

Acts 16:16-40 The Question you want to be asked

Introduction

How many times in our lives do we face the puzzling scenario of 'a door closing' that we had expected to be open and yet also opportunities arising that we had never thought possible. We, as Christians, must trust in the providence of God and acknowledge sometimes that for reasons unknown to us, our circumstances, as they are at present, are ones in which the Lord has allowed us to be placed, for a purpose that is not always clear. We may never understand why certain things were allowed by God to happen. We may never see why certain prayers have apparently gone unanswered, as far as we can ascertain, yet we assert that God, the one in whom we trust, has His guiding hand upon our lives and as a result want Him to show us the best way to go in our lives. Imogen Cairns, was a gymnastics star for England at the recent Commonwealth Games in Dehli, India. She collected the floor title to add to her vault crown and might now target London 2012, having originally planned to retire after Delhi. So what was special about her success? Ollie Williams, a BBC reporter, described her challenge: Unable to walk for months, bedridden and fitfully reliving the Olympic pinnacle of her short career, gymnastics offered little to Imogen Cairns. Having travelled to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and competed for Britain, the West country teenager "snapped both legs" - in her own words - at her next event, a nothing competition where she planned to practise new routines. The injury put her out of gymnastics for more than a year, a tragedy for a girl who left home at the age of 14 for the sport. While others began to target the London Olympics she lay in bed and put on weight, relying on friends to bring food up the stairs..."I assumed my career was over," she says..."It took me a long time to walk again, and then it didn't heal properly. Scar tissue formed and I had to go back for another operation to clear that out."All the skills were still in my head, I just needed to get fit, but it took me two years to get back. The hardest part was doing nothing for six months, in bed. I lost my motivation, I was putting on weight and I became very depressed." "I was really fit after China, at my peak, so I got a new floor routine together with bigger and better skills, and then the injury happened. **And that makes me think these things happen for a reason. I think that was meant to happen**, because when I came back I was hungry for it again." It's safe to say the last few years don't qualify as normal. Her legs and career reconstructed, she hauled herself into England's team for the Commonwealth Games in Delhi, announcing her comeback at the age of twenty-one with gold medals on the vault and floor (BBC Sport website 19 Oct 2010). Paul and Silas must have wondered about their guidance in coming to Philippi. There was no synagogue where they could reason with the men from the Bible (in a cultural context where outside of the family circle men normally spoke to men and women to women) and the only believers in God in the town were a small group of ladies who met for a women's prayer meeting every Lord's Day. There is no doubt that Paul and Silas would have felt decidedly uncomfortable in handling this situation, yet as they brought the matter to the Lord He would open the door for their future. Two incidents would take place, outside their control, that would confirm their calling to ministry in Philippi. In your personal life; family

circle or even in this congregation we have issues that we bring to the Lord that admit of no easy resolution. However, we have to trust the Lord to guide and direct us into the pathway He has chosen for us, in His time.

1. God opens a door for witnessing (Acts 16:16-24)

(a) An unexpected witness (Acts 16:16-18) ¹⁶ *Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling.* ¹⁷ *This girl 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.* ¹⁸ *She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned round 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.* God had not directed Paul and Silas to start a new meeting as they did in many other places, but sensitive to His leading they faithfully attended the ladies prayer meeting in that city for some weeks. The issue for them was Lord I want to work where You are working; I want to fit in with what You desire for this place, not to superimpose my prearranged plans on how the work should be done. This kind of praying is a lot harder to do than we might think! Lord I was praying for this problem to be resolved, but not in that way! Let us never forget Isaiah 55:8-9: ⁸*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord.* ⁹*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.* Paul and Silas had been unsure how to build bridges to the wider non-Jewish community in this city. Never in their wildest dreams would they have anticipated that a slave-girl possessed by an evil spirit would go around proclaiming to the whole community an accurate description of the purpose of their visit. Countless numbers of people through this means would have become aware of the gospel by this unconventional method. This was not a one-off occurrence. She was functioning like an unpaid town crier! Incidentally in Scotland town criers could be paid to announce meetings and various events in Scotland well into the nineteenth century. James Haldane, the great Baptist Evangelist, regularly used them to announce his outreach services on his long evangelistic tours a couple of centuries ago. Yet for the girl herself salvation and deliverance were required, not just for her hearers. When Paul prayed for her the Lord released her from her bondage and gave her a new life. What a joy for this young woman! There was nothing Paul could do about her physical captivity, as slavery was legal in the Roman Empire, but spiritually she was free. As Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church some time later: *But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil [of unbelief] is taken away.* ¹⁷ *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.* ¹⁸ *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (II Corinthians 3:16-18).* The reality of the power of God would have been self-evident in that place. However, not everyone sees the fact of God changing lives as good news, as Paul and Silas were about to find out.

(b) An unexpected problem (Acts 16:19-21) ¹⁹ *When the owners of the slave girl realised that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place to face the authorities.* ²⁰ *They brought them before the magistrates and said, These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar* ²¹ *by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practise.* From a moment of joy at seeing the transformation in this young woman's life suddenly a hostile group of men seized them and dragged them to the **agora** (both the market place and the centre of the city's civic life.) Paul and Silas were brought before the **strategoi**, that is, the two **praetors** who acted as magistrates in a Roman colony (J. Stott, *Acts*, p. 266). The slave owners were very clever in their

accusations. First of all they appealed to the racist prejudices of many Romans against Jews, by drawing attention to their ethnic origins –what would you expect but trouble from Jews? Secondly the (false) charge that they were breaching the peace; Romans were totally committed to law and order. Anyone making a public nuisance of themselves got rough treatment. Thirdly they (falsely) claimed Paul and Silas were introducing an unlawful religion into the city. Under Roman law religions had to be licensed by the government as compatible with Roman citizenship (or not as the case may be). At this stage Christianity was assumed by the Roman authorities to be a denomination within Judaism –a legal religion. When the Jewish authorities expelled all followers of Jesus from their ranks in AD70 Christianity became an illegal religion under Roman law, until the time of Emperor Constantine in the 4th Century AD and many suffered greatly in those difficult years. However, the claim was false in this case as Paul and Silas were acting within the bounds of the law. What the owners of the slave girl had done was to conceal the real motive for their actions. They stood to lose a lot of money because she had now lost her demonically inspired gift of fortune-telling and was of no financial use to them. The praetors would have laughed them out of court had they charged Paul with effective praying or a successful deliverance ministry! When a person comes to faith the needy or disturbed in spirit may be comforted and healed, but others in their family or circle of friends may be confused, angry or deeply suspicious about what has taken place. The reality of a change life cannot be denied, but the reactions of other people to it good or bad may be very different to what we expected.

(c) **An unexpected predicament** (Acts 16:22-24)²² *The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten.*²³ *After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.*²⁴ *Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.* This is a very rough world. Almost all the men in that city were ex-servicemen. They knew how to fight and Paul and Silas were in serious danger of severe injury or even death. Far from stopping proceedings the magistrates wanted to enjoy a bit more violence and *ordered them to be stripped and beaten* (v22). How does Doctor Luke, Paul's resident GP describe their injuries? *After they had been severely flogged they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.*²⁴ *Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks* (vs23-24). This is the treatment meted out to terrorists, murders and the vilest of criminals. Maximum security conditions with minimum comfort in prison. The court case was a joke as the charges were false but the authorities and the crowd didn't care. They had given a couple of Jews a good beating and when they got out of prison they were unlikely to want any more to do with Philippi! God that's not fair! How many times have you uttered those words? For most of us it will be a good few times not only for ourselves, but also with respect to other people's circumstances. Life is unfair. Other people with less or equivalent grades get a university place or job that you were qualified for and wanted. So many situations in life appear to be who you know on the inside rather than the best person succeeding... This is the social reality that we cannot evade, though where we can we as Christians will seek more justice and fairness for the people around us who need it most as well as for ourselves, our family and friends. However, reflecting on this situation reminds me of a young man in prison in his 20s in the Old Testament. He was put there for his own safety after his boss's wife made false charges against him of a sexual assault. Joseph, would have told God in his prayers also about the injustice of his situation. Yet in the providence of God he met two men in prison, officials of Pharaoh, whom he was able to assist and one, a butler, who was later able to assist in getting him out of prison. In fact more than that he became Vizier (Prime Minister) of Egypt and put in place extraordinary economic measures that could have been catastrophic but some years later was credited with

not only saving the nation, but people from several nations owed their lives to him when he provided food that got them through a severe famine in that region of the world. Later reflecting on the circumstances that led him into prison, Joseph told his brothers these famous words: *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives* (Genesis 50:20). Paul and Silas had no idea what God might do in their circumstances and frankly neither do we much of the time. Yet God delights to bring good out of what at times appears to be the most unpromising of circumstances. If that is a fair description of your life situation just now then please take heart because God can work even in your situation.

2. **God opens a door for blessing** (Acts 16:25-40)

(a) **Rejoicing in the midst of adversity** (Acts 16:25) ²⁵*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.* How would you react to being treated as they did? How would I? Every limb in their body was aching; their backs would have been like a ploughed field, a mass of bleeding wounds. If there were no broken bones it was a miracle! In the stocks without such wounds it was very uncomfortable; with them sleep would have been near to impossible, despite being exhausted. Other prisoners must have wondered what these men had done to deserve such brutal treatment. Surely at least one of them would have shouted out: ‘What are you in for?’ A reply of ‘for praying for a demon-possessed slave girl who is now totally healed’, would have produced hoots of laughter and disbelief from the criminal fraternity in that prison. What did Paul and Silas do that stunned these hardened men into silence? They heard them praying out loud and singing hymns at midnight. There is no question that the other prisoners were thinking either they are stark raving mad or I want what they have got, because I would have been uttering some very different words –curses- against the perpetrators of the violence not hymns of praise to God. When all is going well everyone can handle that- people of all faiths or none. When things start to go seriously wrong and we begin to struggle it is no surprise that many people look around to see who may have something that I need to help me get through my trials. This can take a long time, but over time we can pray that God will lead us to people whom we can point to Him and even lead them to trust Him too. I don’t know what Paul and Silas were rejoicing about but I suspect that it included being counted worthy to follow in Jesus’ footsteps in suffering for their faith; also that their lives had been spared when a very different outcome had been entirely possible. In our trials may the Holy Spirit give us the wisdom and strength to ask: ‘Lord what do you want to teach me through this situation?’

(b) **Responding in the midst of adversity** (Acts 16:26-30) ²⁶*Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose.*²⁷*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.*²⁸*But Paul shouted, Don't harm yourself! We are all here!*²⁹*The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.*³⁰*He then brought them out and asked, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*³¹*They replied, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved— you and your household.*³²*Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.*³³*At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptised.*³⁴*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 family.* God’s answers to our prayers are often very different to what we had expected or prayed for. They may have been praying Lord please get us out of here. They may even have mentioned that God sent an angel to get Peter and John out of prison (Acts 5:19: *But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.*) Even more amazingly Peter was confined some time

later in a maximum security prison under armed guards (Acts 12:1-19). King Herod did not believe their story about an angelic rescue so he had all the guards executed as a deterrent to prevent any other escapes. Yet God did not work that way. The prison doors were opened, but by an earthquake. In their case it didn't help that much as they were secured in the stocks, but most of the other prisoners could get out into the main exercise yard. However, God overruled as the Prison Governor came to them. In this surreal situation it appears that Paul from inside his cell is calmer than the senior official. See what Luke recorded here: *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.*²⁸ *But Paul shouted, Don't harm yourself! We are all here* (Acts 16:27-28). Unless God had told Paul that all the prisoners were accounted for he could not have known from his cell that this was the case. Yet the man who on more than one occasion stood before a Roman official and declared that he wished they were like him (except for the chains) now would make a similar challenge to this Prison Governor. (The classic example is Paul's words to the Court of Roman Governor Festus in Caesarea, when Paul made his defence before King Agrippa in Acts 26:28-29: *Then Agrippa said to Paul, Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?*²⁹ *Paul replied, Short time or long— I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.* Don't ever think that God cannot use you to be a witness for Him in whatever circumstances you might find yourself. Praise God for the rare occurrences when you and me will be asked the question: 'How can I become a Christian?' Like Paul and Silas be ready with an answer, because it will likely happen at a time when you least expect it.

(c) **Rejoicing with the people who came to Christ** (Acts 16:31-34)³¹ *They replied, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved— you and your household.*³² *Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.*³³ *At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptised.*³⁴ *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 family.* What an extraordinary spectacle in the early hours of the morning. A gospel message proclaimed; people coming to faith; the preachers' wounds getting medical attention, followed by a service of believers' baptism, then before dawn sitting down to dinner and sharing a meal with their former captors. What an extraordinary turnaround. This is our God at work! He is the same yesterday, today and forever. May we be a praying people with a sense of expectancy that in small or larger ways that the Lord can use you to make a difference in someone's life even this week, for His glory. There can be no greater joy than in the satisfaction in serving God and ministering to other people in His name.

(d) **Rejoicing in the freedom gained for Christian witness in Philippi** (Acts 16:35-40)³⁵ *When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: Release those men.*³⁶ *The jailer told Paul, The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.*³⁷ *But Paul said to the officers: They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.*³⁸ *The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed.*³⁹ *They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city.*⁴⁰ *After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.* Paul was not only a gifted Evangelist and Bible teacher; he also had the ability to think quickly on his feet. I so often think of what I should have said in a conversation some time later, but then the moment has passed. He and Silas could have been so thrilled to get out of jail that they just left as quickly as possible. However, the beating and imprisonment were illegal for Roman citizens. Legally the magistrates could have been sacked and giving the equivalent beating and imprisonment for their oversight. No

wonder they were afraid. They would not sleep easily while Paul and Silas were in the vicinity. However, I suspect Paul asked for assurances of legal protection for Christians in Philippi in coming years and got it, in return for him and Silas not pressing charges against the magistrates. In future years when there was persecution in other places I am not aware that similar actions took place in this community, following what had happened here. We too need wisdom in our dealings with the authorities and come to appropriate mutual arrangements for the common good. Here is an extraordinary story of God at work in surprising ways in the lives of some very different people. This is our God. May we yield our lives to him and trust Him to lead and guide us into the future He has prepared for us, Amen.