

*Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / June 28, 2020 / Pastor Jeff Harrison*  
When Life Hits Hard Sermon Series  
**Facing Obstacles** (Acts 16:6-36)

**Relevance: we can use help when facing obstacles**

Let's pray. We all, whatever our beliefs, face obstacles in life, some big, some small. It's one of the ways that life hits hard. Maybe it's your puppy pooping on the carpet every single day, never on the tile, always on the carpet. Or maybe it's people speaking harsh words to you on social media. Or maybe it's trying to pivot how you do your schooling, job, or parenting in our current circumstances. Obstacles.

Or maybe it's a physical or mental health challenge that others don't have to deal with, and they don't understand your struggles. Or maybe it's a home repair that was supposed to only last one day and only require one trip to Home Depot. Or maybe it's your kids trying to turn your home into a regime run by cute little dictators. Or kids, maybe it's your parents bringing lots of orders and accusations without much listening or understanding. Or maybe it's an unresolved conflict or racist encounter that's left you bleeding. Obstacles.

And if all that's not enough, sometimes following Jesus leads to more obstacles. Not at the same level as Christians in some other parts of the world, but obstacles as you join God in fighting against an injustice, or as you navigate working at a company where there's pressure to keep your Christian convictions quiet if you want to keep your job.

And I don't know about you, but in all these obstacles of life, I sure could use some help facing them better, so I'm thankful for this time in God's Word. For sometimes even small obstacles can throw me way off.

**Orienting to God's Word**

So let's learn about facing obstacles from two early Jesus followers named Paul and Silas. Their story is in the New Testament book of Acts. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to Acts chapter 16. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

These guys Paul and Silas had their lives, relationships, even eternities transformed by Jesus. So they long for others to experience Jesus' freeing work too. It's a couple of decades

after Jesus' death and resurrection, and they decide to visit some early churches that Paul previously planted. Things start off great: they strengthen those churches in the faith, see Jesus set more people free, and are joined in their ministry by Timothy. But as they journey then to new places to help more people to find freedom in Jesus, they start facing obstacles.

### **Teaching: Obstacles Paul and Silas faced**

Where to go and to stay (6-13) – The obstacles begin in Acts chapter 16, verse 6, as they hear only “noes” from God, and no “yeses”. **(6-7)**

<sup>6</sup> Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. <sup>7</sup> When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.

So after many weeks and miles of difficult travel, Paul, Silas, and Timothy only know where God doesn't want them to go in these verses. Whether God tells them through a dream, or a prophetic word, or through circumstances like the road washing out, God makes clear that the answer to preaching in Asia and Bithynia is “no”. And that's an obstacle if you're trying to spread the love of Jesus to new places.

I think we can identify with this obstacle of limitations, of “noes” in these COVID-19 times. You know how your ministry here at church is currently limited, how your work is currently limited, how your home is limited by canceled activities. And like this missionary team, you may have prayed a lot, but still don't have clarity yet on what to do instead in your current limitations.

To their credit, despite whatever their frustration or disorientation as they keep hearing God's “noes”, the missionary team keeps moving forward in faith, trying new places, as they continue to seek God's guidance. There's some debate about the exact location of some of the places in these verses, but overall it appears they have come from the east, and at various points try to travel to both north and south and are prevented by God, so they decide, “Well, why don't try west.”

This may be instructive for our lives today. Whatever your current limitations, don't stop everything. In faith keep trying new ways, in those limitations, to serve others as you also keep seeking God's guidance. In the missionary team's case, this means traveling west in verse 8. **(8)**

<sup>8</sup> So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.

As the team travels west, they get to Troas, and at its westward end they hit the Aegean Sea. Having reached the end of land, and having learned to walk by faith through this obstacle, God finally gives the team a clear “yes”, guiding them where to go in verse 9. **(9-12)**

<sup>9</sup> During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” <sup>10</sup> After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. <sup>11</sup> From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. <sup>12</sup> From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

Notice the verses now use “we” rather than “they”. So the author of Acts, a Christian named Luke, is now the fourth member of this missionary team. In response to Paul’s vision, the team agrees in verse 10 that God is guiding them to Macedonia.

So they travel to the Macedonian city of Philippi, a Roman colony. Rome is the main power back in this time, and Philippi is like a Roman city that’s located outside of Rome, in modern day Greece. So unlike other places Rome has conquered, Philippi enjoys their own government and freedom from tribute and taxation. So Philippi is “team Rome” and thus may not be receptive to hearing that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. And the missionary team also needs a base of operations.

*Demonic opposition (13-18)* – So they need God’s help as they begin to minister in Philippi in verse 13. **(13-15)**

<sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. <sup>15</sup> When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

Alright, now we’re talking. God has shown them their place, and now they quickly meet Lydia, and God sets her whole household free from their sin.

And this isn't just any household, this is a missionary's dream. Lydia sells expensive purple cloth, so she is likely well off and she invites the team to stay at her house. So now they have a secure base from which to spread the love of Jesus. But soon a new obstacle comes, as evil spiritual forces respond in verse 16. **(16-17)**

<sup>16</sup>Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. <sup>17</sup>She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

We don't believe in the red, pitchfork wielding evil spirits of popular culture, but we do believe there are evil spiritual forces at work. And this female slave is possessed by an evil spirit seeking to hinder the team's ministry.

So as the team travels to share the love of Jesus, the evil spirit harasses the team, shouting at them. One could view what the spirit says in verse 17 as ironically true, but it's not a trustworthy source, so it could create confusion through its true statement. And plus it's just hard to share with someone about freedom in Jesus while an evil spirit is shouting.

In addition to confusion and distraction, perhaps the evil spirit wants to make clear that there is opposition to the team's work, that a price will be paid if they keep it up, so step back and keep quiet. This spirit continues to harass the team for many days in verse 18. **(18)**

<sup>18</sup>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.

Eventually Paul becomes irritated enough by this obstacle, that he commands the evil spirit to leave the girl. And at that very moment the spirit leaves, displaying Jesus' authority. And also Jesus' grace, that though Paul feels irritation rather than compassion for the girl, Jesus still works through Paul's prayer to set the girl free.

But the girl's freedom leads right to another obstacle. Do you ever feel that way, that the obstacles keep coming and coming and coming?

Well now it's that the slave girl's owners are furious. With the evil spirit gone, the owners can no longer claim the girl tells the future through the Oracle of Delphi. So their days of exploiting the girl for big profits are gone.

Beating and imprisonment (19-25) – And they make Paul and Silas pay in verse 19. **(19-21)**

<sup>19</sup> When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. <sup>20</sup> They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar <sup>21</sup> by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.”

Philippi is a Roman colony, and the slave owners use that to their advantage. They tell the city leaders about how Paul and Silas advocate customs unlawful for Romans. You see, Roman law required people to worship Caesar as a god, and Christians refused. So the slave owners imply that if Philippian citizens become Christians, they’ll no longer be loyal to Rome.

And Paul and Silas, who are Jews, are the only two dragged before the city leaders, while Timothy and Luke, who have Gentile blood, are not. So there may be racist things going on here as well in verse 20 in the singling out of Paul and Silas and mentioning that they are Jews. Sadly, things take a turn for the worse as the obstacles increase again in verse 22. **(22-24)**

<sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. <sup>24</sup> When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

So the crowd turns into a mob, beating Paul and Silas, and the leaders have them stripped and severely beaten with rods, which is like a caning.<sup>1</sup> And it’s all illegal since Paul and Silas are Roman citizens.

Imagine you’re Silas, faithfully following God’s call to see people set free in Jesus. And in response a mob violently attacks you, and you’re illegally stripped and severely caned, and you’re chained in a dark dungeon, wondering how long you’ll be stuck in this prison, and now perhaps recalling when Paul excitedly told you about the visionary calling to Macedonia.

If I’m Silas, I think I’d have some questions for Paul. Like, did God really call us here? We were having trouble hearing His guidance before Paul, so maybe God didn’t say jail in Macedonia, maybe God said the beaches of Maui. And if God did call us here Paul, why is He allowing us to pay this price for doing His good work?

Even in much smaller obstacles than Paul and Silas face, I can get discouraged, and sometimes wonder if I’m where God wants me to be, doing what He wants me to do. And Paul

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<sup>1</sup> Bock, Darrell, *Acts* (BECNT), 539.

and Silas may feel that way at some point during this obstacle filled day. We don't have a running diary of their thoughts and feelings. But we are told about their amazing response in the dark of night in a dark dungeon in verse 25. **(25)**

<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

Even in these obstacles, Paul and Silas worship, praying and singing hymns to God.

*God overcomes many obstacles (26-36)* – And as the other prisoners listen to their praise in the dark of night, God breaks through that darkness by breaking the ground in verse 26. **(26-27)**

<sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. <sup>27</sup> The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped.

The jailer may plan to kill himself to avoid his superiors killing him in a worse way. And in this honor and shame culture, it's possible that the jailer even thinks the honorable response to this failure is to kill himself. Whatever his reasons, will Paul and Silas risk their freedom to invite the jailer to freedom in Jesus? Verse 28: **(28-30)**

<sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" <sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

The jailer senses that God is working through the huge earthquake and through these men who praise God even in terrible circumstances and now sacrifice their newfound freedom to save a stranger oppressing them. So the jailer wants what Paul and Silas have with God and needs forgiveness for his role in the injustice committed against God's men. So he falls before them and then asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" In verse 31 they respond. **(31-32)**

<sup>31</sup> They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." <sup>32</sup> Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.

In verse 31, Paul and Silas invite the jailer to believe in Lord Jesus. And then in verse 32 they share more about Jesus, Who was also unjustly beaten and imprisoned, like Paul and Silas. But then Jesus went further by freely choosing the cross to take away our sins, overcoming the evil of our world with love.

I wonder if Paul and Silas share about how this overcoming, sacrificial love of Jesus is what frees them to praise God even while bloodied in jail and to risk their freedom to invite the jailer to freedom in Jesus. In verse 33, the jailor's household responds to these amazing things. **(33-34)**

<sup>33</sup> At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. <sup>34</sup> The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

In these verses, the jailor goes from Paul and Silas' oppressor to their caring host, washing their wounds, and then receiving himself a much better washing in baptism. And the joy of his newfound freedom in Jesus leads to a joyful meal in the middle of the night.

If you don't yet know Jesus, you have the same opportunity for faith and joy as the jailer did. Believe on the Lord Jesus, trust that He died for your sins and rose from the dead, and you too will be saved. Forgiven, in right relationship with God and His people forever. It's such good news. And for Paul and Silas, more good news comes at daybreak in verse 35. **(35-36)**

<sup>35</sup> When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." <sup>36</sup> The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace."

The darkness of night is over; at daylight, Paul and Silas are set free from prison. And in the following verses the city leaders even admit their wrongdoing in Paul and Silas' case and Paul and Silas get to strengthen the new Philippian church some more.

As Paul and Silas look around this new church, they see Lydia, the put together, successful businesswoman, along with her household, who came to faith through teaching. And they see the girl no longer oppressed by an evil spirit, who came to faith through a power encounter. And they see the jailer's household. The jailer perhaps an ex-Roman soldier now in a middle-class governmental job, who came to faith in response to an act of God and a selfless act of love. Each of them very different from each other, yet all set free in Jesus because of God's work through this team whose souls keep singing even while facing obstacles.

Their own faith strengthened through these events, the missionary team says goodbye to the church and heads to the next Macedonian city. There, with strengthened faith, they will share with more people about how Jesus sets people free and face more obstacles.

## **Next Step**

As we've faced obstacles recently, you may have discovered, as I have, that you're not as resilient as Paul and Silas. We're all in process, with room to grow, and thankfully Jesus forgives all our failings.

But it makes me wonder: how do Paul and Silas live freely even while in chains? We'll explore this question starting next Sunday as we walk through Philippians, a letter Paul wrote years later, again while in prison, to this same Philippian church.

But one key we see this morning is that Paul and Silas sing praises to God. In their praises, they affirm that God is bigger than all their obstacles and that these forces of evil will not prevail. And Paul and Silas' praise connects their hearts with God's in such a way that God empowers them to live heroically even while in chains. And as their souls are free, singing praises to God, they are set free from their chains, and the jailer's household is set free from their sins.

And so in our obstacles, let's keep singing praises to God. That's our next step this morning: keep singing praises to God.

Back in late March, like today, we closed our worship services to the public. There were only a few of us here on Sunday mornings livestreaming the service. That first Sunday morning, during the worship time I was less engaged, not standing or singing much.

But the next Sunday I decided, you know, singing praises to God with His church, even if it's just with a couple of members of it, that's a privilege, and an important practice for facing our obstacles well. So though there were only a couple of us in the seats, that next Sunday, while the service was still closed, I stood and sang praises to God.

And that's my encouragement from God's Word to us in these coming weeks. Maybe you're one of the few here today and it's tough to worship because of the obstacles in your life, or the masks, or the small numbers here, still keep singing praises to God. If you're worshipping from home, please don't just observe what's happening on the livestream, participate in it, even if it feels a little weird in your living room, keep singing praises to God.

And may our singing then carry into the rest of our week. When we sing praises together on Sunday mornings, that's not supposed to be the end of our worship for that week, it's supposed to be the beginning of a lifestyle of praise. I'm preaching this to myself here too.



As we keep singing praises on Sunday mornings and throughout the week, we remind ourselves that our obstacles are never the bottom line of our life, that beneath them all is always our God. It's like God works through our singing to realign our internal narrative. We still see the obstacles, we are not denying that there are problems in our homes and our society. But we now also see the God Who is bigger than the obstacles, Who will not allow any obstacle to prevail against His coming kingdom. And as we sing praises, we connect our hearts with the only One Who can empower us to keep singing no matter what we face.

Singing praises didn't keep Paul and Silas from painful obstacles. But God worked through their praises, helping Paul and Silas to live free, taking care of obstacles on their behalf, and setting more people free in Jesus along the way.

And so as we keep singing praises, we will experience more of God's freedom, and who knows what obstacles God will remove, or who He will set free in Jesus as we live free in Him.

So let's pray about that, and then sing praises to God...