

# Setting Captives Free

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[ 0 : 00 ] Over the past few months, we have been making our way through the action-packed Book of Acts.

And I trust that you have come to appreciate just how good a storyteller, the author of Acts, is. As a medical doctor, Luke pays careful attention to detail.

And as a literary artist, Luke then gathers up those details into compelling stories of the good news of Jesus Christ.

In the story we will read in a moment, Luke gives us another picture of how the risen Jesus is fulfilling the promise he made at the beginning of the Book of Acts.

Acts 1.8 You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses. You will be my evidence.

[ 1 : 02 ] Evidence that I am who I am and that I can do what I say I can do. You will be my witnesses. My evidence in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and even to the remotest parts of the earth.

Thus far in Acts, we have seen Jesus begin to fulfill his promise in the Holy City and the area around the Holy City in Jerusalem.

We have seen then how he has moved beyond Jerusalem into the supposed unholy area of Samaria, which we've seen in Acts chapter 8.

And then we've seen how he's moved from to Caesarea in the west to Syria in the east and all the way to Antioch in the north in Acts 9 to 15.

And now in the text we're going to read, we're going to see how Jesus bears witness all the way on European soil in the city of Philippi.

[ 2 : 03 ] Now, I think it's important as we read this passage and as we think of the book of Acts to realize that the story of Acts of how the gospel of Jesus Christ spread into the world is not the whole story.

That is, Luke is telling it from his own particular angle, which is inherently limited. For you see, the wonderful fact is that the good news is spreading in all kinds of other directions as well.

For instance, the Ethiopian eunuch who encountered Jesus through the ministry of Philip here and somewhere in this area, then takes his gospel south into Ethiopia.

Matthew and Thaddeus take the gospel all the way into Armenia. And then Thomas, who's wrongly called a doubter, by the way.

Thomas is a good scientist. He's just asking the right questions. Thomas takes the gospel to the Medes, to Parthenians, and all the way over then into India, which is why the nations of Ethiopia, Armenia, and India are three of the countries in the world that have had the longest standing witness to Jesus Christ.

[ 3 : 24 ] Now, in Acts 16, Paul and his colleague Silas are then going to take the gospel into Europe. To the city of Philippi, which is at once deeply Greek and fiercely Roman.

It's founded by Philip of Macedonia, who is the father of Alexander the Great. And it was a city soaked in Greek philosophy and mythology. It was made a colony of Rome by Caesar Augustus, who then gave to all the citizens of Philippi this great privilege of citizenship.

And the city then imbibed all things Rome. So much so that this Greek city was called Rome in miniature. As Rome went, so went Philippi.

As Rome thought, so thought Philippi. As Rome did, so did Philippi. And I wonder if Luke tells us the story of the gospel in Philippi in part to anticipate the end of his story where Paul will preach the gospel in Rome itself.

I wonder if Luke wants us to realize that if the good news of Jesus Christ can get a foothold in little Rome, there is hope that it will gain a foothold in big Rome.

[ 4 : 49 ] You see, for Luke, every congregation being formed in the cities of the Roman Empire, Jerusalem, Samaria, Antioch, you name them, are signs that the gospel will eventually spread through the whole empire.

Every vibrant congregation in any city of the world is a sign that the gospel can win the whole city. Last Sunday, Sharon and I sat in the front row of the balcony.

Boy, is that a great seat. And as I watched you streaming into the worship service, I saw you as signs of hope that one day all the people of our city will stream into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Okay, to our text. It's Acts 16, verses 6 through 40. Now, here's the plan for this morning. It's a long text. But I figured this is the last time we have all of us together in one service so we can do a long text.

Although next week's is long, too. Anyway. Here's the plan. I'm going to read the story in your hearing. And then I'm going to ask you to respond to two questions.

[ 6 : 01 ] So you need to listen carefully as the text is read. Will you stand for the reading of God's word? Spirit of the living God, we believe that you enabled Luke, your faithful disciple, to remember this event, these events.

Write them down accurately. And we believe that you did this because you have a purpose in this text. And we trust you fulfill that purpose in us this day.

For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Acts 16, beginning at verse 6. Hear the word of God. Interesting.

They had great plans. Great strategic missionary plans. But the Holy Spirit stopped them. And passing by Mysia, they came to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul at night.

A certain man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, saying, Come over to Macedonia and help us. Boy, are we hearing that cry right now.

[ 7 : 29 ] And when they had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia. We. This is the first time now Luke includes himself in the telling of the story. Which is why some people think that in this vision that Paul has, it's Luke himself who is calling Paul and Silas to come to Macedonia.

That's because Luke's hometown is Philippi. And we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. Therefore, putting out the sea from Troas, we ran straight course to Somisrat and on the day following to Neapolis.

And from there to Philippi, which is the leading city in the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony. And we were staying in this city for some days. On the Sabbath, we went outside the gate to a riverside where we were supposing there would be a place to pray.

We sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. And a certain woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening.

And the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her housepole had been baptized, she urged us, saying, If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.

[ 8 : 46 ] And she prevailed upon us. And it happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a certain slave girl, having a spirit of divination, met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling.

Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, These men are bondservants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation. She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed and turned to the spirit and said, I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And it came out at that very moment. But when her master saw that their hope for profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities.

And when they brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs, which is not lawful for us to observe or accept, being Romans.

The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them, and proceeded to order them being beaten with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon

them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely.

[ 9 : 55 ] And he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stalks. But about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundation of the prison house was shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains were unfastened.

And when the jailer had been aroused out of sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, Do not harm yourself, for we're all here.

And he called for lights, and rushed in, and trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas. And after he brought them out, he said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? They said, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.

And they spoke the word of the Lord to them, together with all who were in the house. And he took them that very hour of the night, washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized and all his household.

[ 11 : 00 ] And he brought them into his house, set food before them, rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household. Now, when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, Release these men.

The jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Now, therefore, come out and go in peace. Paul said, They've beaten us in public without trial, men who were Romans, and have thrown us into prison, and now they're sending us away secretly? No, indeed. Let them come themselves and bring us out. And the policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard they were Romans. And they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city.

And they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia. And when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed. This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated. Now, I'd like you to do something.

If you don't want to do it, you don't have to. You can do it as an individual and do this privately. But I would love for you now to share with one other person your response to two questions. Number one, as we read the text, what leapt out at you?

[ 12 : 15 ] What grabbed hold of you? And second, what question would you like to ask Luke about this story? Okay? What leapt out at you? And what question would you like to ask Luke?

All right? Why don't you share with one or two people around you? Okay? Go for it. All right. All right. All right.

All right. You go. All right. All right. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. What leaps out to me? See, I'm taken by the fact that everyone in this story is being set free in one way or another.

[ 13 : 58 ] Did you see and hear that as we read? Doors are being opened. Chains are being unfastened, literally and figuratively.

Human beings in every social strata are being set free. As I have read and reread this text over the last weeks, I think I keep hearing Jesus say what he said in his first formal sermon.

In his hometown of Nazareth, on a Sabbath, he's handed the prophet, a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and he reads out loud. The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he's anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden and to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.

Luke tells us that when Jesus finished reading this, he sat down and he said, today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Acts 16 is a picture of that today.

[ 15 : 15 ] In a European city of Philippi, in miniature Rome, the risen Jesus is setting captives free. He's opening blind eyes. He is opening locked doors.

He is unfastening crippling chains. And as I have been reading and reading this text over the past weeks, I have found myself wanting to sing the third verse of that great hymn, And Can It Be?, by Charles Wesley.

Many think it is his personal testimony. Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night. Thine eye diffused a quickening ray.

The quickening ray I woke. The dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off. My heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

In the story, in Acts 16, everyone in the story is being set free in one way or another. They could all sing with Wesley in one way or another.

[16:24] My chains fell off. My heart was free. Let me show you why. This is most literally the case for Paul and Silas.

They'd been thrown into the city jail. Their robes had been torn off them. They'd been beaten with rods. They'd been inflicted with blows. And they'd been thrown down the stairs into the jail.

Into a dark, filthy, rat-infested, inhumane place. Thrown down. Luke seems to emphasize that verb, thrown. Thrown down. And then their feet were fastened in the stalks.

Literally, they are imprisoned. Literally, they are chained. About midnight, an earthquake takes place, which often happened in that part of the world.

But this earthquake was different. It shook the foundations of the building, but did not destroy the building. It seemed to know where to shake and not to shake.

[17:25] And this time, the insurance underwriters were right. Act of God. And amazingly, the shaking unfastened everyone's chains.

Paul's, Silas, and presumably every other prisoner's chains. That's one of the questions I want to ask Luke. How did that take place? Suddenly, says Luke.

As I pointed out before, Luke really likes this word, suddenly. On Christmas Eve, suddenly, there was a host of the angelic hosts singing, glory to God in the highest.

Then on the day of Pentecost, suddenly, there came a heaven, a noise from heaven, like a violent rushing wind. And then in the Philippian jail, suddenly, there came a great earthquake. An act of God, which no one expected or planned.

And Paul and Silas were free. But, what Luke wants us to realize is that they were free before they were freed. For before the earthquake hit, they were praying and singing hymns of praise.

[18:35] That they were praying is not so surprising, right? Did they pray a psalm like Psalm 130, which our staff prayed last Tuesday? Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

We would expect them to pray. What is surprising is that they are singing. Singing hymns and singing hymns of praise to God. Crazy.

Why could they sing in prison? Because their hearts and minds had already been set free. Set free to see the whole perspective.

Set free to realize they are not alone in the jail. Set free to realize that the Savior and Lord of the universe is with them in jail. Set free to realize that he uses everything that happens in our lives unto his plan of shaping us in his image.

Set free, therefore, from the expected self-pity. Set free from resentment. And set free from the fear of death. Sometime long ago, Paul and Silas had learned hymns, like parallel to Wesley's hymns, and they could sing in the jail, my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee, enabling them to sing praise before the earthquake unfastened their feet.

[19:53] This is most dramatically the case for the slave girl. A human being is being set free from the grip of deception and manipulation.

A human being is being set free from the frightening claims of the spirit world. How she became captive, we do not know.

All Luke tells us is that she had a spirit of divination. Literally, it's a spirit of Python. You see, in Greek mythology, Python, a snake, guarded the temple of Apollo and the oracle of Delphi.

And the myth was that Apollo, who was the great communicator, dwelt in the snake and then inspired his female devotees to speak his message.

Somehow, this slave girl had got caught up in all of this. She became captive to the evil one, to the original snake, who was using her to speak.

[20:53] Now, this too raises a host of questions. But what concerned Luke is that the girl was being exploited not only by the evil one, but by human beings who were also being influenced by the evil one.

Some men were using her for fortune-telling. When Paul and his colleagues start speaking the good news, she begins following them around the city and she begins crying out, these men are

bondservants of the Most High and are proclaiming to you a way of salvation.

The thing is, she's speaking truth. Paul and his friends are servants of the Most High. Now, what the girl meant by Most High, we do not know.

For although Jews used this title, so did Greek mythologers, but in reference to Zeus. And the girl is right, Paul is proclaiming a way of salvation, actually the way of salvation.

What are we to make of this girl's words? How can a demon, demonized person, speak truth?

[ 22 : 02 ] Well, because as a matter of fact, the spirit world does know the truth. It's just that it does not surrender to the truth, at least not yet. As James says, you believe that God is one, you do well.

The demons also believe in shudder, as we see throughout the Gospels. When Jesus comes on the scene, the demonized forces recognize who he is, and they shudder, and they begin to be agitated, because they know why he has come.

When the evil one meets Jesus in the desert, the evil one knows who Jesus is. Son of God, says the enemy. It's just that he's not about to bow to the implications.

Luke tells us that Paul was annoyed with this girl, understandably so. But the word can also mean grieved. Grieved that this girl was so close to the truth, but not yet able to live in the truth.

So Paul does what Jesus does, and what Jesus teaches his disciples to do. He speaks to the spirit. Note, not to the girl, but to the spirit.

[ 23 : 14 ] Because the girl is not the real problem. The spirit is the problem. And so Paul says to the spirit, I command you, in the name of Jesus Christ, come out of her. And it did, at that very moment, says Luke, because spirits must come out.

At the name of Jesus, Jesus is Lord over the spirit world. And today, he sets people free. The spirit world manifests itself in different ways, in different cities of the world.

Which means that captivity of the spirits is going to be expressed in different ways, in different parts of the world. But there's one thing true, in every city of the world.

And it is the power of the name of Jesus, in every city of the world. And Jesus has given his church, the authority to do what Paul did, to turn around, face the spirit, and say, in the name of Jesus Christ, you come out.

I can hear the young girl, singing with great joy. My chains fell off. My heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

[ 24 : 34 ] What about the men, who were exploiting her? I said that everyone in the story, was being set free in one way or another. What about the exploiters? What about these human traffickers?

Are they being set free? The slave girl was clearly held captive. But so too were the men, to an even greater degree.

I mean, what is going on in the mind of a person, who sees other human beings held in bondage, and then exploits those persons in some way?

I cannot begin to understand. Fast bound in sin and nature's night. Women who are being trafficked around the world, women who are being trafficked in our city, are clearly in prison.

But so too are the men who are doing the trafficking. They are in an even darker prison. Minds twisted, hearts poisoned, fast bound in sin and nature's night.

[ 25 : 52 ] People on the street, hooked on drugs, are in prison. But nothing like the prison those who sell the drugs are in.

In Philippi, captives are being set free. What about the exploiters? They're very angry with Paul, for they know they're going to lose a lot of money.

So they seize Paul and Silas and drag them into the marketplace. They accuse Paul and Silas, throwing the city into confusion. That was not Paul's intent, but it certainly was the consequence of his action.

Would that our city got all worked up because people were being set free from exploitation in the name of Jesus Christ. But again, what about the exploiters?

Are they being set free? Yes, they are. They do not realize it, but they are. Why do I make this claim? Because the exploiters are opting for violence.

[ 26 : 53 ] It is when people realize they are losing, that they choose the way of violence. You do not need the way of violence if you're winning.

The exploiters were beginning to lose their grip, and out of desperation, they lash out. You realize that, do you not? That those who are wielding violence in our world, whether it be in the Middle East

or Europe or in the inner cities of North America, are doing so because they're losing?  
When you know you're in the truth, when you know that you are on solid ground, when you know that you're on the path of justice, you do not need to choose the way of violence.  
So the exploiters are, ironically, in the place where freedom can happen. They are, yes, in a very vulnerable place because if they keep choosing violence, they're going to keep going further down to the spiral of chaos.  
But at that moment, they are in a place where they could be set free. For you see, when Jesus sets a captive free, he also wants to set the captor free.  
[ 28 : 08 ] As John Newton, the former human trafficker-turned-abolitionist learned, once his heart began to melt for slaves, he discovered that he was the greater slave.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. A wretch indeed. Exploiters are wretched indeed. But Jesus loves to set exploiters free.  
To set wretches free. Wretches like me, free. Even exploiters will one day say, the dungeon flamed with light.  
My heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed thee. And the jailer in Philippi was set free. When he saw that the prison doors were opened, he drew his sword to kill himself.  
You see, he was responsible to guard the prisoners. And it was law that should prisoners escape on his watch, he would have to suffer the punishment for which these prisoners were awaiting.  
[ 29 : 18 ] And he felt his only option was to take his life. Not thinking, of course, for the implications of his family. But then he discovered that Paul and Silas were still there.

Imagine. Paul and Silas are so free that they're going to stay in jail so that the jailer does not suffer. He falls before Paul and Silas and asks the question everyone asks sometime or another.  
What must I do to be saved? Now, we do not know what the jailer was thinking when he used this verb saved. He could simply be asking, what must I do to be safe?  
Given all that has happened, what must I do to be safe? Paul answers in a way that answers whatever the jailer has in mind.  
Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household. Throw yourself on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved in every way that you need to be saved.  
[ 30 : 21 ] I like how D.T. Niles of Sri Lanka works with this text. He interprets the jailer's question this way. What must I do to be safe in the morning when the magistrates come?

And Niles then interprets Paul's answer this way. I do not know. But I can tell you what will keep you safe whatever the magistrates do and whatever happens in the morning.  
Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be safe no matter what happens to you, you and your household. Jesus can keep your wife and children safe even if you lose your job or you lose your life.  
Safe in Jesus whatever happens. That is salvation and that is freedom. The jailer who had clamped chains on hundreds of people throughout the years could now sing my chains fell off my heart was free I rose, went forth and followed thee thee, you Jesus are my salvation you are my safety and my safety and your safety there is no other safety Jesus is our eternal security.  
You remember the great first question of the Heidelberg Catechism what is your only hope in life and in death? And the answer is my only hope in life and in death is that I do not belong to myself but to my Savior Jesus Christ.

[ 31 : 56 ] He is my safety. And Lydia was set free. Even though she comes first in the story I saved her for last because she's your average Vancouverite.

She is most of us. Luke says she was a successful business woman. She bought and sold fine purple linen. A business she began in her hometown of Thyatira.  
Thyatira is east of Philippi across the Aegean Sea in the middle of Asia Minor which is now modern day Turkey. Now Thyatira is one of the seven cities Jesus addresses in the Revelation.  
Luke says that Lydia was a worshiper of God. The phrase means that she was a Gentile who was drawn to and sought to know the God of the Jews.  
What a miracle! That's because believing in God is always a miracle especially in Thyatira. For as Jesus points out in his message to Thyatira the people of that city proudly said I have need of nothing.  
[ 33 : 10 ] Their mantra was I am healthy I am rich I am well dressed and I need nothing. And they were healthy rich and well dressed.

Thyatira had a first rate medical school where doctors developed eye salve that was used to treat weak and failing eyes. Thyatira had many banks they were all solvent. When an earthquake later destroyed Thyatira Rome offered help and Thyatira says don't need it. Their banks had more gold than anyone would ever need. And Thyatira was known for its clothing industry.

Clothes that were made from this glossy wool from the sheeps that were raised nearby complimented by this beautiful purple cloth made by people like Lydia. The rumor was or the story was that the Thyatira people were the best dressed people in Roman Empire.

They would have loved the sign that the new Nordstroms has on the wall. Hello Vancouver we like your style. By the way all those pictures of like our style I haven't seen those in Vancouver that's another story.

[ 34 : 22 ] Healthy rich well dressed and so they thought they could say I have need of nothing. I have everything I need.

But as Saint Augustine once said I have everything I need is a dangerous thing to say when everything does not include the living God.

A miracle for all her health and wealth and glorious apparel Lydia no longer bought into the mantra of her city.

She had been freed from this dangerous illusion. By the grace of God she realized she did not have everything she needed. She realized she needed more and she was on the path to meeting that more.

When Paul and Silas met her at the prayer meeting by the river bank in Philippi she was eager to hear what Paul was saying about Jesus and the kingdom. And Luke says the Lord opened her heart.

[ 35 : 26 ] The Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. This is the same thing Jesus did for his first disciples on that Easter afternoon when Jesus showed them the things concerning himself of all of scripture and opened their hearts.

Jesus opened their hearts like he's done for me like he's done for you as he's doing for someone in this room right now. You see it's a great miracle to open prison doors.

It's a greater miracle to open human hearts. Lydia had been set free. Free from the illusion that if she was healthy and wealthy she was whole.

Free from the illusion that all there is is what she sees with her eyes and hears with her ears and touches with her hands. Free from the illusion of self-sufficiency and self-reliance and free to know that there is a God who has come to us in and as Jesus Christ.

So Lydia could sing the whole verse of Charles Wesley's testimony. Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature's night though I didn't realize it at the time that I was bound in sin and nature's night.

[ 36 : 47 ] Thine eye diffused the quickening ray. I woke the dungeon flamed with light. You broke through my darkness dear God. My chains fell off. My heart was free.

I rose went forth and followed thee. I need Jesus Lydia could say. Without Jesus I do not have all I need. Now we know her heart was free because of what she did after she was baptized.

Lydia insisted that the emerging church in Philippi now meet in her home. She prevailed upon us says Luke because when the doors of our hearts are opened so are the doors of our homes.

everyone in the story Luke tells in Acts 16 was set free in one way or another for that is what the risen Jesus does wherever he goes.

He sets captives free. From what do you want to be free today? Of what do you need to be free today?

[ 37 : 59 ] In a moment we are going to partake of Holy Communion. for this is the act of worship when we remember why Jesus died. And in this act Jesus is bringing us further into the reason he died.

I'm going to invite you to take that little piece of paper that the ushers gave you when you came into the service. And I'm going to invite you to write down on this piece of paper what you want Jesus to free you from or of.

I assure you no one will see what you write unless you want to share it. As you then come forward for the Lord's supper in just a few minutes I invite you to bring your little piece of paper and place it in a basket.

The baskets will later then be collected and brought to me and then I'm going to do something with all of you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my evidence in the world that I am who I am and that I can do what I say I can do.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he's anointed me. He has sent me to bring release to the captives. Today this word is being fulfilled in your hearing.

[ 39 : 32 ] Take a few moments and write what you need to write and then we'll begin to sing.