

The Gospel Comes to Europe

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[0 : 00] Tonight will be from Acts chapter 16, verses 11 to 40. Once, when we were going to a 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 from her owners by fortune telling. 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.

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. 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 marketplace to face the authorities.

They brought them before the magistrates and said, These men are Jews and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.

[1 : 02] The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.

Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

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. 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.

But Paul shouted, Don't harm yourself, we're all here. The jailer called the lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

They replied, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.

[2 : 15] At that hour of the night, the jailer took them and washed their wounds. Then immediately he and all his family were baptized. 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. When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order, Release those men.

The jailer told Paul, The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace. 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.

The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed.

They came to appease them and escort them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city.

After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them.

[3 : 24] Then they left. Turn with me in your Bibles once again to Acts chapter 16. I want to read from verse 11 to verse 15, and then we'll think about the whole of chapter 16 from that point on.

Here is the moment where the gospel begins to break through in pagan Europe. So Acts chapter 16 at verse 11, From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on

to Neapolis.

From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony, and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer.

We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God.

The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.

[4 : 43] If you consider me a believer in the Lord, she said, come and stay at my house. And she persuaded us. So we've been looking for the last few weeks at Paul's missionary journeys, journeys that began from Antioch, the church in Antioch, Paul's sending church.

So for this evening, I want us to imagine that we are Paul's sending church in Antioch. So we've gathered together for worship once again, and we are preparing to hear a letter that's come in from the mission field, written by Dr. Luke, to tell us about the progress of the mission.

Imagine how we would feel the sense of excitement as we read of these individuals and the way God was working.

Imagine the praise. Imagine how encouraging it would be to us as a young church, surrounded by a largely hostile culture, to be reminded of the fact that God is building his church.

Acts chapter 16 is an interesting one. There's been lots of momentum. Acts is a really action-packed book. Lots of momentum in the last few chapters. We see the gospel advancing in towns and cities.

[6 : 05] We see opposition to the gospel. But it's kind of like wide scale. It's, yeah, wide screen. But here, Dr. Luke deliberately slows down and zooms in.

Now the attention is not simply on the city of Philippi. And now he's looking at these individuals that Paul and Silas and the others met and whose lives were changed by their encounters with Jesus.

So Dr. Luke deliberately records for us three of the earliest converts to Christianity in Europe. So if we were sitting here in Antioch, this prayer letter would be telling us of the first time that people had turned to faith in Jesus in Europe.

And so I want us to have that mindset and for us to think, what lessons are there for us in the mission that we are engaged in? And as we pray for mission in Edinburgh and Scotland and Europe and indeed around the world.

The first lesson I think that we would probably draw instinctively is we'd be reminded that the gospel is powerful. Here we see once again God's gospel breaking through barriers.

[7 : 27] So at first sight, Philippi in Europe doesn't sound like a very promising place for the church to take root and grow. Let me give you a few reasons for saying that.

So when they arrive in Philippi, Paul's usual practice, we discovered this, his usual practice when he finds a new mission center, he'll go to where the Jews are gathering, where people are still anticipating the coming of their Messiah.

And he'll say from scripture, the one you're waiting for is Jesus. But when he comes to Philippi, that can't happen. Verse 13, on the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river where we expected to find a place of prayer.

So we know there is no synagogue in Philippi, which means there must have been less than 10 Jewish men in the city of Philippi. The law was if there was 10 Jewish men, they were allowed to have a synagogue.

So there'd be at least 10 families or at least 10 individuals waiting for the Messiah who Paul could begin to engage with. That doesn't happen here. So he needs to go to this alternative to this place of prayer.

[8 : 36] Another way in which we see that this is not a very promising, this is a hard ground for the gospel, in verse 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. So this is a city where evil spirits are prominent. This is a culture where the presence of evil can be felt, and where even worse than that, people are actually profiting, making money from the work of evil spirits.

Doesn't seem very promising for gospel work. And then we can go down to verse 22 as another example. So the owners of the slave girl, once she's changed and she's unable to predict the future, they call or they haul Paul and Silas to the marketplace.

In verse 22, the crowd join in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they'd been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison.

So here is wide-scale opposition. So the slave owners, they don't want the gospel. It seems like a lot of people in the city gather together to oppose it, and the magistrates are also standing against Paul and others who would want to share the good news of Jesus, attacking them, imprisoning them without trial, as they'll discover despite the fact that Paul is a Roman citizen.

[10:15] It doesn't seem like a very promising ground for God to do a work. But the wonderful thing is God has his saving plan, and Dr. Luke draws attention to the fact that out of this darkness, God is working to call followers to Jesus out of this moral and spiritual darkness.

Now, that's a very basic point, but I think it's one that we can never hear often enough. It's significant for us today in terms of how we pray when we think about mission, because we will know of situations and missionaries who are active and churches who are active where the church is small and fragile and surrounded by hostility.

We will know of people working and situations where evil spirits are a part of life, where the demonic is a huge feature of the culture.

Thailand, Haiti, parts of Africa, many other places. We know of situations where the government and those who are in authority want to crack down on Christianity and would love to make sharing the gospel illegal.

We can think of so many places in the Middle East, in North Africa, in China, in North Korea. So in other parts of the world, we can pray because we know that other people are having these kind of experiences, but the gospel is powerful, and God is still seeking to build his church.

[11:54] But for us here, I think it's important for us to take heart for Edinburgh, to take heart for Scotland and the UK. Here we are discovering that Jesus' power is greater than all the forces of opposition.

Here we are discovering the gospel can break through a pagan culture as Europe was then, and bearing in mind that Jesus is the same, yesterday, today, and forever, we are invited as God's people to be confident in him, to trust that God is concerned for his glory, that God is concerned to build his church, that God is calling men and women and boys and girls to faith in him, and we are called to be part of that mission enterprise.

So I wonder if, as we think about that, it's time for us to repent and believe, perhaps to say to God, I do believe, help my unbelief.

It can be hard to keep our faith in the powerful gospel of God's grace in Jesus when we meet with so much apathy, when we see hostility, or just people who don't seem interested.

We can lose heart. We can be fearful. But here is an invitation to believe that he's still building his church and he can still use us for his glory.

[13:29] And so we see the gospel is powerful and it breaks through barriers. We see that God is powerful and he opens people's hearts. I think another thing that we would see as we gather together to read this letter, as we listen to Dr. Luke's words, we'd be struck by the significant transformation that's happening in the lives of these individuals.

And we'd be struck by the way Dr. Luke records it because he makes plain that it's the work of God that brings lasting change, that it's as people believe in Jesus that their lives are transformed.

We're reading of conversions and we're being reminded that someone coming to faith in the Lord Jesus, that's God's work and not ours, that we respond to the work that God does.

Let's see that in Lydia's case. Lydia, who it seems like, is the very first convert in Europe. What do we know about Lydia? In verse 14, we meet Lydia.

She's a dealer in purple cloth. She seems to run some kind of fashion house. So she is a wealthy lady. We discover too that she was a worshiper of God.

[14:48] So she is somebody who's not Jewish, but she's become a convert to the Jewish faith. She's not living as a Jew, but she's reading the scriptures. She's praying to the God of the Bible.

And so she gathers with other like-minded people to pray on the Sabbath. And what happens at the end of verse 14? We're told the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

So in modern terms, we would describe her as a seeker. She's reading, she's praying, she's putting herself in the place where she can hear more. But still, it's God by his spirit that causes her to believe in Jesus as Savior.

Maybe this is the first time she's discovered that all the promises of God in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the Savior. That he is the promised king.

That he is the true Passover lamb. That he is the suffering servant of Isaiah chapter 53. And God enables her to trust, to believe in Jesus.

[15 : 54] And we see evidence of her conversion. First of all, in her baptism, verse 15, when she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.

So there's baptism, this outward sign of an inner change. She's now a member of God's family. And just as Jesus called the disciples to baptize people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now that she's believing, she's baptized.

And then she shows hospitality. She invited us to her home, verse 15. If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house. So Paul and Silas and the others, they've now got a mission base in Lydia's house.

But we see how that develops. By verse 40, read verse 40 with me. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. So it seems like the church begins to meet and gather at Lydia's house. So she's opening up her home, she's using her resources in order to allow God's church to grow.

[17 : 03] Here is evidence of a transformed life. Now, with the next person we meet, in a sense, couldn't be any more different to Lydia. Where Lydia was wealthy and influential and seeking after God, we meet this slave girl in verse 16.

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. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us shouting, these men are the servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved.

So she's poor, she's exploited, she's a slave twice over because she's a slave to this evil spirit as well as being a slave to her owners. There is this sort of striking situation where she is, in a sense, witnessing to the truth of Paul and Silas' message.

But it's perhaps likely that the evil spirit is trying to discredit their ministry. Everybody, I think, would know this girl. So as she comes alongside Paul and Silas and as they're listening to her and they're listening to him and they've got the same message, perhaps the evil spirit is hoping to discredit what Paul and Silas are saying.

But what we discover is that Paul becomes troubled. In verse 18, he's grieved by her situation. So he turns around and said to the spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her.

[18 : 29] At that moment, the spirit left her. So we read the Gospels and we discover spiritual opposition to Jesus. We discover so many who are possessed by evil spirits and evil spirits who know that Jesus is the Lord but they hate him for it.

And we see that Jesus is able to drive them out with a word because he is greater. And here again, we see that there is no contest. As Paul drives the spirit out in the name of Jesus, instantly the spirit leaves.

There is no contest spiritually. Jesus always wins. He is greater than the power of evil. And then we see God's power in the life of the prison jailer.

So verse 23. So when the owners realize that they can't make money anymore and they cause this fuss and they bring Paul and Silas into the marketplace and they are arrested, end of verse 23, the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.

Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stock. So here is a professional. He's going about his business. He's been told to make sure that these prisoners don't escape, that they don't cause any bother.

[19 : 51] So he puts them in the inner cell. But while they are in prison, the jailer receives some remarkable impressions. Verse 25.

About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. So the prison jailer gets to hear this remarkable testament.

Here they've been flogged and beaten and put in incredibly uncomfortable stocks, but they're singing praise to God. And not only that, this jailer, he witnesses God's power.

He witnesses God's power, first of all, in an earthquake. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And then he sees God's power in the fact that despite this earthquake, none of the prisoners escape.

Going on in verse 26, at once all the prison doors flew open and everybody's chains came loose. So you're expecting prison break. Of course, especially when there's no chains and there's open doors.

[20 : 59] The jailer, knowing that this escape is more than his life's worth, 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, but Paul shouted, don't harm yourself, we are here.

This is not natural, this is the power of God. And it seems like the jailer, having listened to Paul and Silas, credits it to them as the men of God.

So here he finds himself at the lowest point in his life when he's ready to kill himself and now he calls for a light and he falls before Paul and Silas and he asks that question in verse 30, sirs, what must I do to be saved?

And they replied, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household. Here is a reminder of the extent of God's grace.

It is open to anybody. This working class guy who had no thought for Paul and Silas and their message, this guy who'd been brought so low that he was about to kill himself, God speaks to his heart, God convicts him of his needs and he hears that Jesus is the saviour for him.

[22 : 14] And again, there's evidence of his conversion. We see it in his hospitality. No longer is he keeping Paul and Silas in the stocks. Verse 33, he takes them home and washes their wounds.

He gives them a meal in verse 34. And he and his family are baptized. So if you read this prayer letter from Dr. Luke from the field in Philippi, what impression are we getting of the mission of the church?

We're getting this impression that God is building his church in Europe. And he's doing that by his power and he's doing that by his grace.

And we're learning, again, that anyone who believes in Jesus can and will be saved. And again, there are lessons for us to reflect on.

Here is one of them. The gospel creates one church from many backgrounds. You couldn't get a more diverse beginning to a church than what we have in Philippi.

[23 : 22] this wealthy woman, this slave girl, and this working class man. But their diversity speaks to the power of the gospel.

It speaks to the believability of the church. When the only thing that a group of people have together, the only thing that we share in common is the fact that we love Jesus, that we've been saved from our sin through the finished work of Jesus on the cross, then that creates a believability where we're not just together because we're the same sort of social type.

It's not like every other social club. People think that the church is like a social club, but it's not like that because we all come from different backgrounds, different places, different educations, but we're brought together because we love Jesus.

Every year, we get an invite slipped through the door, an invitation to our local bowling club and their summer fest. I used to like bowling, carpet bowling as a teenager, wildlife and sky.

But one year, we decided, yeah, we'll go to this. We'll see our neighbours, we'll get to know folks.

And so we took, the boys were still fairly little at this point, so we decided to walk along the road and we'd go to the bowling club fest.

[24 : 50] Well, we got as far as the gate and we looked in and we saw nice tables, nice white tablecloths, everybody very prim and proper, everybody the same kind of age and stage in life. And we decided, perhaps, not for us.

That invitation didn't seem to fit. It said we were welcome, but it seemed like we would kind of stick out. But when anybody is invited to a local church, it should never be like that.

There should be that sense that whoever we are, whatever our background, whatever our faith background, we should be able to come and feel welcome and able to hear the good news of Jesus.

So the gospel creates one church from many backgrounds and we see that in their stories. Now we see it in how they came to faith. For Lydia, she was a seeker.

Her need, in a sense, was intellectual. She needed to know that the good news promise in the Old Testament had been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the Son of God and the Savior of the world. [25 : 56] For the slave girl, her need was very different. It seemed like she had lost her identity because she was possessed by evil spirits. So she needed to be set free so that she could be herself.

in Christ. And then it seems like the jailer has a moral need. It's interesting that he asks, what must I do to be saved?

Commentators suggest here is an example of somebody who's got a stricken moral conscience. Different points of need, different social situation.

somebody of great power and influence, somebody of no significance at all to most, somebody who's brought to the very lowest point where they want to end their own lives, and they all discover God's grace to them in Jesus.

I wonder, do we see or hear something of our story in them? them. Have we come to appreciate that same grace and power and love that they received is also available for us, for you, this evening, through faith in the Lord Jesus.

[27 : 12] The last thing to say about the power of God in opening people's hearts is that what's clear in the way that Dr. Luke writes it is that God saves, but we must respond.

The message of the Bible is that God has completed a work of salvation, that by ourselves we are sinful, we choose to walk away from God and his love, and we are unable by ourselves to ever find a way back to God.

So if we are ever to know and enjoy God, God must do something and that's what he did in sending his son, Jesus. So Jesus comes to be perfectly obedient where we are disobedient and he comes to die on the cross to take our sins and the punishment that that deserves on himself to give us forgiveness and eternal life and that's a completed work that we are called on to believe in, to believe in Jesus as Savior.

It's a gift of grace. It's something that we must receive. It's not something that we earn. It's not something we work towards. It's a gift that we receive and it's also, as we discover from this, it's a gospel that we must share.

But let's think about how we see this in Lydia's story. In Lydia's story, verse 14, it says to us, the Lord opened her heart. So there's God's work in salvation.

[28 : 41] But how does he do it? He does it through Paul's preaching. So God chooses the means of preaching in order to carry out his work of salvation.

And it says, the Lord opened her heart, but she obviously then had to still believe. So she says in verse 15, if you consider me a believer in the Lord.

So there is response. God works in salvation, but we are called to share the gospel if we're Christians, and we're called to believe the gospel if we're not Christians.

And so all of us are being invited constantly to respond to the gospel, either to believe in Jesus, to forgive our sin and to be our savior, or to have faith, to speak and act for his glory so that others might meet Jesus for themselves.

One last thing to notice as we think about this missionary letter, and that's to see that God's providence serves his saving plan.

[29 : 59] Imagine again, this is the first time you're reading this prayer letter from Dr. Luke. I wonder how we would feel. Would there be a groan when the angry crowd attacked the missionaries?

Would we be thinking to ourselves, ah, what a waste when they are thrown into prison? But as the story goes on, we see how God is able to use that.

The God of providence is able to work good even out of evil, out of injustice, out of torture and hatred and hostility. And isn't that the story of the cross?

That the greatest injustice that has ever been carried out in the world is that men and women wanted the death of the perfect, sinless son of God. But God, in his providence, had planned for that.

And he used the death of Jesus in order that men and women and boys and girls, as Fergus was praying, might be turned from enemies of God into friends of God.

[31 : 08] And that's what we see in sort of verse 25 onwards, that the arrest of Paul and Silas allows them to be ambassadors for Christ in chains.

They have this incredible witness at midnight praying and singing hymns to God where we would expect groans, we get songs, where we would expect curses, we hear blessing. They sound just like Jesus on the cross. Didn't shout insults and curses back at the crowd that were baying for his blood and mocking him. Rather, he prayed, Father, forgive them. They know not what they're doing. And in God's providence, their powerful witness is used to bring the jailer to faith.

I read this week a story from the Scottish Bible Society from a woman taken captive by Al-Qaeda in Syria. For two years, she'd been kept in darkness with her daughter for two years.

[32 : 24] They'd been tortured and been told if you turn to Islam, we'll let you go free immediately. Well, she said at some point a guard found a Bible and the guard wanted to hear the Bible.

And so she began to share her faith. and she said that she had the joy before her release to hear this from her prison guards. We have learned to love Jesus because of you.

And there again is the providence of God. The worst of evil being turned in God's hand into grace and salvation for prison guards.

And so I think this is a reminder to us never to underestimate the power of personal testimony, to recognize that the way we approach and experience suffering can speak powerfully to others, that our lifestyle matters when we have integrity at work, when we avoid gossip, when we deal well with suffering.

that speaks to people who are watching. When we share Jesus as our hope in the middle of hardship, it's a powerful testimony that's really hard to refute.

[33 : 53] Somebody once said that the providence of God is not a heavy hammer, it's a soft pillow. Humanly speaking, sometimes our circumstances can seem hard and bleak and we may be tempted to turn on God and to accuse God and to ask questions of God and there's a place for that but there's also a place for recognizing that God is with us, that God has planned these things and God is able to use even our suffering for our good and also for the good of others, that the providence of God is a comfort to us and it's also important for us in that sense of mission that we are called to, whatever our circumstances, God can use us to seek to extend his kingdom.

But if the only thing that we can do is to pray then we're doing a wonderful thing for God's kingdom. So that's the beginning of the story of gospel breakthrough in Europe.

And wouldn't it be amazing for us to have that same story to tell in 21st century Europe, to recognize that God is at work saving lives and planting churches and renewing established churches.

And praise God, that's what we're seeing in our city and in our country. But there's much more to be done. There are some parts of Scotland that are ready to be labeled unreached people group and that we're so far removed from the knowledge of God, the knowledge of the Bible, from the good news of Jesus.

But God is powerful. The same God who opened the door to pagan Europe all those hundreds of years ago is the same God today.

[35 : 47] His grace is great and God still has people. He still has us as his church that he can use in order to witness, to draw people to Jesus.

So he calls us to know Jesus, to depend on Jesus, and then to go in his strength that we would make disciples.