

As we read about Paul’s life and his journeys recorded in the book of Acts it’s not his preaching or teaching that is always on display but sometimes it’s his humanity. Paul was a wise leader, a remarkable theologian, and a courageous apostle. But he also was a human being. Like most of us, his greatest strengths could at times be his greatest weaknesses. Paul’s determination meant that occasionally he spoke ungracious words toward those with whom he disagreed. At times he lacked mercy toward those who disappointed him. We’ll see those strengths and weaknesses in Acts 15 and 16 as Paul deals with disagreements among early believers and then sets out on his second missionary journey.

The first major division among Christ followers is set forth in the 15th chapter of Acts. That meeting came to be known as the Council of Jerusalem. In the end it was James who said, *“Brothers,” he said, “listen to me... “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God”* (15:13&19).

Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 11:25 what Jesus himself had said as he shared the cup at the Last Supper: *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”* Paul had become convinced that Christ initiated a new covenant between God and humanity. This covenant, or binding agreement, was not only for the Jew but also for the Gentile. It was a covenant that wasn’t based on fulfilling the Law of Moses but on trusting Jesus Christ. (Hamilton, Adam. *The Call* . Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.)

In Galatians chapter 2 Paul argues his case. He writes: *“We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified”* (2:15-16).

Paul is itching to go back to Asia Minor to see how the new Christians are doing and plant more churches, perhaps even claim the great Roman city of Ephesus for Jesus Christ. So, taking Silas with him, he begins his second missionary journey. Luke says, *“He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches”* (Acts 15:41). So far, so good. The Christians rolled out the red carpet. Their churches were healthy and growing. It was everything he’d hoped for. He was ready to move on. He could hardly wait to get on the road.

But Paul had a problem. Luke says in 16:6 that he was forbidden by the Spirit to speak in Asia. Understand, Asia here does not refer to the continent of Asia, but to the region of Asia Minor containing Ephesus. For whatever reason, the Spirit would not allow him to go there. So, he went to Plan B. Luke says that, having been forbidden by the Spirit to go to Asia, Paul went north through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia and, when he came opposite of Mysia, he wanted to go on to Bithynia, but, again, the Holy Spirit stood in his way. Having no other choice, he headed south to the port city of Troas.

We’ll pick up with his journey in a moment, but first, let’s ask: What does it mean that Paul and his companions had been *“kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia?”* (16:6). Have there been times in your life when you didn’t do something or you did do something you wouldn’t have done otherwise because the Spirit told you to? To be led by the Spirit?

For us rational-minded Presbyterians, this can be a stretch. To be led by the Spirit sounds like mysticism—looking for signs, acting on instincts or intuition. A lot of folks aren't comfortable with that, and you may be one of them. After all, we don't rely on tarot cards and divining rods. Personally, I'm a little uncomfortable when someone says, "This is what the Lord told me to do." I'm like Dr. Fred Edgar. Fred Edgar was pastor of the Oak Lawn United Methodist Church in Dallas years ago. The story is that his wife died. A few months later, one of the women of the church said the Lord had told her to drop what she was doing and devote her life to taking care of him. Now, Fred was a diplomat of the old school, and in his most tactful manner, he replied, "I appreciate your offer, and when the Lord confirms this with me, I'll let you know."

Let's also note that Paul's second missionary journey would be taken without Barnabas, the encourager, and instead Paul would be accompanied by Silas, the prophet and leader set apart by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to convey the decision of the council. Paul notes that Silvanus had preached with him in Corinth. Silas not only preached with Paul but was imprisoned with him as well. (Hamilton, Adam. *The Call*. Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.)

After they were called to "help" in Macedonia (that's next Sunday's sermon), Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke went to its leading city, Philippi, ministering and teaching in the town and returning to the place of prayer at the river. They encountered a "slave-girl," who seems to have been the first-century equivalent of a psychic or fortune-teller. People would pay her to tell their fortunes or prepare them for the future, and that money was a source of revenue for her masters. As she met Paul and his companions, she began to shout, "*These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.*" She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "*In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!*" At that moment the spirit left her." (Acts 16:17-17). It appears that at first the apostles accepted her witness as a positive affirmation. But she continued shouting after them "*for many days.*" Notice Paul's glaring humanity again.

Paul became so annoyed that he turned to the girl and said to the spirit in her, "*In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her!*" This is a perplexing story. In the Gospel accounts of people with unclean spirits who come in contact with Jesus, it seems they cannot help but announce who Jesus is, and tremble in fear. Here the slave-girl, or the spirit within her, at first seems unable to resist declaring the truth about the apostles and whom they serve. Within a short time, though, her shouting becomes a distraction and created a hindrance to the disciples' work. Paul invokes the name and power of Jesus Christ, and the spirit leaves her.

The slave-girl was released from the spirit, but it left her unable to make money for her owners, who clearly did not appreciate what Paul had done. It's interesting that in the Bible, and in our own time, an encounter with the saving power of Christ often comes at an economic cost. In the case of the slave-girl's owners, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the city officials, in a courthouse that has been identified among the ruins at Philippi as the likely place the apostles were taken. As Paul and Silas were taken there, a crowd gathered and attacked them. The magistrates, seeing the crowd, commanded that Paul and Silas be stripped of their clothes and beaten with rods.

The magistrates saw Paul's actions as violating another man's property and disturbing the peace, and they ordered swift punishment. The rods used to beat the apostles, called *fasces*, were a bundle of branches

strapped together. Afterward they were thrown into jail for the night with their feet locked in stocks. The beating would have left them bruised and bloodied, possibly with a cracked rib or two. It's likely that Paul and Silas were then shackled so their feet could not move and forced to sit up all night in the prison cell.

What would you be thinking as you sat in the prison cell that night in pain? I suspect many of us would be disappointed with God. We might be angry with God. Paul and Silas had given themselves to proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ, yet they were humiliated, beaten, and now imprisoned for the night.

But listen to what Luke says in 16:25 that Paul and Silas were doing: *“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”* How could they sing hymns to God at a time like that? Many of us would be complaining, “Why me, Lord?” and perhaps doubting the very existence of God. But Paul and Silas knew that their beating was not God's doing.

They also knew that God doesn't typically stop people from doing evil things and that our faith does not keep us from suffering. But our faith certainly changes how we face suffering, as Adam Hamilton says in his book, *The Call*. (Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.)

Steve Saint wrote an article for Billy Graham's *Decision* magazine ten years ago. The article titled, *God's Purpose in Our Suffering*, says, “My father, a missionary pilot, was one of five missionaries killed (with Jim Elliot) when they tried to reach out to the Waodani Indian tribe in Ecuador in 1956. I was five years old. A lot of people believe that when bad things happen, God merely allows them. But God didn't merely tolerate my dad's death, and I don't think He turned away when it was happening. In His sovereignty, He was orchestrating events for His glory and ultimately for our good. This was a hard realization for me, but then I read 1 Peter 2:21 which says, *“To this [suffering] you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”*”

When she was finishing college Steve's only daughter Stephenie died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Long before she had died Steve says he prayed, “God, please let me have your heart for the hurting world.” He goes on to say, “Oh, be careful what you pray for. Through the loss of my daughter, God did change my heart. He broke it. He shredded it. In the process He helped me see what He sees. From God's perspective, just as I was separated from Stephenie, our loving heavenly Father, the God and Creator of the universe, is being separated every day from those He desperately loves. And He will never be reunited with them again if they die without knowing Christ...”

I don't know what role God has for you, Steve says, but I know He has a role. He has made us His ambassadors of reconciliation, and suffering gives us credibility with a hurting world and demonstrates God's sufficiency to meet our needs.” (<https://billygraham.org/decision-magazine/february-2009/gods-purpose-in-our-suffering/>)

If you have suffered, let God use you to serve others in their suffering, because people who suffer want to be ministered to by people who know what it's like to suffer as they have.

I firmly believe that's why in his life Jesus knew suffering even as we know suffering in our lives.

Bottom line? As followers of Jesus Christ we are all *called* to suffer.

Just ask Paul. Amen.