

Supernatural

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Please turn with me again to the passage we read in Acts chapter 16. Acts chapter 16 from verse 25 to 34.

This is the penultimate study in Acts chapter 16, which is our summer series. About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.

Have you noticed how our televisions are crammed full of the supernatural? For a deeply rationalistic society, we do like our ghost hunting shows, our epic sci-fi movies, our monster mashes.

There's money to be made in monsters, pounds in poltergeists and dollars in aliens. At the same time, our televisions are also crammed full of highbrow boffins, pouring all kinds of scorn upon the claims of Christianity, most of which they themselves have not investigated.

And so the highbrow boffin, having spent his day debunking the supernatural claim of Christianity, goes home at night and watches Stranger Things on Netflix. Problem is, of course, he can't distinguish between the fact of the supernatural and the many fictions which surround the supernatural.

[1 : 34] Because Christianity is both deeply rational and thoroughly supernatural. But it's no fiction, it's fact.

And its followers are not living in a fantasy world. We are basing our lives upon solid, verifiable, rational fact.

Jesus Christ really did exist. He really did die on a Roman cross. And he really did rise from the dead. These aren't myths, these aren't legends, these are historical truths.

And here in Acts chapter 16, verses 25 through 34, we again witness the invasion of the supernatural into the world of men. But perhaps not always in the ways we think of as supernatural. These verses remind us that as Christians, we believe in the supernatural. We are rational supernaturalists.

[2 : 37] Rational supernaturalists. From the God in whom we trust, to the gospel to which we cling, from the circumstances of our lives, to the transformation God brings about in and through us, we are rational supernaturalists.

And we see this powerfully in this passage in four directions. Supernatural confidence, crisis, conditions, and conversion.

Never mind the walking dead. Never mind stranger things. The gospel of Jesus Christ is both rational and supernatural. And Acts chapter 16, verse 25 through 34 will prove it to you.

First of all, we have supernatural confidence. Confidence. In many ways, the most supernatural event in this passage is not the earthquake or the jailbreak, but the fact that having been beaten and tortured and having been fastened in the stocks at midnight, Paul and Silas are praying and praising.

If this was all this passage said, nothing more than this, it would be enough to convince us of the supernatural activity of God in this world. That despite extreme pain, humiliation, and suffering, these two men are praising and praying.

[4 : 14] There's no earthly psychology which can account for this, that these two rationally, philosophically educated men, having been beaten to within an inch of their lives and having been fastened to the stocks in great pain, are singing and praying.

I've never been severely beaten. My back bleeding and stinging. My head sore from having been beaten with clubs and so on.

I've never had my feet chained and in a wooden stock. I guess if these things happened to me, my natural response would be very different from that of Paul and Silas.

At the very least, rather than singing, I might be trying to get some sleep. Two of them must have been exhausted by that ordeal. And rather than speaking prayers, if I'm being honest, by nature, I'd be shouting profanities.

The natural thing to do in this situation would have been to ask questions. Lord, what are you doing by putting me in prison? I could be out there evangelizing more people like that slave girl and like Lydia.

[5 : 32] I don't even know what you're doing, Lord. There might be questions. There might even be doubts. There might even be accusations against God. Lord, how could you do this to me? Is this my reward for my faithfulness to you?

That my back is stinging and my head hurts? The natural thing to have done in this situation might have been to have said, Lord, it looks to me as if you've given up on me.

Well, two can play at that game. I'm now giving up on you. These are the natural reactions of a human being to suffering on account of being a Christian.

But in Paul and Silas, we see a supernatural reaction. At midnight, they are praying and singing hymns to God. Far from being dumbstruck and downbeat, they are upbeat and joyful.

They're singing hymns. These hymns may have been early creedal statements about Christ, but more probably psalms which express confidence in God even in the midst of crisis.

[6 : 37] Psalms like 1 to 4 or like Psalm 27 verse 1, The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? And they're praying. Prayers of thanksgiving perhaps, for being counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ.

Prayers for the strengthening of the believers in Philippi. Prayers for the evangelism of their fellow prisoners. Prayers for the evangelism of their family. The point is, their reaction to the situation is wholly supernatural.

Although they are in severe discomfort, they aren't mentally disturbed to the extent that they are what we might call away with the fairies.

Rather, they are joyfully, confidently, resolutely worshipping Christ and praying to Christ. You know, many times in the ministry, my rational mind has been confronted by the supernatural peace and joy of suffering Christians.

they've got terminal cancer. But there's a deep peace in their hearts. They're struggling to breathe.

But all they want to speak about is Jesus.

[7 : 56] They know it might cost them their lives. But they're going to live in that hostile culture for Christ and name him as Lord. Here is the supernatural evidence of the truth of the Christian faith.

That Jesus can so transform our hearts that what once would have been a natural reaction to suffering becomes unthinkable. And what would have been unthinkable once becomes almost natural.

And the amazing thing here in Acts 16.25 is that the other prisoners are listening to Paul and Silas. They're in the same situation. And yet, the supernatural reaction of Paul and Silas to their extreme suffering impresses others.

The text doesn't tell us, but I wonder if any of these other prisoners became Christians, members of that church in Philippi, on the basis of the difference they saw in Paul and Silas' life.

And I further wonder who, perhaps, will be watching us. And listening to us, as even though we're suffering, we're singing hymns and praying.

[9 : 13] Will our most effective evangelism, perhaps, be conducted not when we're at our peak, but when we're in our pain? Will the greatest example and evidence of the supernatural others see see, be the peace we have in suffering and the joy we have in pain?

Yes, it will be the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which shall so change us, that our natural reaction shall be swallowed up in the supernatural reaction of grace.

Because that's the power of Christ, and the spirit at work in Paul, and Silas, and yes, even in us. Supernatural confidence, first of all.

But second, supernatural crisis, crisis. Perhaps the most obvious supernatural occurrence in this story is that of the earthquake. But actually, if we know the book of Acts at all and the story of the very early church, the idea of God breaking his apostles out of prison isn't so unexpected.

He does it in Acts 5, verse 19. The apostles, having been thrown in prison by the Sadducees, we read, but during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.

[10:36] And then in Acts 12, where when Peter was imprisoned by Herod, in verse 7, we read, suddenly an angel appeared in the cell and a light shone. The angel struck Peter on the side and woke him up.

Quick, get up, he said. The chains fell off Peter's wrists. In the light of how God had supernaturally rescued his servants from prison before, we might almost expect the same to happen here. However, remember, on both previous occasions, the apostles had been in prison in Jerusalem. Here's Philippi, modern day Europe.

Can God still do amazing miracles outside the borders of Israel? Is he a localized God? Or is he global? Is he almighty?

Or is he limited to where he is? This jailbreak here shows that God is entirely as powerful in Europe as he is in Israel, that his ability to rescue his people and deliver them from danger is entirely as important in Philippi as in Jerusalem, in Glasgow, as in Palestine.

[11:52] What's true for God's power over space is also true over time, that he remains as powerful today as he was back then and that he is still in the business of rescuing his people from their captivities.

Now, a skeptic might look at this and call it a coincidence. After all, earthquakes happen all the time. There was one reported not too far away from Philippi last month in the news.

That's the skeptical view. It's all a big coincidence. Yes, it is. A great coincidence, is it not? Read the text with me. That the earthquake should be powerful enough to open all the doors of the prison but not destroy the fabric of the prison.

That houses weren't destroyed. That lives weren't lost. In fact, is it not coincidental that the only things broken that night, according to our text, were the prison doors and the chains of all the prisoners.

Some coincidence, right? Don't think so. If someone holds a pack of cards in their right hand with their left hand turns them over one at a time and brings out five aces straight away, you know something's up.

[13:18] Not a coincidence. As Alan would call it, a God incidence. They say the devil's in the detail but in this case, the deliverance is in the detail. It had to have been a powerful earthquake but as I say, the only two things broken were the prison doors and the chains of the prisoners.

Good luck explaining that one using the skepticism. Make no mistake, here's a spiritual, here's a supernatural earthquake. There is no other explanation for the force required to break the prison doors, the localization of the earthquake and the surgical precision with which the chains of every prisoner were unfastened.

And again, I say, it's a supernatural earthquake. In my mind, it's not of the same supernatural importance as the praying and praising of Paul and Silas but nevertheless, it's supernatural.

But this is the way God works when he's at work with his troubled people. We might call it, we might call it coincidence but I'm long enough in the tooth and I'm sure so many of you are as well to recognize the work of God in the deliverance of his people.

The pity is that perhaps we don't recognize his hand at work enough to give him the praise for it. And our prayer must be, Lord, give us eyes to see your earthquakes in our lives.

[14:48] Supernatural crisis. Supernatural conditions, third. Supernatural conditions. I'm sure many of you know the story of Acts 16 better than I do so let me take you straight to the next supernatural story.

Jailer's a tough man but he knew that he'd pay the price if any of his prisoners escaped. His life would be forfeit if they escaped, he knew that. But there's more going on here.

There has to be. What exactly does he mean when this hardened prison governor falls to his knees before Paul and Silas and asks them, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

Now, we could spend days, weeks, and years dissecting this seemingly simple question, especially what he means when he says saved.

He probably did not understand what we might if we were asking that question, perhaps. And yet, earlier in the passage, we read that the slave girl who was possessed kept on drawing attention to Paul and Silas as, verse 17, servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved.

[16:15] So perhaps the Philippine jailer had heard all about this incident and was therefore familiar with the language of salvation. salvation. But saved from what? By what?

To what? These are the questions, are they not? Salvation here is to be understood in terms of Paul's presentation of the gospel.

The gospel he's been speaking, the gospel he's been preaching in Philippi, the gospel he's been singing about with Silas in the prison. That gospel speaks of a judgment upon idolatry and sin which is to come.

But how Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose on the third day that we might be forgiven and escape the coming judgment. Yes, the more I thought through this passage, the jailer's question must concern that central gospel message.

What must I do to escape the coming judgment? It's the best question. A question I like to think each of us have at least engaged with that we know the answer to it.

[17 : 31] It's the answer which falls into the realm of the supernatural. Paul says, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ that you will be saved. Believe. Believe.

That's it. Yes, that's it. Perhaps the jailer thought Paul might say something different. That Paul would attach more conditions to salvation.

The jailer was probably a Roman citizen, a worshiper of the emperor. Now there was a religion with plenty of things you had to do. But no, here Paul is and the only thing he says is, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Again, earlier in Acts, the Christians, the vast majority of whom were Jewish, were called believers. That's what they're called, believers. They and the Philippian jailer, if they are to be saved, will observe one condition and no other, they must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[18 : 36] Just as God's supernatural power is the same all over the world, so God's supernatural condition for salvation is the same all over the world. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

But then you say to me, but I can't see faith. Can't see faith and neither you can. God sees it. It is entirely as visible to God as the outside world is visible to us.

And it's God who's important here, right? Notice that Paul doesn't, he's not vague, he doesn't just say, well, just have faith. He's definite. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's not enough to say, well, I've got some, I've got faith, as so many people do. It's who the faith is in which makes it saving faith. It must be placed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is supernatural. Something which no sane human being would ever have dreamed. that it is by the simple, seemingly costless act of faith, belief, and trust in Jesus that a man or woman is saved from the coming future judgment.

[19 : 53] Nothing more, nothing less. Every other religion in the world requires its adherents to do more, to observe some kind of initiation ceremony, celebrate religious offerings, to engage in ritual practices, things which can be seen by others.

But Christianity is supernatural in this. It requires only one thing, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But what does this mean?

Is it merely that we believe Jesus existed? Well, not at all. Many believe this but are not Christians. Christians, I rather think we should understand it like this. We sometimes say to someone, I believe in you.

And what we mean by that is that we believe they are able to accomplish the task which is before them. That we think they have the gifts and the talents to do it.

And so, my children on the cusp of sitting exams, I'll often say to them, I believe in you. To believe in Christ is to consider not that he will do what is necessary to save us from the coming judgment of our sin, but that by the cross and resurrection, he has already done it.

[21 : 25] It is placing the weight of our trust upon him that not what these hands have done will save us from the judgment of our sin, but what Jesus Christ has done on the cross by giving himself to bear the punishment and to give us eternal life.

That is the supernatural condition of the gospel. That it's by simple faith in a strong Christ we are saved.

God and I want to challenge all of us here, myself included, have you believed in the Lord Jesus Christ? Are you saying to him today in your heart and mind, though no one else can hear, I believe in you.

I believe that what you did on the cross and resurrection is more than enough to save me from my sin and I place the weight of my trust in you.

No one else can see you are here, you say these things to him. But let me tell you, this condition of salvation is supernatural. But that whoever you are, whatever your history, whatever you're from, Philippian jailer, Glaswegian homemaker, tourist here, faith in Jesus Christ is all you need to be saved.

[22 : 48] supernatural condition. And then lastly and briefly, supernatural conversion. Conversion.

If church tradition is to be believed, the Philippian jailer is identified from the book of Philippians by a new name, the name Clement. If that's true, isn't it interesting that it's this man, this hardened Roman prison officer, who is called upon to mediate between the warring parties, Iodia and Syntyche.

What a change has come about in this man's life. Supernatural change. And just like today, we started with the greatest supernatural sign in this story, namely the psychology of Paul and Silas transformed by grace.

So we end with this similarly great supernatural sign. The transformation of the Philippian jailer from the man he once had been to the man he's described as in verses 33 and 34.

In these verses we have another household baptism, where Paul and Silas, having been invited into the jailer's home, explain the gospel more fully to them.

[24 : 06] The NIV translates this verse, I would suggest, wholly incorrectly. It suggests that the whole household believed in God. Actually, in the original, the sense is that the only person we are sure believed in Christ for himself was the jailer.

And yet, once again, the whole household, as in the case of Lydia and her household, are baptized. Food was set before the apostles. Whereas just a few hours previous, the jailer was suicidal, he is now ecstatically joyful.

Baptism is featuring heavily, isn't it? That baptism which, following faith, is the same for both Jew and Gentile, both baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the name of God, now rests upon them.

Have you been baptized? Have you had your household baptized? Is the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit upon them?

See, the change in this man's life, this is what so utterly supernatural cannot be accounted for in any other way than that God is at work here. It's the same transformation millions have experienced over the centuries.

[25 : 21] Same transformation Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. The same transformation John Newton experienced when converted through reading a New Testament his mom had given him.

The same transformation Suraj Kisula experienced when he came to faith in Christ from a background of gang culture in Nepal.

Remember Suraj? Do you want evidence of the supernatural? Then consider the transformation that takes place in someone's life when they believe in Jesus Christ.

Watch them carefully. They're not perfect, very far from it, but they're different. Swords being taken from their hearts.

They're dominated not by hate but by love. They serve a different master. They're slowly overcoming their addictions. There's something different about them, a different flavor even though they remain the same person they've always been.

[26 : 27] That's what happens when you believe in Jesus Christ. It is as if you've opened the door to a new world of potential and possibility. And I guess we want to drive this all down with the hammer of Paul's answer.

Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Tell me, what have you to lose by believing in him? What have you to lose?

Well, you're feet of the coming judgment for one thing. Do you suppose the Philippian jailer, filled with joy in starting a new life, regretted his decision to believe? I would suggest to you that not for one second did he wish he had killed himself rather than embracing supernatural faith in Christ, the same faith by which any of us who believe in Jesus Christ today will be saved.

So what's stopping you? Perhaps it's this seeming irrationality of such a thing, how preposterous it appears that by simple faith, in a man who lived 2,000 years ago, we can be eternally forgiven, secure, and changed.

But is it really so irrational? In the light of what you've seen in other people's lives, is it really such a step in the dark? Not for one second.

[27 : 50] Not for one second. Supernatural confidence, crisis, condition, and conversion. Come now, come today, join the Philippine jailer in the joy he experienced that night in Philippi.

Believe in the Lord Jesus for yourself. Let us pray.