

Acts 16:20-34

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Date: 21 March 2021

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- [0 : 0 0] The following sermon is from Grace and Peace Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Grace and Peace is a new church that exists for the glory of God and the good of the northeast suburbs of Hamilton Place, Collegedale, and Ottawa.
- You can find help more by visiting gracepeacechurch.org. So, if you want to get your handouts, we're going to continue on in our story of the early church from the book of Acts.
- You know, I said earlier in the service that the glory and the tragedy of being human is that we don't know what's going to happen next. We are people who are travelers in an unknown land, just like our forefathers in the faith.
- But the great thing about that is we get to travel. You know, one of the things that I love, and I'm sure you like this as well, is a movie with a good travel montage. You know, one of my favorites is from Cars.
- I don't know if you remember this. I know you all love Cars, especially if you have children of a certain age and you've watched it a number of times. But in the travel montage in Cars, you may remember this.
- [1 : 2 5] Lightning McQueen has just, he just won a big race in the south and he gets picked up by the national racing team and they put him in this fancy racing truck and ship him off to California.
- You know, rolling hills and fertile farmland and beautiful mountains. There's the glorious cities he passes on the way. All to life is a highway, right?
- Thank you, Rascal Flats, for the soundtrack to our lives. Acts chapter 16 is essentially a travel montage as well.
- It's full of a lot of short, brief scenes about Paul's missionary life. And we could spend a few weeks just stopping in each one of these scenes and really looking at them.
- And I would love to do that, but I think it's probably best if we move through them very quickly. And what I'd love to do is just give you an overview and let the major point of these various images of this montage kind of capture your attention and then we'll stop at the very last scene.
- [2 : 3 2] So I'm going to blow through it. You can get out your Bibles and you can see where we're going to go. So it begins, the first scene is with Paul.
- Paul is in Antioch. They've just finished with this Jerusalem council and he's got this letter and he wants to go deliver this letter back to the churches that he planted in Turkey. And so he comes to Barnabas and Barnabas, he says, Barnabas, let's go, let's go back to Turkey.
- And Barnabas wants to bring along John Mark. Now, if you remember a couple of chapters ago, John Mark ditched them on their first journey when things got hard. So Paul says, thank you, bye.
- We don't want John Mark. We are moving on with somebody else. So Barnabas and Paul split. They have a conflict over John Mark and they split. And Barnabas goes to Cyprus.

Paul takes Silas and goes up into Turkey. Then while the second scene, they're traveling through Turkey. They stop in this city called Lystra where they had planted a church before and they meet this young man named Timothy.

[3 : 36] And they grab ahold of Timothy and say, you're coming with us. And so now they've got a team that's going. In the third scene, Paul is trying to get to the west coast of Asia Minor.

He wants to go to the big cities on the coast like Ephesus and some of those. But he says, dream. He has a vision. And there's a person standing in Europe calling to him saying, come to Europe.

And so all of a sudden, he has this dramatic shift in focus. He had been thinking, I'm just staying in Turkey. I'm staying in this area that I know that's familiar.

And now God is calling him to an entirely different continent. And he crosses over to Europe. So they arrive in the city of Philippi, which was a major city.

It was a Roman garrison. It was also a port. And it was where the famous road, the Via Ignatia, went through. So it was a major hub.

[4 : 40] They met an incredible woman there. She was wealthy and successful. She was connected. She was sophisticated. Lydia was her name. And she got converted and became a benefactor for much of the rest of Paul's travels.

The next scene that we get in this travel montage is a demon-possessed girl. This girl, she is demon-possessed, but she tells fortunes. And so she is following Paul around, not just telling fortunes, but she's proclaiming who Paul is and talking about Jesus.

But finally, Paul just gets sick of it. And he heals her from her demon possession. And that's where we pick up. Because when he healed her, her owners, can you imagine that word?

That she is owned by someone? Her owners become mad because she's no longer able to tell fortunes and make money for them. And so they get Paul and Silas thrown in prison.

That's the travel montage that is preparing us for the passage that I want us to look at. Men are Jews and they're disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice.

[5 : 48] The crowd joined, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. And the prisoners were listening to them. But suddenly, there was a great earthquake.

And the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately, all the doors were opened and everyone's bonds were unfastened. And when the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were 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, Do not harm yourself, for we're all here. And the jailer called for lights and rushed in and trembled with fear. Trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas.

They gave the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. And he was baptized at once, he and all his family.

[6 : 54] Then he brought them into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God. Friends, this is God's word.

And he gives it to you because he loves you. And he wants you to know him. See, here's the thing about a travel montage. Is it sets up the story for the key point of the story.

The key point for Lightning McQueen in Cars was that he was becoming arrogant and self-important. He was overconfident. And he was about to figure that out. For us here, the key point is this.

That faith in Jesus enables you to persevere through the way underneath as the soundtrack of your life. I want to make just three brief observations about this passage.

Here's the first one. They're singing in the midst of the difficulty. I mean, did you notice this? This is crazy. They're just singing in jail. Well, this had been a hard journey.

[7 : 58] I mean, Paul had conflict with his partner and they'd split. He had to go... He went the way that his plan...

That he wanted to go and he didn't see success. He had had failure along the way. He had to radically reorient his plan for what he wanted to do to go to Europe.

And just as things looked like he was starting to get some traction in Philippi, he had this great convert in Lydia. He gets arrested. And not just arrested, but he gets beaten as well for healing this girl.

Freeing her from Satan's grasp. He gets beaten. It must have felt like kind of whiplash. You know? At every turn, something is happening that's unexpected for Paul.

I can relate to that. I mean, doesn't 2020 and 2021 feel a little whiplash-ish for us? That's not even a word, whiplash-ish.

[8 : 56] It feels like whiplash. You know, it feels like at every turn something unexpected is happening. Something that we didn't anticipate. We couldn't have planned on.

There's conflicts with people that we love that we didn't realize were kind of under the surface. There's plans that have been altered. Things that just when it seems like they're going well, they kind of crash around us and they don't work out.

There's been failure in the midst of all of this. You know, Paul at this point had been through the ringer just like all of us have been. And so, I want to ask you this question sincerely.

How are you doing? You know? I think it's good that we just kind of stop for a minute and just ask the question, how are you doing? Let me tell you how I'm doing. I'm exhausted.

You know? I'm tired. I'll wake up in the mornings most days and feel really energetic and kind of hopeful and kind of eager about the day, but I find that my energy level is lower.

[10 : 01] You know? I get to the end of the day and I'm more often frustrated or irritated by things. Wanting more rest. I'll take a day of rest, but it never seems like it's quite enough.

There just seems to be this mental fatigue that is underneath all of that. As I talk to many of you, you say the same kinds of things. I hear that you're telling me that you feel depressed and anxious, that you're fearful, that you feel lonely.

You know, sometimes you feel optimistic and hopeful and happy, but it's inconsistent. And it's that inconsistency that seems to be one of the major problems. Is that it feels like there's always something new around the corner that undercuts that feeling of stability that we're all longing to find.

And yet, despite the circumstances, Paul and Silas are finding themselves in jail and they're singing. What's going on with that? Now, I want to be clear about something. They aren't ignoring the difficulties that they experienced.

In fact, what we see is that they have open wounds. Like, they have just been beaten and they've got wounds that need to be dressed that aren't, that have not been dealt with and yet, in spite of that, they're still singing and praising the Lord and praying.

[11 : 25] This is not an example of the power of positive thinking, you know? If you just don't think about it, you know, then it's going to be okay. That's not what's going on at all.

In fact, the very fact of their singing is actually the fruit of what I want to talk about today as the point of this passage. But I just want to say at this point, so we'll come back to the singing, but what I just want to notice at this point is that there is singing in the midst of difficulty and so for those of you, however you're doing right now, I want you to see that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

There is hope out there and I want to show you how to get there. Okay? It's the first thing they're singing. The second thing is the jailer. He is totally despairing.

The jailer, he took extra precautions to make sure that Paul and Silas were well secured. He put them in the interior cell, whatever that means, and he put them in stocks around their ankles so that they couldn't go anywhere.

But despite that, God sent an earthquake that opened the jail. This is just like what happened with Peter back in chapter 12 of Acts.

[12 : 42] You know, and we don't know. Maybe the jailer was asleep. Maybe he was overconfident. Maybe he was in a moment and he runs in and he sees what's happening there. He's awakened by this.

He turns on the lights. He sees what the reality is and he grabs his sword and he's about to do himself in. He knew that he was responsible. He knew that in Roman society, the jailer, if somebody got away, the punishment that was for those prisoners would be inflicted upon the jailer.

And so he knew that as soon as morning came, he would be... You know? That feeling of being found out. You know, if you're a high schooler, maybe you know that feeling of people are going to find out.

My parents are going to find out. My teachers are going to find out that thing that happened. You've done something in private that you know now is going to come out, but there's this despairing feeling.

And some of you, some of you, not just to be found out, but some of you can relate to the sense of despair in life as you know it right now.

[13 : 48] That nothing works right. That there seems to be something new, a new tragedy that you have to confront and try to emotionally deal with.

I think some of you have gone beyond just the sadness and the frustration of life in 2021, and you've actually gone to a deep place kind of like the despair that the jailer is feeling.

It's more than just feeling like you're alone in the world. It's more than just feeling like the world is broken around us, although that is the case. It's the stories of violence and racism and sexual abuse and strife that lead you to these dark and despairing places.

Some of you have reached that darkness. Psalm 116 that I read this morning, our hearts of the grave laid hold of me. I suffered distress and anguish.

It's this picture of the grave reaching up and grabbing a hold and pulling you down. And some of you have felt that.

[14 : 57] It all happens so fast, doesn't it? You almost don't see it coming. I've got this pastor friend a couple of years ago. He was coming home from dropping off his daughter at some event.

It was kind of like early evening. And he was driving down the street. He was passing and he hit this man and killed him instantly. And my friend was shattered.

Shattered. Things were going great in life. And in a moment, all of that just seemed to be over.

He was despairing. In fact, the fact that he was cleared from any wrongdoing in the accident, he still continued to deal with the despair and the loss and the grief and the trauma of that moment.

In fact, he would tell you he still deals with it three years later. That wound still hasn't healed. It still festers at times. It feels like it's going to drag him down to the depths that he might lose everything that makes life worth living.

[16 : 06] And he didn't see it coming. There's this Ray LaMontagne song that I love. It's called Empty. I'd recommend it. But the two lines of the chorus are this.

Will I always feel this way? So empty? So estranged? See, the jailer, in seeking to take his own life, he was just living out the logical implication of the despair of living in this broken and uncertain world where we don't know what's coming and we feel like we've just been whiplashed to one thing after the other.

You know, the jailer is just bailing out on life. That's the ultimate bailout, suicide. Suicides are rising in our culture. And let me just stop and say, suicide is not the answer.

It is more painful for the people who are left than it is painful for you. If you find yourself in that kind of a dark place, I'd love to help you find the light again.

Come talk to me. But, plenty of us, plenty of us, we bail out on life without going all the way to the logical conclusion of suicide.

[17 : 28] We self-sabotage our life in all kinds of ways out of our despair. people bail out all the time by trying to grab control for a life that is fundamentally out of control.

They pour an extra drink. They click on one more pornographic website. They click on Netflix again to avoid relationships and intimacy with people.

They conveniently forget to text that person back that's reaching out to them. They subtly let that relationship slide that would be so good for them.

Sometimes we go the opposite direction. From self-indulgence, we go to over-control. We try to control our world and we become angry abusive to our children, to our spouse, to the people who work with us.

It can be this kind of direct sabotage or it can be a slow drift. The fundamental fact is that there is a despair that is fundamental to who we are as people.

[18 : 45] And if you feel that, number one, you're not alone. And number two, there's a way out of it. And the way out is given right here by faith.

By faith. That's the third thing. He shares it with the jailer. He didn't, this is what's interesting. You know, elsewhere in the book of Acts, we get a sermon. You know, we get the apostle telling people exactly what he wants them to know about Jesus.

None of that happens here. There's no content given. There's no argument. Paul doesn't try to, you know, kind of counsel the jailer out of his despairing place.

He just simply showed him Jesus. You see, Jesus didn't come as some sort of a self-help strategy or a technique in order to make you feel better.

Or even as a way to rationalize your despair. Jesus came to take your despair upon himself so that you would be freed from it.

[19 : 47] Remember Isaiah 53, surely he has borne our griefs. He's carried our sorrows. We esteemed him stricken and smitten by God and afflicted.

He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The Lord laid upon him the iniquity of us all.

Every fear, every failure of your life, every thought of shame or anger or self-pity, every terror in the night that you have of anxiety, every regret from what you have done, every sorrow of what has been done to you has been laid upon Jesus.

Every single one. So that you would not have to bear their implications anymore. You know what Paul does not say to the jailer?

He does not say that your despair is foolish. He does not say, oh you shouldn't have to feel that way, it's fine. What Paul is communicating here is the despair of living in this world is absolutely justified.

[21 : 03] You should feel it because it's real. But you don't have to bear the weight of it because Jesus has borne the weight of it. You can be free of the weight of that despair by trusting in the truth of who Jesus is.

Horatius Bonar is a writer. He says this, faith is the acknowledgement of the entire absence of all goodness in me and the recognition of the cross as the substitute for everything I lack.

Faith saves because it owns the complete salvation salvation. And not because I contribute anything to that salvation. See, what he's saying is that faith is the process by which we lean into a truth that we cannot see in the midst of our circumstances.

Faith is treating something as true even though it seems that it cannot possibly be true. that's what faith is.

The truth is Jesus has come. Jesus has died. Jesus has been raised again. We could say it this way, that Jesus himself took the sword of condemnation that the jailer deserved upon himself instead of him.

[22 : 38] It wasn't suicide. Jesus gave himself over to the men who in their own despair and wickedness and their own attempt to deal with the uncertainties of life, attempted to gain control of their world through authority and through injustice and through abuse of power.

And he gave himself over to their sinful impulses and took their punishment from them. And he died.

Horatius Bonar, as I said, was a writer. He was a Scottish pastor and he was a poet at the end of the 19th century. But really his life was pretty hard. He and his wife Jane, they had nine children.

Five of them, five sequential children, died in infancy of their nine. Five in a row. He wrote a song about faith.

Here's what it says. I heard the voice of Jesus say, come unto me and rest. Lay down, O weary one, lay down your head upon my breast.

[23 : 56] I came to Jesus as I was, so weary, worn, and sad. I found in Him a resting place. and He has made me glad.

See, for the jailer, he thought that this was the end of his life. He didn't realize that this was the beginning. This was the beginning of something new, an entry into a new family, a new world, a new life of grace.

grace. It's amazing. The irony of it, he went from the darkness of that jail cell and went into the night and grabbed up his family to bring them back so that they might all together hear the truth of who Jesus was and believe.

And then he bound up the wounds of Paul and Silas and fed them as a response to his own healing and restoration.

See, Jesus gave himself up to the despair of this world so that you wouldn't have to bear its burden. All of us, it feels like this world is so burdensome right now.

[25 : 19] And I don't know what that looks like for you. You may be completely avoiding it. You may be so weighed down you're not sure what to do. Whatever it is, you need to hear again the message that Jesus in his coming has taken and borne that despair for you.

You do not have to bear it any longer. That doesn't mean our life is going to get easier immediately. That doesn't mean that we're not going to have struggle and strife.

It doesn't mean that we can't, that it's going to fix all our problems. That's not the promise of the gospel. The promise of the gospel is not that your life is going to work out. The promise of the gospel is that no matter what by faith God will be with you.

That's what it means. That in the midst of it you will have the resources to persevere, to carry on, that you'll be able to sing.

To sing in the midst of the difficulty. Don't you want that? Don't you desperately want to be able to sing in the midst of whatever you're feeling right now?

[26 : 30] I want that. And I think there's thousands of people living just miles from here that desperately want to learn to sing again.

We can be God's means of bringing that song to them. And may it be so for us. let me lead us in prayer. Our God would you make us to be people who lead who lead those who need to know you back to the song of the gospel, to the song of faith.

Would you give us that faith we pray in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.