

## Acts 16 - John Karmelich

If you're familiar with books that list bible promises that God makes for us, I'd argue the hardest one to accept is, "Christians will suffer in this world". (Philippians 1:29 et.al.) While growing in my Christian faith, I've developed the view that I don't fear death but I want to avoid pain as much as possible! That is relevant as Acts Chapter 16 is a prime example of suffering we can experience as a witness for Jesus in this world. The main character (Paul) suffers real pain while leading people to Jesus in spite of what he had to deal with to "get the job done". I know most of us have gone through some level of suffering in life so why make us deal with it here and now? I'm not talking about general suffering, but a case of specific suffering as a witness for Jesus. It's one of the hardest promises to accept as Christians. Let me explain this idea another way: When we're about to face surgery, the more we know about it before we actually go through it, the less we'll fear it. It's a psychological truth! The same idea applies to dealing with suffering when we make a difference for Jesus. Knowing what to expect will help us to deal with it when it comes.

Let me give an example from this chapter. Paul was falsely arrested and beaten up badly. Beatings like that often led to death. Right after the beating we read of Paul singing praises to God in prison! If I am in pain, I have a real hard time focusing on anything else! Let's be honest, all of us would like to avoid pain as much as possible. Why lecture us on dealing with pain for Jesus? Again, it's like preparing for surgery, the pain isn't as bad if we know it isn't forever and we'll have a good life after all that ends!

With that said, let me give the chapter story as it focuses on the suffering Paul went through here in the chapter. Remember this section of the book is a travel journal. Paul's on his second of three missionary journeys recorded in Acts. He's traveling through what's Turkey today. It's usually called Asia (minor) through the book. At this point, Paul met Timothy (as in Paul's epistles to Timothy). He's a young man who had a Jewish mother and a Greek father. Paul had him circumcised not as a salvation requirement, but because they were witnessing for Jesus in local synagogues and it was well known Timothy came from "mixed blood". The point for us is about avoiding issues that can hinder us from being a witness for Jesus. Consider that later Paul met Titus (another New Testament epistle is Paul's letter to Titus). I am just saying Paul never required Titus to be circumcised. This was only done to Timothy to avoid it being an issue as they were telling the locals about Jesus.

Anyway this group continued traveling through that area. Somehow (we don't get told how), Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia (northern Greece) who wanted Paul to preach the gospel there. Did he wear an "I love Macedonia" t-shirt? Somehow Paul knew where he was from and that's that! Recall the traveling party here was Paul, Silas (the guy who started this journey with Paul) and Timothy. God was somehow making it obvious which way to go. In practicality it could have been closed city gates or the Holy Spirit making it obvious which way to go. I believe if we're willing to use our lives for Jesus, He leads us in what to do. Then we're to simply use our heads and do what's logical.

From there we read of Paul traveling from one town to the next. The word "we" starts to appear in this part of the book. That's when Luke became part of that journey. Now stop and think about where God was guiding them where to go. If it wasn't for the guidance, they'd never have met Luke, who wrote the book of Acts (and the Gospel of Luke). After going from town to town, they got to Philippi (a city that was in what is Greece today). One of the epistles is Paul's letter to the Philippians. We know he started a church there! Philippi had no synagogue at that time, which is where Paul normally begins. The next best place to look for fellow Jewish people is next to a body of water. The Jewish rule was if there was less than 10 Jewish men in a town, those who wanted to seek God were to meet at a water's edge. So at

a river there, Paul and his gang met a woman named Lydia. She apparently wasn't Jewish but she was interested in God and was part of a group that met there. The text said she made a living selling purple clothes. A dye from a seashell in that area was used for her product. She heard Paul preach Jesus. She converted to Christianity. That caused Paul to baptize her. I'm convinced Luke included this story to show how God leads us to people that we may have never expected to reach!

As all efforts for Jesus get "weird" at times, that happened here. Apparently a girl (not Lydia) who had demonic power was telling people there that Paul and his gang were servants of God. A danger for any Christian is not only suffering but praise from a source that is well not godly to put it mildly. If she was telling the truth, what's the danger? Those who are possessed with demonic power don't want people to turn to God so their testimony can't be trusted. Paul wanted "none of it" and cast the demon out. That's when the trouble started. I've always argued if you really want to see who is and isn't a believer "hit them in the pocketbook". When the girl's owner (she was a slave) lost her power, her owner set up a plan to have Paul and Silas arrested. (Timothy and Luke apparently weren't there at that moment so only those two got arrested.)

A question that puzzled me was why didn't Paul claim to be a Roman citizen here? He could avoid the beating if he proved his citizenship as he did later in the chapter. Was he a glutton for punishment? No one knows. A theory is Paul recalled how he had people beaten for being a Christian before he became a Christian and maybe he thought of it as "just due". Maybe he just wanted to show Silas how suffering was part of the Christian life. Like I said, I don't fear death, but I avoid pain as much as possible. All I am saying is we don't know why Paul allowed it to happen, I'm just throwing theories at you.

From there Paul and Silas were thrown in prison. Like I said earlier they were singing praises to God at that point. My guess is the other prisoners heard about the beating and maybe even heard about the girl who lost her powers. The other prisoners were amazed how Paul and Silas reacted to all that they have been through. Bottom line is Paul is using that evening in jail as a witness for Jesus.

Then came an earthquake! Not just any earthquake but one that made the prisoner's chains fall off and the doors open for them to get out! I'm born and raised in California and had my share of earthquakes. This was no natural phenomena! That earthquake is what caused the doors to be open and the chains to fall off. If I was a prisoner there, I'd be long gone before anyone could think twice. However, all of the prisoners were so impressed with Paul and Silas, no one left!. They realized true freedom comes from within, which is biblical by the way!

All of this led to the story of the jail keeper! The Roman law was, if prisoners escaped the guard had to serve the punishment. When the guard saw no one escaped after the "contained earthquake", I suspect the guard asked Paul, "OK, I'm really impressed. I don't know all that happened, but I'm ready to give my life to Jesus". As most of us know, miracles don't always lead to conversions but this one did! To sum up the story, the jail keeper and his family converted to Christianity. Despite all of that suffering Paul received, it led to people being saved.

OK John, pause for a second. Should we inflict pain on ourselves to win people to Jesus? Of course not. We shouldn't look for ways to suffer either. A reason God allows Satan to exist is to prove God's power is greater than his. Still God allows the "bad guys" to have victories even though they are short term and in the end God is always the victor. Realize our rewards in heaven are not based on the number of people we convert. That's strictly a "God thing". Our job is just to be a witness for Him. The whole point of this exercise is to realize that a way to tell that we're an effective witness for Jesus is as I like to say, "stuff happens" and it's usually not good.

The good news is the suffering part of the chapter is over, but not the story itself. Remember how Paul didn't exercise his rights as a Roman when he was beaten? Now that he's in prison and the town leaders need him to come out for trial, Paul makes a stand here to say in effect, "Your citizens illegally beat up a Roman citizen, so you'll have to drag me out of here yourself!" The town leaders wanted to avoid the trial for illegally beating a Roman citizen so they asked him to leave! That left there the jail keeper, the woman named Lydia (the woman from the river's edge) and maybe a few others to start that church. It became famous enough that Paul wrote his most joyful letter (Philippians)! A key point here is despite the human suffering, it made a difference for Jesus, which is what God is interested in us doing!

On the same page where you downloaded this summary is a detailed lesson on Chapter 14. That is on a verse-by-verse basis. To read that, click on one of the other two links on this chapter. You're always welcome to e-mail me and I hope you like this. Thanks, John