Paul and Silas May 7, 2023

**Bible Verses:** Acts 16:25-40

**Spark Story Bible:** pages 536 to 539

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Overall Lesson Takeaways

* **God is always with us – no matter what.**

There are certainly big picture issues to think about today related to the unjust nature of Paul and Silas’ imprisonment and about the prison system in our own country, but the most universal entry point for kids will be trying to put ourselves into the shoes of Paul and Silas, using that as a springboard to thinking about other times when we’ve been afraid, uncertain, or upset – and reminding ourselves that God is still there with us during those times. Learning to trust in God during those moments is a really difficult thing for all of us – adults included – but it can also help to share stories from our own lives, in addition to reading about what Paul and Silas went through. Being able to say a quick prayer to God, taking a deep breath to remind yourself that God’s spirit is with you, having a short reminder that you repeat to yourself – all of these are ways that we can remind ourselves of God’s constant presence in our lives.

* **Remembering Paul and Silas’ kindness to the jailer.**

It’s hard to wrap our minds around someone being unjustly imprisoned, having an opportunity to escape, and then choosing to stay in prison for someone else’s sake… but that’s exactly what Paul and Silas did! This can be a good opportunity to lift up their courage and the obvious impact that it had on the jailer – and it can also be an opportunity to remember times that leaders were unjustly sent to prison for standing up for something they believe in. We’ve already learned about Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela this year, but both of them served prison time for standing up for racial equality and equity. Their willingness to do so for the sake of others should be inspiring to all of us – and is a reminder of the personal sacrifice that doing the right thing sometimes takes.

* **Thinking about how we should care for those currently in prison.**

You may find it shocking and saddening to learn that our country has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world, as well as the world’s largest prison population at over 2.1 million people. Our justice system has long focused on punishment for crimes rather than rehabilitation – and an unequal enforcement of laws (or the very nature of those laws themselves) have disproportionately harmed people of color. Older kids may or may not be ready to engage with some of these big picture systemic issues, but at minimum we can try to communicate that people who are merely labeled as “criminals” are God’s beloved children too – and we should treat them with the respect and dignity that everyone deserves.

Checking In

**Before the reading:**

* **Check in with the kids – welcoming any newcomers warmly.**
	+ Younger kids: What is one of your favorite songs to sing along to?
	+ Older kids: Highs and Lows from the past week
* **We’re learning about Paul being in prison today… what do you think would be the hardest part about being in jail?**

Bible Lesson / Discussion

**Reading the Bible:**

* We’re learning about Paul again today – and some serious trouble that Paul and his friend Silas got into while preaching about Jesus.
* **Read the text together, either in the Bible, or the Spark Story Bible.**
	+ Feel free to stop and ask questions during the reading, if helpful.
	+ Afterwards, take time to explore what that passage might mean, and know there's no one *correct* way to read these passages!

**Questions About the Passage** (see next page for PreK/K questions)

* How do you think Paul and Silas were feeling about being in prison? How might they have reminded themselves that God is always with them?
* Paul and Silas stayed in prison even after they could have escaped because they didn’t want the jailer to get in trouble – what would you have done?

**Connections to Our Lives**

* Paul and Silas did something incredibly nice for the jailer – when was the last time that someone did something really nice for you? How did it change your day, or the way you were feeling?
* The U.S. has more prisoners than any other country in the world. What might Jesus say about that? How would Jesus want us to treat prisoners? Are there ways to help people instead of punishing them?

**Biblical/Church Connections**

* During the season of Eastertide, we learn about people who helped the church grow – particularly during those earliest years. It’s thought that Paul and Silas helped start several house churches – would you rather have church at home all of the time, or go to a church building? Why?

**Alternate Preschool and K/1st Questions**

Younger ages, particularly those in our preschool class, may have a hard time discussing the biblical text for very long (if at all). My hope is that these questions (and especially the activity) can help with engagement!

**Opening Questions / Activity**

* **Take some time to welcome / get to know the kids!**
	+ Today we are learning about Paul and Silas being put in jail – and they must have been bored while they were in there… what are some things that you like to do when you are feeling bored?
	+ At one point they start singing in their jail cell! What are some songs that you like to sing along to?

**Warm Up Game – Freeze Dance**

* Well, one of the many ways that we can be joyful is by dancing – so I wanted to play a game of Freeze Dance as a way to practice the joy and excitement that Jesus’ disciples must have been feeling.
* You’ll need to be able to share music – whether by a phone, or by a player within the classroom (or via the classroom iPad)
* Play as long as kids are having fun, then transition to the Bible questions.

**Bible Discussion/Questions**

* Our Bible story today is about Paul and his friend Silas showing God’s love to someone else, even when they were in prison!
* **Read the text together, either in the Bible, or the Spark Story Bible.**
	+ Feel free to stop and ask questions during the reading, if helpful.
	+ Afterwards, take time to explore what that passage might mean, and know there's no one *correct* way to read these passages!
* How do you think Paul and Silas were feeling about being in prison? How might they have reminded themselves that God is always with them?
* Paul and Silas stayed in prison even after they could have escaped because they didn’t want the jailer to get in trouble – what would you have done?
* That was a very nice thing to do for the jailer – when was the last time someone did something really nice for you? How did it make you feel?

People of Faith

In addition to reading our weekly Bible story, I'd love for our older grade school students to learn more about people whose lives were changed by their faith in Jesus. We'll lift up a new person each Sunday, trying to connect their story to our Bible passage as much as possible!

**Elizabeth Fry**

Paul and Silas’ imprisonment is a good opportunity to learn about the important humanitarian work of Elizabeth (Betsy) Fry, sometimes referred to as the “angel of prisons” for her extensive work in prison reform.

Fry was born in Norwich, England in 1780. Her family were very devout Quakers and her early experiences with Quakerism helped shape her respect for all people. After her mother passed away when she was only 12, Elizabeth took on responsibility for caring for her younger siblings for the next several years.

Fry was married at the age of 20 and would have 11 kids, but she also decided to become a Quaker minister as she entered her 30’s. As part of her duties, Fry visited the local prison to help preach and work with the inmates – and the terrible conditions that the inmates suffered (many of them women and children) deeply moved her. She began bringing food and fresh clothes to these prisoners, as well as beginning a school for imprisoned children.

As time went on, Fry began to shift from individual help to wider advocacy, working to end the practice of transporting prisoners through public squares (where people would often throw food and filth at them) and advocating for shifting the purpose of prisons from punishment to rehabilitation.

Throughout the course of her work, Fry is believed to have visited and helped over 10,000 prisoners – and she continued to make appeals to the British government to improve the prison system. Her advocacy gained the attention of Queen Victoria, who further transformed England during her 63-year reign.

In addition to her prison advocacy, Fry also helped to establish a homeless shelter and worked to abolish the slave trade. She was a remarkable person and leader who not only cared about others, but was also willing to do whatever it took to help them!

Crafts / Activities

**Paul and Silas Paper Chains**

**(Ages 3+, 5-10 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Scissors
* Tape

Instructions:

* Younger kids will need some help with the assembly, but these simple paper chains can serve as a reminder of Paul and Silas being in jail during our Bible passage today – and that God is always with us, no matter what.

**Paul and Silas Word Scramble**

**(Ages 7+, 5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Pen/Pencil/Marker

Instructions:

* This puzzle involves unscrambling individual words to reveal Paul’s message to the jailer after the earthquake.

**Paul and Silas Greek Translator**

**(Ages 7+, 5-10 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Pen/Pencil/Marker

Instructions:

* If you’ve ever wanted to (kind of) learn Greek, here’s an easy intro! Greek doesn’t perfectly translate to English (24 vs. 26 letters), but it’s close enough to make an overly simplified letter puzzle.

Biblical Background – Paul and Silas[[1]](#footnote-2)

Paul and Silas’ imprisonment is the closest we’ll get to discussing the dangers that faced the early church as it began to expand across the Roman empire, so it might be worth spending a little time on what Paul and later generations of Christians went through – keeping the age of your class in mind, of course.

Although we often assume that the early church was facing intense persecution from Rome right off the bat, historical records don’t really show organized persecution until the 3rd century (which makes sense given Christianity’s relatively small size in the first few centuries). Most conflicts were directed towards individual Christians like Paul – although there were certainly instances of community conflicts as well (1 John seems to reflect this). In many cases, though, we don’t have a clear enough picture to accurately understand all of the factors at play – and what caused the abusive treatment of many Christians.

One of the puzzling pieces about the resistance that Paul encountered throughout his ministry is that religious preaching in public squares wasn’t illegal or unknown in the Roman Empire – in fact, it was pretty common. Instead, Paul seems to have gotten in trouble most consistently during his advocacy within city synagogues. We don’t know what exactly he was saying that upset others so much – Jews and Christians seem to have co-existed easily throughout much of the 1st century – but Paul was run out of towns consistently enough that it was likely more about the messenger rather than the message…

Regardless, as time went by and Christianity continued to expand there were increasing levels of skepticism and derision from the wider Roman empire, as well as increasing levels of resistance within Judaism. Judaism was afforded respect by Rome as an ancient religion, but Christianity came under suspicion for being “atheists” (meaning they didn’t believe in the Roman pantheon of gods) and occasionally charges of “cannibalism” (because they kept talking about a ritual where they ate Jesus’ body and blood). The emperors Domitian and Trajan may have permitted Christian persecution around the turn of the 1st century, but it wasn’t until the year 250 that the emperor Decius began the first systematic persecution of Christians.

1. Your ability to share this info with kids will vary depending on their age – this section is mainly written for teachers and parents to learn a bit more about the background to each week's passage! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)