

The End of the Beginning

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Date: 11 August 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Please turn with me to Acts chapter 16, verses 35 to 40. In 1942, the British scored a major victory over Axis forces at the Battle of El Alamein in Egypt.

General Montgomery's British Eighth Army succeeded in breaking through Axis lines and began an advance which finally led to the liberation of North Africa from Mussolini and Hitler.

In the British Parliament in late 1942, the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, made a memorable speech where he extolled the courage of the British Eighth Army.

Firmly convinced of the rightness of their cause and that ultimate victory would be theirs, Churchill said, this is not the end, nor even may we say, is this the beginning of the end?

But we may venture to say that this is the end of the beginning. This is the end of the beginning. In Acts chapter 16, verses 35 through 40, what seems to us to be a hasty retreat is, when examined deeper, a resounding victory for the gospel.

[1 : 2 6] Paul and Silas, having been beaten and then imprisoned, left Philippi behind. But it's no defeat. They leave in victory. For the church in Philippi, and by extension for the church in Europe, Acts 16, 35 through 40, are not the end, nor are they the beginning of the end.

They are merely the end of the beginning. Paul and Silas have been the advanced guard of the gospel. They leave behind them a thriving gospel church, which changes the history of the world.

But if I'm being honest, these verses have always confused me. Why did the same Paul, who talks in his letter to the Philippian church, as not insisting upon our own rights as Christians, insist upon his right to a public vindication and a grovelling apology from the city magistrates?

It's almost like he is rubbing their noses in the fact that he's a Roman citizen and he should not have been treated in this way. He seems to be advocating a relationship between church and state which is alien to anything we've ever recognised in Scotland.

Belligerence and aggression, not support and humility. But then perhaps I've been reading it wrong. In fact, not perhaps at all.

[3 : 0 0] This is not an aggressive Paul, who having humiliated the city officials of Philippi, now turns tail and runs before they can hurt him anymore. I want to argue that this is a deeply passionate and bastardal Paul, who having provided for the continued growth of the church in Philippi, moves on with Silas to the next town God is calling him to.

Because he's got a big gospel to proclaim. And he is straining at the bit to proclaim it. What's the overriding application for us of today's sermon?

It is that the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ shall always be victorious. That Christ is building his church. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Let's have confidence in the power of the gospel. Confidence to believe it for ourselves. Confidence to proclaim it to others. Our spreading of the gospel is not the end, nor is it the beginning of the end, but it may well be the end of the beginning for the eternal good of those with whom we proclaim it.

I want to look briefly at four things from this passage. First of all, protecting. Protecting. Why it is that the city magistrates of Philippi change their minds about Paul and Silas is not certain.

[4 : 38] The text doesn't tell us. But we do know that when morning came, the city magistrates sent messengers to the jail where Paul and Silas had been incarcerated and ordered their release. The most popular reason given is that these city magistrates realized that Paul and Silas had been imprisoned under a false accusation.

But for whatever reason, they ordered Paul and Silas to be released and the Philippian jailer, now a Christian himself, says to them, go in peace.

Well, he's qualified now to say this to Paul and Silas because through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to him at midnight, for the first time in his life, he knows what real peace is.

But Paul makes a fuss. They beat us publicly without a trial even though we are Roman citizens and they threw us into prison, verse 37.

He's going to teach these city magistrates a lesson they're never going to forget. Now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No, let them come and escort us out.

[5 : 47] And at this, the city magistrates are terrified. If they didn't know that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, it was illegal under Roman law for Roman citizens to be beaten and treated in this way.

In fact, if the Roman authorities in Macedonia had heard how these two Roman citizens had been treated, they'd be justified under Roman law to execute all the city magistrates of Philippi.

So one can quite understand, therefore, how shocked and afraid the magistrates were and how keen they were to get rid of Paul and Silas. But Paul and Silas aren't going to give way. Rather, they insist upon an apology and receive it and an escort out of the prison, which they also received.

Bruised and beaten, Paul and Silas leave that prison triumphantly with both the apologies of the magistrates and the peace of the jailer ringing in their ears.

And in one sense, we want to rejoice with them because God has rescued them in a marvelous way. They could have left that prison secretly during the night when the earthquake struck and broke all their chains.

[7 : 04] But they waited because they wanted to preach the gospel to the jailer and now they're honored by the magistrates as they leave, publicly vindicated even as they sow the seeds of the church.

But I rather think something different is at play here. On first inspection, it looks as if Paul and Silas are being difficult, as if they're insisting upon their own right to vindication.

But let's dig deeper. Let's listen again to Paul's complaint. Verse 37, they beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens and threw us into prison.

In years to come, Christians in Philippi will be persecuted. In Philippians 1, verse 29, the letter Paul wrote to them some years later, he said, it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not just to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.

The same jail in which Paul and Silas were incarcerated will be familiar to these Christians. The same city magistrates who condemned Paul and Silas will probably condemn them also.

[8 : 18] Paul can see this will happen. What he's doing here by making a fuss over the fact that he and Silas were denied a trial is sending a warning shot across the bows of the magistrates that before they should persecute and imprison more Christians in Philippi, they should at least grant them the right to a fair trial.

In other words, Paul and Silas aren't fighting for themselves here. Rather, they are ensuring that these new Christians in Philippi, like Lydia, like the slave girl, like the Philippine jailer, that they are treated fairly, that their rights are upheld, that accusations made against them are investigated before they are declared guilty.

In other words, having proclaimed the gospel to them, Paul and Silas are now protecting the Philippine Christians. They're not fighting for their own rights at all.

They're protecting the rights of their fellow Christians. They're not looking out for their own interests, but for the interests of others. What they're doing is entirely in line with Paul's defense of the humility of Christ in Philippians 2, a Christ who is always for us, who works on our behalf to the extent that he'll always put us before himself.

Christ is the archetypal public servant in whose line stands William Wilberforce with his anti-slavery campaign, Lord Shaftesbury with his manifesto against child labour, and the first unions with an insistence upon workers' rights.

[9 : 58] You see what Paul and Silas are doing here. They're establishing and reinforcing the principle to the city magistrates of Philippi that any Christians who are accused of crime should be subject to the same legal processes as any other citizen.

the Roman system and standard of habeas corpus. They're engaged in a battle not for self-indication, but a battle for the vicarious protection of fellow Christians.

Even now at the very end of their time in Philippi, Paul and Silas are working for the good of Christ's gospel and the prosperity of the church. And you know, this puts pay to any notion we might have in our post-modern individualistic society that all that matters is Jesus and me.

What's more important than me to Paul is we. And what's more important than I to Paul is us.

So let me challenge each one of you here. In what ways are you demonstrating the other focus of Paul? In what ways are you standing on the line of Christ with your first thought not being your own public vindication, but the prosperity of the church and of Christ's gospel?

[11 : 26] In what ways? Second aspect I want to look at with you is pastoring. Pastoring. Having been escorted from the prison, the last Paul and Silas heard from the magistrates were their voices pleading with them to leave the city and that'll come in good time, but before they leave they want to go to Lydia's house.

They've got the heart of pastors whose first instinct is not toward their own safety but toward the good of Christ's people. So we read in verse 40 after Paul and Silas came out of the prison they went to Lydia's house where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them.

These are words we read so quickly with so little thought. Let me suggest something that we can all do. Spend this afternoon dwelling on these words in verse 40.

Think of where it was they met in the house of Lydia the lady from Thyatira who was a seller in purple cloth the heart of whom God had opened just a few days previous.

The first person to be baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit on mainland Europe. Having believed the gospel for herself she opened her home to Paul and his missionary friends.

[12 : 57] They're just words Lydia's house but words which declare the victory of the gospel in Philippi. Think also of who it was Paul and Silas were meeting with the brothers a term used in the New Testament to describe Christians both male and female.

Think of who's gathered here a group of baby Christians whose Christian pilgrimage is just a few days or even hours old. There's Lydia and her household there's the slave girl there's the Philippian jailer and his household who knows who else.

Before Paul and Silas arrived in Philippi there were no brothers and sisters there was no church there was no fellowship of believers with one common bond but now they are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Again they're just words. Words which declare the victory of the gospel in Philippi. But then think of what Paul and Silas were doing they're encouraging the brothers.

Say what you like about them Paul and Silas are people people. Their primary interest is in the people God has called them to serve and their primary way of serving them is by encouraging them.

[14 : 15] I've got no doubt that their encouragement consisted in their continued proclamation of the gospel to them that being a Christian is not a decision to believe as much as it's the discipleship of a lifetime and that the grace of Christ is discipleship's beginning middle and end.

One might have expected Paul and Silas beaten up and exhausted to engage in a pity party but no their primary focus is on the fledgling Christian church on the hearts and minds of Christ's people here.

They're not strategizing. They're speaking. They're not planning. They're preaching. You know I'd love to have been a fly in the wall in Lydia's house that day.

Just imagine being a fly in the wall there. Paul and Silas had such a short time left in Philippi so they had no time to waste. They would have consciously chosen the most important elements of the Christian faith to encourage the believers with.

The grace of Christ in his cross and resurrection. the forgiveness of sins. The power of the Holy Spirit in the pursuit of holiness. Likewise although this text doesn't tell us that they prayed I'm sure they did and I'd have loved to have heard Paul's voice passionately lifted up to God praying that God would establish these new Christians in Philippi that they would stand firm in faith and grow up in holiness.

[15 : 43] That God would protect them in the days and years to lie ahead. They're just words on a page but they're important words because up until a few days previous there was no encouragement to be had in Philippi.

There had only been the empty rhetoric of emperor worship and the darkness of idolatry. They're just words. Words which declare the victory of the gospel in Philippi.

As a pastor I find these words deeply challenging that my primary responsibility should be to encourage you through the gospel to stand firm and grow in grace. But then there's an even greater sense in which we're all pastors.

All of us. And the challenge is in what ways are we encouraging one another through the gospel to stand firm in the grace of Christ and to grow in the likeness of Christ.

These words in verse 40 concerning the church in Philippi they're so easily passing over our lips but they remind us of the victory of the gospel.

[16 : 55] That the gospel is on the march in Philippi and that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Pastoring. Third. Passing on.

Passing on. Third lesson. One of the things that's always confused me about this passage is the finality of Paul and Silas' departure. It's almost like the big time evangelists have rolled into the sleepy Midwest town, made a few converts and now they're moving on to the next town in an almost Steinbeck-esque Grapes of Wrath manner.

Some of these believers had been Christians for only a few hours at this stage. So we wouldn't leave a newborn baby to care for itself, would we?

So why would Paul and Silas do this to the Christians in Philippi? Look very carefully at the text of verse 40 with me. Let's remember that we know there were at least four members of Paul's missionary group when they arrived in Philippi.

Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke and we know that Luke wrote the book of Acts. When we read the word we in the text like we do in Acts 16 10, 11, 12, 13, 16 we are to understand that this was something all four did together.

[18 : 25] They all went to Philippi together. They were all present at the conversion of Lydia and the slave girl. But we know that it was only Paul and Silas who were thrown to prison because in verse 20, 21, 23 and 31 Luke does not use the pronoun we but they.

And now here in verse 40 once again Luke uses they as opposed to we. The they describing Paul and Silas not Luke and Timothy.

I want to argue from these details that Luke and Timothy during Paul and Silas' imprisonment had not left Lydia's house. They did not leave Philippi like Paul and Silas did.

They remained there. In other words Paul and Silas are not leaving the newborn Christians in Philippi to their own devices. Rather they are passing on the responsibility for pastoring them to Luke and Timothy.

Their Christianity must not consist in the decision of a moment but the discipleship of a lifetime so Paul and Silas leave Luke and Timothy in Philippi to lead and serve the fellowship there.

[19 : 49] Now this makes sense of the way Paul spoke of Timothy in Philippians 2 where he says of Timothy I have no one else like him who takes a genuine interest in your welfare.

Why does Timothy take such an interest in the welfare of the Philippians? Because he was their first pastor who Paul left there to look after them in his absence.

And this makes Acts 16 the most wonderful chapter because it begins with Paul's choice of Timothy as a companion in mission. Over the weeks of their journeying together Timothy has learned from Paul and it's now time for Timothy to put it all into practice.

It's now time for him to proclaim the gospel he first heard Paul proclaim to imitate the life and ministry of Paul. You see the victory of the gospel in Acts 16 isn't just localized in Philippi it is the victory of the gospel in the life of Timothy that having been discipled by the apostle Paul he is now discipling others to stand firm in grace and grow up in holiness.

What Churchill said of that victorious campaign in North Africa can be said now of the progress of the gospel in Timothy's life. This is not the end. This is not the beginning of the end but Acts 16 40 tells us it's the end of the beginning.

[21 : 18] So going back to our application at the beginning of Acts 16 we reflected on our need to be discipled to be taught to fly.

We also reflected upon our responsibility to disciple others to teach others how to fly. Who are you learning how to be a Christian from and who are you teaching how to be a Christian?

The follower of Christ must both be disciple and discipler. being encouraged by others and encouraging others. Are you? And then lastly pressing on pressing on very briefly as we close I want to do so on the high note of this chapter.

Remember there have been there's been great success in the proclamation of the gospel in Philippi but it's come at the great cost of the suffering of Paul and Silas. They've been beaten and tortured and imprisoned.

You've heard the expression once bitten twice shy. Well one might expect Paul's attitude to be once beaten twice shy. But no with unabated confidence in the gospel and with renewed drive and mission we read then they left.

[22 : 39] Because they've got a gospel to proclaim and they've got a whole continent in which to preach it. Their enthusiasm for mission is not held back by the beatings they endured here in Philippi it is propelled forward.

They're now more eager than ever to preach the gospel to new people in new places. And so from Philippi they're going to go to Thessalonica and plant a church there.

And from there they're going to go to Berea and from there to Athens and so on until finally the gospel comes to Glasgow. they're pressing on in gospel mission and ministry.

There's no thought of taking it easy of coasting. Their passion is for the gospel of Jesus Christ to reach new people in new places. They will joyfully press on. Then they left.

John and Betty Stamm were young American missionaries serving in China. They were very bright Christians. They contributed greatly to the discipleship of new believers in the region in which they worked.

[23 : 47] December the 7th 1934 John and Betty Stamm were murdered by insurgents for being Christians. Their martyrdom far from discouraging missionaries from working in China led to an exponential increase in applications from America and Western Europe to go to China with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Today there are more than 100 million Christians in China. The mission of the gospel pressed on and I'm sure John and Betty Stamm would rejoice in its progress.

Just in these three words, then they left. Capture for one moment the great enthusiasm of Paul and Cyrus for gospel mission. The potential, the potentialities for the good news of Jesus being proclaimed to new people in new places.

There's one word which covers it, excitement. That's why we're concluding our worship today with the hymn facing a task unfinished. Not because this unfinished task fills us with guilt.

It fills us rather with excitement at the unlimited potential and possibilities for gospel expansion in Glasgow, in Helensboro, in Scotland and beyond.

[25 : 15] Surely, if anything, Acts 16, especially verses 35 through 40, fit the mould of that victory of which Winston Churchill spoke in the House of Commons in late 1942.

When he said of this great allied victory in North Africa, this is not the end, nor even may we say is it the beginning of the end, but we may venture to say that it is the end of the beginning.

whatever lies in the future for Glasgow City Free Church, whether it's here in St. Vincent Street, whether it's in Town Head or whatever it might be, this is but the end of the beginning of our gospel mission to Glasgow and beyond.

Whatever lies in the future for us as individual Christians, this is but the beginning, this is but the end of the beginning of our mission. to see Christ glorified here, there, and everywhere.

Let us pray. our Lord, fill us with that excitement, the possibility of the proclamation of the gospel to new people in new places, that the name of Christ would be believed and trusted, that Christ would be glorified in places where at present his name yet is not known, and with shame we have to say there are many parts of our city where that's true.

[26 : 48] In Jesus' name, Amen.