Mussolini’s Italy, Franco’s Spain, Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia, Mao’s China, Augusto Pinochet’s Chile, and Tito’s Yugoslavia (and the list continues with modern day dictators) are among the best-known examples of **authoritarian regimes**. Whether fascist or communist, dictatorships oppress people. Life and prosperity are constrained.

Freedom of speech, widely considered a cornerstone of democracy and individual liberty, is severely restricted in authoritarian states. In these nations, the government dominates the narrative, suppressing dissent. Any deviation from the "official" story line — the one promoted and enforced by the regime — is discouraged and met with serious life-threatening consequences.

Education is monitored, and research is censored; history gets rewritten, and the free press shut down. Intellectuals, artists, journalists, and educators are frequently targeted, as their work has the potential to influence public opinion and inspire change.

Authoritarian regimes thrive on the cultivation of fear among their citizens. People are acutely aware that their words, whether spoken in public or private, can be surveilled, interpreted as dissent, and used against them. In such environments, individuals often self-censor. Spying among the populace is encouraged. Governments in these states often reward individuals who inform on their peers, creating an environment of mistrust and suspicion.

In such regimes, people may be picked up, detained, and imprisoned in blatant acts of abuse of power with carelessness toward the law or due process.

The reding from Acts reports of a girl enslaved both by owners — who dictate her actions and her value — and by an inner spirit that tells her what to do and what to say. Contrasting that image is the experience of Paul and Silas. They have both inner and external freedom. When they use their authority to rebuke the demon that enslaves the girl (and by extension, her owners), they are also caught up in that system and sent away to “the innermost cell” of the jail (Acts 16:24).

They are arrested, not because they have done something wrong, but because they have gone against the economic interests of people in power: they have disturbed the city with teachings unfamiliar to them (Acts16:20).

And we observe how those with less power become part of the system and are made to do the bidding of the powerful. The mob acts as an enforcer (Acts 16:22). The jailer, like Hitler’s executioners,[[1]](#footnote-1) is drawn in by “just following orders.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is the context in which we are led to observe Paul and Silas’s inner freedom: instead of whining, they sing.

When during the 1963 Birmingham Campaign of the Civil Rights Movement Bull Connor arrested the Freedom Riders, he swore he'd never let them out of Birmingham - but the next morning he put them on a bus headed to Nashville. When asked why he let them go, he said "I just couldn't stand their singing."[[3]](#footnote-3)

Paul and Silas cannot avoid the corruption of the system and are imprisoned as criminals just because they disrupted the status quo and upset the powerful. It reminds me of Jesus, his turning over of the merchants’ tables, his arrest by a mob, and execution as the worst criminal and enemy of the state. We serve a God who was unjustly arrested, charged, sentenced and executed.

When God opens the prison, Paul and Silas are mysteriously freed from their chains, along with everyone else in the prison. They don’t run away. They choose to stay, demonstrating that their freedom ultimately has little to do with walls and chains.

Just as Jesus didn’t come down from the cross, Paul and Silas accepted their mistreatment for love of truth and freedom. By staying, they affirmed their faith and loved their neighbor, in this case, the jailer. Whatever the context, a Christian is called to love.

The jailer is shocked by their behavior. He has a taste of true freedom and peace. He receives the words of salvation and marks his transformation through the water of baptism along with his household.

Ponder the Philippian church. Meeting in the home of wealthy Lydia, we find the home owner and her household, a formerly enslaved girl, and the jailer together with his wife and children. The Jesus movement fashions churches that cross social boundaries – and then there is a unity in Jesus that the world thinks impossible.

In John’s gospel (chapter 17) Jesus prays for all those who haven’t seen him physically but still believe in his message. He prayed for Paul and Silas, for Lydia and her household, for the enslaved girl, for the Roman jailer and his family, for you and for me. He prays that we all may be one.

Jesus-style unity isn’t uniformity. It’s togetherness in difference. God made us different, and delights in difference. Division is on our side, not God’s. unity is God intended and holy. Uniformity is a sinful fabrication. Diversity is divinely created and planned. Divisions are the consequence of our smallness. Jesus points out why unity matters: “so that the world may know.” (John 17:23)

Divisions reveal our stubbornness and embarrassing sinfulness. In our bitterness and insistence on separating each other along party lines, color of the skin, social class, religious affiliation, gender identities, we are the anti-answer to Jesus’ own prayer. What does this say about the need for humility and repentance? What does it say about the cultural and political idols we worship?

Paul and Silas left the open prison only after they impressed upon the jailer that they honored his wellbeing more than their physical freedom. They acted on faith and their faith produced new believers. They opened the doors of the enslaved girl’s and the jailer’s own spiritual prison and allowed them to walk out.

May the freedom of the Spirit teach us new songs to sing. May prison doors be opened.

1. Acts 16:23. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Superior orders - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superior_orders) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [The Freedom Rides of 1961](https://www.crmvet.org/reprints/freedom_rides.pdf); [Freedom Rides](https://www.thecongressofracialequality.org/freedom-rides.html); [The Birmingham Campaign – BCRI](https://www.bcri.org/bham-campaign/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)