

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF
TENNESSEE, NASHVILLE DIVISION

James Dalton #1170 v. Chad Youker

Dalton · No. 3:26-cv-00524 · Decided May 26, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee grants James Dalton leave to proceed in forma pauperis and leave to amend his complaint. The court permits Dalton’s First Amendment free-exercise and retaliation claims, RLUIPA claim, and Tennessee-law claim concerning the alleged removal and restricted access to Bibles at the Williamson County Jail to proceed, while dismissing any individual-capacity RLUIPA claim for damages. The court holds Dalton’s emergency motion for injunctive relief in abeyance and directs service of process on Captain Chad Youker.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee, Nashville Division
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Aleta A. Trauger
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee
DECIDED	May 26, 2026
DOCKET	3:26-cv-00524
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Pro se pretrial detainee filed an in forma pauperis action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, RLUIPA, and Tennessee Code Annotated § 41-21-211. The court granted leave to proceed in forma pauperis, granted leave to amend, screened the amended complaint under the PLRA, permitted specified claims to proceed, and held an emergency motion for injunctive relief in abeyance.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Initial screening under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A; the court liberally construes pro se pleadings and accepts factual allegations as true unless entirely lacking credibility.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished_or_nonprecedential

TOPICS

prisoners rights

free exercise clause

section 1983

injunctions

civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

prisoner civil rights

constitutional law

religious liberty

civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the amended complaint stated colorable First Amendment free-exercise and retaliation claims concerning the alleged prohibition and restricted access to Bibles.
2. Whether the amended complaint stated a colorable claim under RLUIPA based on the alleged substantial burden on Dalton's religious exercise.
3. Whether the alleged Bible-access policy stated a claim under Tennessee Code Annotated § 41-21-211.
4. Whether Captain Youker could be sued in his individual and official capacities, including whether RLUIPA permits an individual-capacity damages claim.
5. Whether the supplemental complaint added defendants or claims and whether the emergency motion for injunctive relief should be resolved immediately.

HOLDINGS

1. The amended complaint states claims sufficiently colorable to proceed under the First Amendment, RLUIPA, and Tennessee law, subject to later dismissal under the PLRA or a motion to dismiss.
2. Allegations that jail officials prohibited possession of physical Bibles and restricted or obstructed access to religious materials sufficiently state a colorable First Amendment free-exercise claim at the screening stage.
3. The amended complaint states a colorable RLUIPA claim against Captain Youker in his official capacity, but any individual-capacity RLUIPA claim is dismissed because RLUIPA does not permit money damages against prison officials in their individual capacities.
4. The allegations sufficiently state colorable First Amendment retaliation claims against Captain Youker in his individual capacity.
5. The allegations permit an inference that the alleged jail policies violated Tennessee Code Annotated § 41-21-211 and state a claim against Captain Youker in his official and individual capacities.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"To establish a claim of First Amendment retaliation, "a prisoner must prove that (1) he engaged in protected conduct, (2) the defendant took an adverse action that is capable of deterring a person of ordinary firmness from continuing to engage in that conduct, and (3) the adverse action was motivated at least in part by the prisoner's protected conduct." (Section III)

"Having screened the Amended Complaint pursuant to the PLRA, the court finds that it states viable claims under the First Amendment (free exercise, retaliation), RLUIPA, and Tennessee state law." (Conclusion)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Dalton, a pretrial detainee at the Williamson County Jail, alleged that jail officials seized physical Bibles and prohibited inmates from possessing religious books under a county jail policy. He alleged that digital Bible access was limited, routinely withdrawn as punishment, and obstructed by jail staff, and that he was retaliated against after filing grievances and litigation concerning the Bible ban. He also alleged that Captain Chad Youker directed or participated in a search of Dalton's pod and made threats concerning Dalton's requests for Bibles.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Dalton filed a complaint concerning the removal of religious materials, including Bibles, from the Williamson County Jail, followed by a motion to amend and a supplemental complaint and emergency motion for injunctive relief. The court granted the motion to amend, designated the proposed amended complaint as operative, and conducted initial PLRA screening before service. The court found colorable First Amendment, RLUIPA, and Tennessee statutory claims, dismissed only the individual-capacity RLUIPA claim for damages, and directed service and referral for further proceedings.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- United States v. Smotherman, 838 F.3d 736, 739 (6th Cir. 2016)
- Erickson v. Pardus, 551 U.S. 89, 94 (2007)
- Thomas v. Eby, 481 F.3d 434, 437 (6th Cir. 2007)
- Denton v. Hernandez, 504 U.S. 25, 33 (1992)
- Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520-21 (1972)
- Jourdan v. Jabe, 951 F.2d 108, 110 (6th Cir. 1991)
- McDonald v. Hall, 610 F.2d 16, 19 (1st Cir. 1979)
- Dominguez v. Corr. Med. Servs., 555 F.3d 543, 549 (6th Cir. 2009)
- Sigley v. City of Panama Heights, 437 F.3d 527, 533 (6th Cir. 2006)
- Maye v. Klee, 915 F.3d 1076, 1083 (6th Cir. 2019)
- Kent v. Johnson, 821 F.2d 1220, 1224 (6th Cir. 1987)
- O'Lone v. Estate of Shabazz, 482 U.S. 342, 349 (1987)
- Cavin v. Michigan Department of Corrections, Cavin v. Mich. Dep't of Corr., 927 F.3d 455, 461 (6th Cir. 2019)
- Turner v. Safley, 482 U.S. 78, 89-91 (1987)
- Colvin v. Caruso, 605 F.3d 282, 296 (6th Cir. 2010)
- Lovelace v. Lee, 472 F.3d 174, 199-200 (4th Cir. 2006)
- Holt v. Hobbs, 574 U.S. 352, 361-62 (2015)
- Brown v. Page, No. 2:20-cv-00070, 2021 WL 288754, at *3 (M.D. Tenn. Jan. 27, 2021)
- Yates v. Painter, 306 F. App'x 778, 780 (3d Cir. 2009)

- Washington v. Klem, 497 F.3d 272, 282-83 (3d Cir. 2007)
- Arauz v. Bell, 307 F. App'x 923, 928 (6th Cir. 2009)
- Hill v. Lappin, 630 F.3d 468, 472 (6th Cir. 2010)
- Thaddeus-X v. Blatter, 175 F.3d 378, 394, 398 (6th Cir. 1999) (en banc)
- Alkire v. Irving, 330 F.3d 802, 810 (6th Cir. 2003)
- Haight v. Thompson, 763 F.3d 554, 569-70 (6th Cir. 2014)