

Sunday, January 18, 2026 | Missio Dei

Week 7 | Acts 16:16-40 | "Prison Ministry, Pt. 1"

READ: Acts 16:16-40 (ESV)

¹⁶ As **we** were going to the place of prayer, **we** were met by a **slave** girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners **much gain** by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸ And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become **greatly annoyed**, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their **hope of gain was gone**, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. ²⁰ And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men **are Jews**, and they are **disturbing** our city. ²¹ They advocate customs that are **not lawful** for us as Romans to accept or practice." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight, Paul and Silas were **praying** and **singing** hymns to God, and the prisoners were **listening** to them, ²⁶ and suddenly there was a **great earthquake**, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and **everyone's** bonds were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was **about to kill himself**, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and **trembling with fear**, he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I **do** to be saved?" ³¹ And they said, "**Believe** in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and **washed their wounds**; and he was **baptized** at once, he and all his family. ³⁴ Then he brought them up **into his house** and set food before them. And he **rejoiced** along with his entire household that he had **believed** in God.

³⁵ But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, “Let those men go.”
³⁶ And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, “The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace.” ³⁷ But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.” ³⁸ The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. ³⁹ So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.

As we talked about last week, the gospel is international; it transcends borders, reaching all who'll answer God's call to salvation. This means we can go *anywhere* with the good news, from distant lands to our own neighborhoods, from the friend group to the family table, and from the freedom of the public square to the confinement of a *prison cell*.

In today's passage, Paul and Silas will be wrongfully imprisoned. As such, they follow in the footsteps of the other apostles who were likewise incarcerated for the faith (cf. Ac 4:1-3; 5:17-18; 12:1-19). Interestingly, things aren't so different today. According to a recent report, “4,712 Christians were detained without trial, arrested, sentenced or imprisoned, with more than 1,600 of these incidents occurring in India.”¹ Looking through Church history, one could argue that a key tradition of Christianity is *the practice of jail time*!

But as we'll see, it is in dark places like jail cells where the light of the gospel often shines the brightest. Paul and Silas don't see their imprisonment as a *hindrance* to the kingdom of God but as an *opportunity*. The mission field isn't only to be found in foreign lands, nor is it confined to our own back yards; it is also found inside correctional facilities. Faith-based prison outreach programs have a proven track record of reducing recidivism, that is, people returning to prison. For example, inmates in Minnesota who went through *Prison Fellowship's* program had a recidivism rate of 0.8 percent, compared to the state average of 40 percent, saving taxpayers \$3 million.²

On the last day, what will distinguish unbelievers from believers is their care not only for the poor but also for the imprisoned (cf. Mt 25:35-36). As Christians, we must see gospel opportunities in the *bleakest* places.

¹ Chandler, Diana, “[World Watch List 2026: Christian persecution at all-time high in 15 nations](#),” January 14, 2026, *Baptist Press*, [accessed January 17, 2026].

² <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/about/academy-backup/academy-case-statement/>

I want you to notice four things in this passage:

1.) Vs. 16-18 – The Annoyance of an Apostle

Vs. 16 – Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke were "going to the place of prayer," presumably the following Sabbath day, since, on the previous Sabbath, they met and then lodged with Lydia.

As they were going, they "were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling." Slavery in the ancient world was common. That she was called a "girl" doesn't mean this person was a minor. It's possible, but the same term translated as "slave girl" (*paidiskē*) is used to refer to Hagar in Ga 4:22.

The Greek term translated as "spirit of divination" is *pneuma pythōn*; literally, the phrase means "spirit of python."³ In Greek mythology, the Python was a snake or dragon that lived on Mt. Parnassus in Greece. After slaying the Python, Apollo installed a priestess who seemed to predict the future, giving her the title of Pythia, a play on the snake's name.⁴ (Pictured to the right is the bronze statue of the Python in Turkey that once stood 41 feet tall.⁵) Those who were said to possess "the spirit of the Python" were, like the Oracle of Delphi, thought to have powers of divination.⁶ Divination is a blanket term for gaining secret knowledge through supernatural means. Those who possessed this power claimed to be able to predict the future,



³ Louw-Nida (1996), 420.

⁴ General Editors, "Delphic Oracle's Lips May Have Been Loosened by Gas Vapors," August 14, 2011, *National Geographic*, [accessed, January 16, 2026], According to geological studies, there are hallucinogenic gases, namely ethylene, that seep up from the ground around Mt. Parnassus. So accounts of prophetic utterances may have been due more to fumes than any supernatural force.

⁵ Wikipedia contributors, "Serpent Column," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* (accessed January 16, 2026).

⁶ Interestingly, the term ventriloquist is closely associated with the Pythia. The priestesses of Delphia were said to speak without moving their lips, with some voice emanating from their belly. Ventriloquist is a transliteration of the Latin word *ventriloquus* (belly speak), which is itself a translation of the Greek term *engastrimythoi* (lit., "in-the-belly-myth-tellers"). Plutarch explicitly records the shift in terminology. He notes that in his time, people who were formerly called *engastrimythoi* were now called Pythones (after the Python), saying, "It is absurd and childish to believe that the god himself... enters into the bodies of the prophets and speaks through them, using their mouths and voices as instruments... for that would be to treat them like the ventriloquists formerly called Eurykles, but now called Pythones." (Plutarch, *Moralia* 414E).

interpret omens, and consult with spirits.⁷ Diviners had a variety of methods that they used, including special rods, arrows, cups, household idols, animal livers, and so on.⁸

QUICK ASIDE: It is essential to have a biblical perspective on magic. Much of what I'm about to say, I've said before. Nevertheless, given the fascination with demons and the spiritual dimension through TV and movies, these words bear repeating.

As mentioned when studying Acts 13 (Jewish magician, Bar-Jesus), sorcery, divination, magic, and so on, was a capital punishment in the OT (cf. Ex. 22:18). It condemned everything from conversing with the dead or spirits to astrology (cf. Deut. 18:10-12; Jer. 10:2). So, professions like psychics, palm readers, and astrologers were, **and still are, expressly forbidden for the follower of God.** In Roman society, such vocations were well-respected, since the Empire was fascinated by any and all cults—e.g., Isis and Mithraism.⁹

And, as mentioned when studying Acts 8 (Simon the Magus), not everything we call magic today should be held to the same strict prohibition found in the OT. What we might call “magicians” today are, for the most part, more precisely defined as illusionists; **they're not *real* magicians.** And the so-called “magic” depicted in series like *Harry Potter*,¹⁰ *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* are mere plot devices; **they're not *real* magical textbooks.** This is not to disregard those Christians who may be against depictions of magic in any form. Such issues are matters of the conscience (cf. Rom. 14:1-23; 1 Cor. 8:10-12) and good Christians can disagree.

Broadly speaking, the “magic” we see in pop culture isn't the same as what the Bible describes. Biblical magic is, without question, demonic. *The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* defines magic as “An attempt to influence or control people or events through supernatural forces.”¹¹ It promotes practices wherein a person might commune with spirits, engage with mediums, and/or use magical instruments for the purpose of supernatural revelation and manipulation—e.g., Wicca, the occult, psychics, horoscopes, and so on.

⁷ Mangum, Douglas, *The Lexham Glossary of Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

⁸ Smith, William, in *Smith's Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986).

⁹ Bird, Michael F., *Crossing Over Sea and Land: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 84.

¹⁰ Mathis, David, “[Harry Potter Turns 25: What I Saw While Reading to My Sons](#),” June 26, 2022, *Desiring God*, (accessed August 28, 2025).

¹¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “[Magic](#),” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1375.

But while magic, in some form or another, might be real, the validity of magical practices ought to have little effect on the believer. No magic, however powerful, can overcome Christ and those in whom he dwells (cf. Col. 1:13; 1 Jn. 4:4). Satan is defeated; he's dying a slow and agonizing death (cf. Col. 2:15). And while he may yet trouble the believer (cf. 1 Pet. 5:8), should the Christian, in the power of the Holy Spirit, resist the devil, we're promised that he'll flee from us like the coward that he is (cf. Ja. 4:7).

But this assumes that the believer is not engaging in magical practices. **Though a believer cannot be demon possessed (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 1 Jn. 1:5), they can be dominically oppressed.** This occurs when they invite wicked forces into their hearts and minds through demonic activities. Make no mistake, magic is soundly condemned in both the OT (cf. Lev. 19:26, 31; Deut. 18:10; Mal. 3:5) and NT (cf. Gal. 5:19-21; Rev. 21:8; 22:15), and thus, **believers are to have no part in its influences or practices.**

That the slave girl “brought her owners **much gain** by fortune-telling” need not mean that her predictions were necessarily **accurate**, just that they were **profitable**. After all, among the fortune tellers of the ancient world, one claiming to be in the tradition of the Pythia “was considered highly reliable prophetic information.”¹² Even granting the fact that she was demon-possessed, we mustn't assume this woman had some extraordinary ability. A demon's existence is long, and experience has made them excellent predictors of human behavior. But such an ability is no more supernatural and then when a parent predicts what'll happen on Christmas morning. **God is the only omniscient being in the universe. No demon, not even Satan, knows the future.**

Vs. 17-18 – Luke says that this slave girl followed Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke, saying, “**These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.**” This is hardly a special revelation. Anyone listening to Paul and his friends would know the gist of their message. And, on the surface, this seems like a good thing, and, perhaps, if this were a one-time occurrence, it may have been. But Luke says, “**she kept doing for many days.**” The repetition made the girl more of an annoyance than an assistance. So much so, Luke says Paul became “**greatly annoyed.**” The Greek term Luke uses is *diaponeomai*, which comes from the root *poneomai*, which means to toil or work hard.¹³ So, Paul wasn't simply displeased (cf. Ac 4:2); his patience had worn thin over the “**many days**” and was now completely gone. He could

¹² Keener, Craig S., *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012–2013), 3:2422.

¹³ Thomas, Robert L., in *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition* (Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc, 1998).

take no more. So, Paul tells the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And Luke tells us the demon “came out that very hour.”

This scene is reminiscent of two events in Jesus’s ministry.

In Lu 4:34-34, we're told about a demon who says to the Lord, "'Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent and come out of him!'"

Presumably, Jesus didn't want his cover blown before it was time. Having a demon spouting off his identity would've drawn the wrong kind of attention.

In the story of the maniac of Gadara, the demon horde called “Legion” says to Jesus, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me” (Lu. 8:28). Showing mercy, the Lord doesn't send them to “the abyss” (Lu 8:31; cf. Re 9:1), but into a herd of pigs.

What's interesting about these two events is that, as with the Philippian witch, Jesus's identity was already known to the demons; the demons themselves spoke the truth, and in each case, the unclean spirits were exorcised.

Takeaway #1: The power of God frees those enslaved by dark forces.

We're not told anything about this girl other than that she was twice enslaved: she was the property of human owners and a demonic spirit. But through the power of Christ's name, she was set free from, at least, her demon possession. It is unclear whether she followed Christ after this. But nevertheless, it is an NT principle that those who yield themselves to Christ will be set free from the powers of darkness.

Romans 6:6-7 says, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.”

Colossians 1:13-14 says, God the Father “has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

There is power in the name of Jesus, not as a magical word, but as a transformational reality.

2.) Vs. 19-24 – The Negligence of the Magistrates

Vs. 19 – Though no doubt Paul and his companions were relieved, not everyone was so happy. Remember, this girl was a slave, and “when her owners saw that their **hope of gain was gone**, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.” For some unknown reason, Timothy and Luke were spared, perhaps because Paul and Silas were the main speakers.

Takeaway #2: A profit margin dependent on **unjust** gain will be **threatened** by Christianity.

Slavery, the porn industry, prostitution, gambling, abortion clinics, dating apps that facilitate one-night stands and/or affairs, all such things will fight against the truths of Christianity, using the legal system if necessary.

In Acts 19, rather than some slavers being upset, it'll be the silversmiths. Since the true God could not be made with hands, Christians no longer needed silver idols. The people burned “**fifty thousand pieces of silver**” (Ac. 19:19) worth of magic books. **That's roughly \$6 million!**

Vs. 20-21 – The slavers brought Paul and Silas to “**the magistrates**,” also known as a “praetor,” or “captain.”¹⁴ Like an attorney general, a praetor oversaw the judicial affairs of a Roman colony and was the highest authority within it. They wielded considerable power, commanding soldiers and carrying out capital punishments.¹⁵

Remember, the problem these slavers had with Paul **was economic**. He had cast out the evil spirit from their slave girl, and now their livelihood was at stake. But, instead of admitting this to the magistrates, the slavers' accusation is comprised of three other components: **ethnic, domestic, and nationalistic**.

- 1.) **Ethnic** – “**These men are Jews**.” In other words, they were **racial outsiders**. Interestingly, Jewishness was an advantage in regions with a sizeable Jewish population (cf. Ac 16:3). Here, in a town so far away from Jerusalem that it did not even have a synagogue, being a Jew was a disadvantage. **Prejudice is as much an ancient problem as a modern one.**
- 2.) **Domestic** – “**They are disturbing our city**.” In other words, **they were local outsiders**. The Greek term translated as “disturbing” means “to cause people to riot against—‘to stir up against, to start a riot, to cause an uproar.’”¹⁶ The slavers characterized Paul and Silas as provocateurs seeking to disrupt the peace of Philippi.

¹⁴ BDAG (2000), 947.

¹⁵ Schultz, Celia E. and Allen M. Ward, *A History of the Roman People* (New York; London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 94.

¹⁶ Louw-Nida (1996), 1:497–98.

- 3.) **Nationalistic** – “They advocate customs that are **not lawful** for us as Romans to accept or practice.” In other words, they were **cultural outsiders**. But the “not lawful” bit was an exaggeration. Nothing that Paul and Silas said went against Rome's law, and any Roman reading Acts would immediately see that Christianity posed no threat to Rome. In fact, many theologians have noted that Luke has an apologetic aim to discredit the claim that Christianity was antagonistic to Roman rule. Christians are law-abiding citizens, not anarchists (cf. Rom. 13).

Vs. 22-24 – Notably, after the accusation was levied against Paul and Silas, **there is no trial**. In the place of due process, mob violence takes the reins. **Five** things occur in quick succession: allegations, humiliation, lacerations, incarceration, immobilization.

- 1.) **There were allegations** – Luke says, “The crowd joined in attacking them.” The Greek term translated “joined in attacking them” doesn’t necessarily involve physical violence. It is far more likely that the “crowd joined” the slavers in verbally “attacking” Paul and Silas.¹⁷
- 2.) **There was humiliation** – Luke says, “the magistrates tore the garments off them.” Admittedly, the Greek word “garments” can refer only to an outer cloak (cf. Lu 6:29; 19:35). However, given that they'll be beaten with rods, we can safely assume that Paul and Silas were stripped of their clothes, leaving them completely naked.¹⁸ Speaking of this moment, Paul says they were “shamefully treated at Philippi” (1 Th 2:2). To be exposed to the public was humiliating, especially to a Jew.
- 3.) **There were lacerations** – Luke says the magistrates “gave orders to beat them with rods.” Luke’s use of the term “rods” appears to reference the *lictors* who were the enforcers of the *praetors*. They carried the *fasces* (picture right), or the “rods of praetors.”¹⁹ **A fasces was a bundle of birch or elm sticks measuring about 5ft long, tied together with red straps, with an axe head at the top.**²⁰ Each *praetor* had **six lictors**, each armed with a fasces.²¹ It was a



© 2011 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

¹⁷ Louw-Nida (1996), 1:499, “In Ac 24:9 συνεπιτίθεμαι does not involve physical force but strong verbal opposition. It may therefore be more appropriate to translate ‘they opposed him strongly with their words’ or ‘they spoke very strongly against him.’”

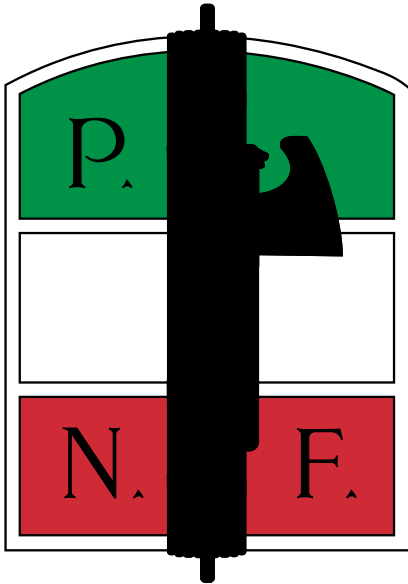
¹⁸ Keener (2012–2013), 3:2477.

¹⁹ Ibid., 3:2478.

²⁰ Britannica Editors, “[fasces](#),” March 12, 2025, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, [accessed January 17, 2026].

²¹ Ibid.

striking symbol of penal authority. Interestingly, Mussolini used it as the emblem of the Fascist Party (bottom left), and the US Government has two of them situated on the wall of the US Senate (bottom right).



The Romans had a variety of methods for carrying out corporal punishments, with varying degrees of severity depending on the crime and citizenship—punishments were less severe for Roman citizens. According to Brian Rapske, given that the men will need their “wounds” tended to (vs. 33), they likely experienced the *verberatio*, a heavy beating for non-free civilians.²² Bear in mind, the Romans weren’t limited to “the forty lashes less one” as was the case in Jewish courts (cf. 2 Co 11:24). Usurpingly, Roman beatings often led to the criminal's death.²³

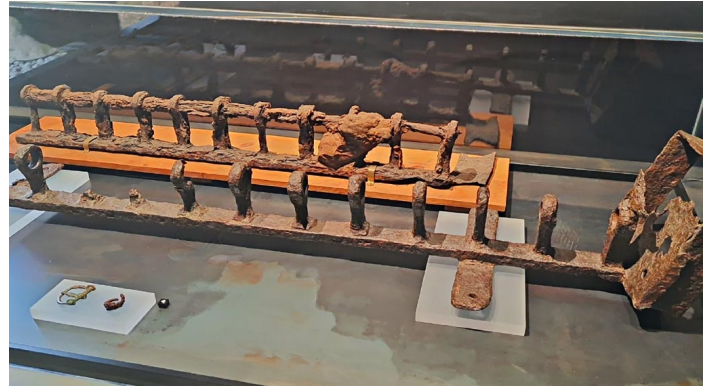
- 4.) There was **incarceration** – Luke says, the magistrates “threw them into prison.” And not just anywhere in the prison, but the “inner prison,” that is, the most secure part of the prison. They weren’t put into something like the drunk tank but supermax, where the most heinous criminals were kept, most of whom would’ve been on death row.²⁴

²² Rapske, Brian, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting: The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody*, Edited by Bruce W. Winter, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; The Paternoster Press, 1994), 3:124.

²³ Keener (2012–2013), 3:2479.

²⁴ Rapske (1994), 126.

5.) There was **immobilization** – Luke says, the magistrates “fastened their feet in the stocks.” There were several kinds of stocks in the ancient world, most of which were made of wood. However, iron stocks were found in the Gladiatorial Barracks of Pompeii (pictured right). According to Rapske, "Prisoners' legs were set in the spaces between the teeth, and a moveable iron rod was run through the holes in the top of each tooth. The whole contraption was anchored to the floor."²⁵ As such, Paul and Silas would've been unable to move, making sleeping all but impossible.



[Pompeii, Gladiator Barracks, Stocks](#) - photo courtesy of Giuseppe Ciaramella

Takeaway #3: Those who bear the **name** of Christ will bear the **marks** of Christ.

Jesus was falsely accused by a Jewish mob, humiliated by Roman soldiers, lacerated via scourging, incarcerated by both Jewish and Roman authorities, and then immobilized on a tree. All that Paul and Silas went through, Christ went through and more. We do not follow a king who is led by the sword. We serve a king who sacrificed himself, suffering for the very ones who crucified him. And he tells us that if the world treated him like that, it will treat his followers just the same. 2 Timothy 3:12-13 says, "**Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.**"

We must ready our minds to suffer; otherwise, we're bound to fall away (cf. Jn 16:1).

Soli Deo Gloria

²⁵ Ibid., 127.

Video Description:

Missio Dei | Week 7 | Acts 16:16-24 | “Prison Ministry, Pt. 1”

As we talked about last week, the gospel is international; it transcends borders, reaching all who'll answer God's call to salvation. This means we can go *anywhere* with the good news, from distant lands to our own neighborhoods, from the friend group to the family table, and from the freedom of the public square to the confinement of a *prison cell*.

In today's passage, Paul and Silas will be wrongfully imprisoned. As such, they follow in the footsteps of the other apostles who were likewise incarcerated for the faith (cf. Ac 4:1-3; 5:17-18; 12:1-19). Interestingly, things aren't so different today. According to a recent report, “4,712 Christians were detained without trial, arrested, sentenced or imprisoned, with more than 1,600 of these incidents occurring in India.”[1] Looking through Church history, one could argue that a key tradition of Christianity is *the practice of jail time!*

But as we'll see, it is in dark places like jail cells where the light of the gospel often shines the brightest. Paul and Silas don't see their imprisonment as a *hindrance* to the kingdom of God but as an *opportunity*. The mission field isn't only to be found in foreign lands, nor is it confined to our own back yards; it is also found inside correctional facilities. Faith-based prison outreach programs have a proven track record of reducing recidivism, that is, people returning to prison. For example, inmates in Minnesota who went through *Prison Fellowship's* program had a recidivism rate of 0.8 percent, compared to the state average of 40 percent, saving taxpayers \$3 million.[2]

On the last day, what will distinguish unbelievers from believers is their care not only for the poor but also for the imprisoned (cf. Mt 25:35-36). As Christians, we must see gospel opportunities in the *bleakest* places.

[1] Chandler, Diana, “[World Watch List 2026: Christian persecution at all-time high in 15 nations](#),” January 14, 2026, *Baptist Press*, [accessed January 17, 2026].

[2] <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/about/academy-backup/academy-case-statement/>

Sermon Manuscript:

Grace Pointe Baptist Church

12029 Eastern Ave.

Baltimore, MD 21220

Contact: info@GracePointeLife.com

Website: <https://www.gracepointelife.com>

Give here: <https://www.gracepointelife.com/give/>

Podcast Details:

Season 42 | 7