

Challenging the Persecutors

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. Well, good morning, friends. We are now 20 years after the day of Pentecost in the book of Acts.

So 20 years of gospel growth, and yet the gospel of Jesus Christ in Acts has not yet reached the continent of Europe until today.

And so what we're watching from chapter 16 of Acts and reading and reflecting on is the first formal Christian church planting missionary venture into the continent of Europe.

As Paul travels from West Turkey in his boat over to the shores of modern day Greece, that's when Christianity comes to Europe.

Now, I've never been to Europe. Paul went there because he had a dream. It was quite exciting earlier in Acts 16. He has this dream of a man from Macedonia who says, come over and help us.

[1 : 05] Come and bring the gospel. So that is the divine leading that sends Paul into Europe. Now, I've never been there myself. My wife's been there. And I've noticed that when people go to Europe, they come back and even if they're not believers, they show me photos of cathedrals.

And so it seems to be a thing about going to cathedrals in Europe. Why is that? I think because Europe in the plan of God or in the reign of the Lord Jesus becomes the first really kind of Christianized continent of the world.

And Europe was used mightily by God to help many thousands, millions of people know and follow Jesus Christ and be part of his church.

And in the history of God for over, well over a thousand years, nearly two really, Europe, from Europe has come so much good for the world. I mean, mistakes were made, but so many Christian missionaries have gone out from Europe to bring the gospel to all the continents of the world.

It's good then for us to think, Europe has not always been Christian, has it? So for 20 years of the church, there were no Christians there.

[2 : 27] If there were, there are only kind of scattered pockets. So Europe herself had to receive missionaries to become Christian. And I'm sad to say that today we're kind of in a place where missionaries are needed again to go into Europe to bring the gospel to that place.

And there are more Christians today in the other continents of the world, in Africa and South America and Asia, than there are in Europe. What was in Paul's mind in that boat trip?

What was in his mind when, I mean, he had the dream, he knew it was God's will that the gospel go over to this place. I doubt that he would have had any inkling of how big the gospel was to become in Europe, that it would become the first Christian continent.

I think he would be blown away from heaven at what God did through the church planting and the movement begun through him and Silas and others to bring the gospel to that place over the next one, two thousand years in Europe.

The lesson, I think, in the book of Acts, is all about the risen Jesus Christ actively reigning at work to spread the fame of his name and the power of the Spirit through his followers, especially through apostles, but also through all his followers.

[3 : 57] And so the lesson is that the Lord Jesus, through the smaller circumstances, through this boat ride and this sort of knockabout church planting, through getting thrown in prison, through the most unlikely circumstances, can do the greatest things.

Acts of gospel courage, acts of gospel witness in the timing of God, in the timing of Jesus, can do more than we can ask or imagine, more than Paul probably asked for, more than he imagined.

And similarly in our time, through the smallest acts of gospel courage and gospel witness, God can do, in his timing, more than we ask or imagine. I expect my failure as a Christian, I think, is I want Jesus to do too much too soon and too little over the long term.

So I want Jesus to solve my problems in 2009 this year. I want him to convert all the people I'm trying to convert this year. I want him to fix the Anglican church this year. And I rarely pray or think about or work for 10 years ahead or 20 or 100 years ahead. And yet Jesus reigns forever.

[5 : 13] We ought to have his perspective. And so really it's just a great encouragement of this message today from Acts 16 of what can be done by the Lord Jesus.

And when we look back in hindsight at what happened in Europe, we can be encouraged that he can do the same today. I mean, it starts very kind of negatively and kind of weirdly actually with meeting this slave girl who was possessed by a demon or an evil spirit that gives her powers of divination.

Here's how Luke describes it. He says, This is a change actually in the book of Acts because Luke, the author of Acts, is now speaking in the first person.

Up until now he's been saying in the third person, Paul did this, they went there, then they did this. Now he's saying, we went. And so it's believed that maybe Luke came from the Roman colony at Philippi.

And so this is the point at which Luke jumps on board and there are other parts of Acts that go back to the third person and when Luke is not with them and he's just writing down the eyewitness reports and then later on in Acts it goes to the first person again.

[6 : 39] It's just Luke's humble way of hinting that he's an eyewitness of these parts. And so they meet this slave girl and I suspect her owners, seeing that she has this spirit, this sort of demon in her, this gift, they put her on the way to the place of prayer in order to sort of distract or deceive worshippers of God going to the place where they're going to meet as God's people to sort of suck them in into sort of seeing what she has to say as an evil spirit, as sort of a clairvoyant.

And when she sees Paul and Silas, she cries out, these men are slaves of the Most High God who proclaim to you a way of salvation. It's actually the truth.

It's funny, it's awkward. Satan is mischievous in having her speak the truth to try and distract attention away from them. Similar to what happened to Jesus, evil spirits in people would say about him, you know, Jesus, you are the son of the Most High God.

That's in Luke 8, he's one example of that. So similarly here, the spirit says, these are slaves of the Most High God who proclaim a way of salvation. It's a strategy of distraction by speaking some truth about the apostles that maybe people might think that they're on the same side.

Or maybe people might think, well, it's complimentary so you can worship God and listen to the clairvoyant and the evil spirit. It's a deceitful tactic. And Paul sort of tolerates it for a couple of days of preaching the gospel there, but then he kind of gets annoyed.

[8 : 23] He just gets frustrated with her. And so in the name, he says to her, or to the spirit, I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.

And then there's the demonstration of the power of the risen Jesus that she comes out, the spirit comes out of her that very hour. Let me encourage you, friends, as Christians, as worshippers of the Saviour who has true power to never be tempted to read your horoscope, to never be tempted to listen to a clairvoyant or someone who practices divination or fortune telling, astrology, tarot, you know, that kind of stuff.

I mean, I can't believe that people, well, I can believe that people are so sucked in because they don't worship the true God who has power. And so they're sucked in by other instruments of power that come from the evil one.

But we ought to know better and we ought to trust Jesus alone and never dabble in those things. I've met Christians who think it's harmless to read their horoscope.

They think it complements, you know, serving and worshipping Jesus. But that's not true. True power is found in Jesus at God's right hand. So we don't need to toy with the tools of the evil one when we know the one who has all authority in heaven and earth.

[9 : 54] Now, Luke gives a sort of a joke here, actually, a kind of play on words. When he says, the spirit came out of her that very hour. And then he says in verse 19, her owners saw that their hope of making money had come out as well.

He uses the same word for the exorcism as he does for the owner's hope fading. So he sort of says, the spirit has gone and so has their hope of making money was gone.

So Luke's kind of saying that, you know, they're now very angry because they're exploiting this girl and her possession. And now that she's become a believer, become a Christian, they are angry at Paul and Silas.

So what happens is they drag them to the authorities and they make up lies. Knowing that Philippi is a very patriotic Roman colony, they make up lies that they are against Rome.

The kind of things they say are, these men are disturbing our city, they are Jews and the Romans sort of didn't like the Jews. They're advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.

[11 : 07] And the crowd joins in and without a trial, which as Roman citizens, Paul and Silas would deserve, without a trial, they are stripped of their clothing, ordered to be beaten with rods, given a severe flogging, thrown into prison and ordered the jailer, who becomes an important person soon, ordered the jailer to keep them securely.

Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet with stocks. It seems like this happens today actually, not just the fact that there's physical persecution, but people do lie to speak against the church.

People do lie to speak against Jesus Christ. They say lies about Jesus Christ. They say lies about his followers in order to get them in trouble. We ought not to be surprised when the church is, these things happen to us today.

We ought not to be necessarily discouraged as if it were a new thing, that people would be deceitful in order to get Christians in trouble.

Our hope is ultimately not in earthly justice systems. So we'll see in a minute, Paul does use that at the end of this chapter, but our hope ultimately is in the judgment and administration of justice that Jesus will bring on the final day.

[12 : 33] And when we get to the prison, I think we hit the biggest miracle of the chapter, bigger than the exorcism. See if you can see the miracle.

Verse 25, About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them. The video didn't emphasize this very well, but could you imagine being lied against, being beaten up, tortured, flogged, and then singing?

I could imagine crying in jail. I could imagine maybe praying in despair to God. I could imagine being in a state of kind of lament to God, but I couldn't imagine praying and singing hymns to God. Just not in my nature. In my mind, you're only meant to sing when you feel good. But here they are, incarcerated, they're in the stocks, and they are singing.

I was trying to think of a song, what would you sing in jail? And it's probably a good test of our Christian hymns and music today is would they work if you were in jail?

[13 : 43] Or they just wouldn't make any sense anymore. They'd just be too fake. But let me give an example that would work in a jail. And you see if it works. I know that my Redeemer lives. You heard of that hymn?

Great hymn. He lives, this is how it goes. He lives my kind, wise, heavenly friend. He lives and loves me to the end.

He lives, and while He lives, I'll sing, He lives my prophet, priest, and king. They are trapped in the innermost cell. They are in the most solitary and depressing part of a dirty and disgusting prison. And yet, they can sing that because He does live. The Saviour does live. He is their prophet, priest, and king. The singing of that song is predicated on the Lord Jesus, on His death and resurrection. So you can sing that. That hymn goes on. Just imagine you're there. He lives and grants me daily breath. He lives and I shall conquer death.

[14 : 45] He lives my mansion to prepare. He lives to bring me safely there. They may actually be expecting to die in that cell. Their backs are lacerated.

Their limbs are aching. Maybe some of their bones are broken. But instead of just groaning and moaning, they can sing that. They can sing of the victory over death.

They can sing of their future hope that they will conquer death and that Jesus has prepared a place for them. See, you can do that with the eyes of faith.

Finally, that hymn ends. He lives all glory to His name. He lives my Jesus, still the same. Oh, the sweet joy this sentence gives.

I know that my Redeemer lives. So you could sing that if you were in jail because Jesus is still the same Lord. He's still the same Saviour. You still have the same hope and promise.

[15 : 41] In fact, you can almost bear it more knowing that you are suffering for His name. You can sing to Him knowing you'll be vindicated for that suffering as a Christian.

Well, that hymn was written in the 18th century or something. So they wouldn't have been singing that hymn. But you can see how they could do it, can't you? If you keep trusting in Jesus, if you know where He is, you know what He's promised you, even in jail, you can sing to Him.

And I think actually it's significant that Luke says the other prisoners were listening because their singing in jail is an act of witness to the jail of the hope of the gospel.

I think for us today we should remember that. When the chips are down for us, when we are suffering, when we don't feel like praising God, it's an act of faith to speak of the truth about the risen Jesus in song.

They are the times you've got to drag yourself and get to church and sing at home to praise Jesus of the definite and sure hope we have. Singing is actually not an optional part of the Christian life.

[16 : 54] I'm surprised I meet Christians who think to sing is sort of something that you can do if you like singing. I'm not a singer or something. I mean, how dare anyone come today to this church if you believe that He is risen, if you believe that your Redeemer lives, how dare you not praise Him in song?

It's clearly a matter of conviction, not a matter of how you feel. It's a matter of conviction of the truth of the gospel, not a matter of your performance ability that makes sense.

It's no small thing that Luke tells us they sang. It's really quite a significant part of the witness in which the jailer in a minute is going to be converted, him and his whole family.

Singing is one of the greatest weapons of the church to tell the world no matter what the circumstances are, no matter what you do to us, we will trust Jesus.

We will love Him and we will put our hope in Him even when we are in chains. Jesus Christ is in heaven and He reigns. And so as they sing to Him, He seems to respond with this great miracle of the earthquake.

[18 : 05] Suddenly there was an earthquake so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

So this is clearly a supernatural miracle of the Lord Jesus that not only do things shake, all the chains drop off and everyone is sort of in effect almost free to escape.

But that's not what happens. Somehow, because all the prisoners have been watching and listening to Silas and Paul, they know that their God has done something here but for some reason they stay and watch Paul and Silas and the jailer, well, you know, he kind of hears the noise, comes out of his private residence on the site, sees the door open and just knows, well, that's curtains.

You know, he's going to be tortured and killed for not guarding that jail. So he just decides to kill himself. Paul saves him. Paul saves him in more ways than one actually.

Do not harm yourself for we are all here. And so, they go in and he checks them out and Paul's there, Silas is there, all the prisoners are there.

[19 : 19] It's amazing. And so, he knows what's to do with Paul and Silas. He takes them and says, what must I do to be saved?

It's a great question. What must I do to be saved? And the answer is so beautifully simple. And I think the video had this really well.

They're sort of laughing almost. It's so sweet. Believe on the Lord Jesus and you'll be saved. You and your household. Believe on the Lord Jesus.

It is so straightforward. Salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ. Christ. And I don't think the question came out of just the earthquake.

I think the jailer has been watching them. He's supervised their flogging. He's seen them sing. He's heard them singing to Jesus. So, he's heard something about Jesus through the singing.

[20 : 16] And Paul goes on to preach the word to them. So, it's not just that one question and answer and that's done. He goes on to explain the word of God and helping others probably understand repentance and faith and who Jesus is and what he did dying on a cross.

Probably all that happens. But at heart, it's a beautiful, straightforward answer. Believe in Jesus and you'll be saved. So, friends, if you need to know how can you be saved, where does your forgiveness, where does the hope come from to be able to sing in jail, the hope comes from believing in Jesus.

It's that straightforward. And I think it echoes somewhat what Peter said on the day of Pentecost. There's a similar situation there where people come to Peter with great guilt and they say, you know, what must we do?

And at the answer, there's sort of different aspects of the gospel but just a simple repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. So, it's that straightforward and interestingly, there's the similar promise to a household at Pentecost and here.

So, here it says, believe in the Lord Jesus, you'll be saved, you and your household. And at Pentecost, Peter said, repent and be baptized, the promise is for you and your children.

[21 : 35] So, it sort of reflects that expression of God's ongoing covenantal concern to transform whole families in the name of Jesus Christ, to transform whole households.

And then, because then you actually get this beautiful picture and I really enjoy this on the DVD of Paul and Silas going into the house, into the private residence of the jailer.

So, they've been in the jailer's house in terms of the cells but actually go into the house of his wife and of his children and, you know, teaches the word of God to them and they are all saved.

And, you know, the one who supervised their flogging now washes their wounds. Isn't that a wonderful image? He tends to them, the jailer tends to them and nurses them and as he washes their wounds, Paul and Barnabas, so to speak, wash him in baptism, him and his whole household in baptism, in effect, washing away their sins as he's washed their wounds.

and as they were once jailed in his cell, they are now fed at his table. It's a wonderful image of the peace that Jesus brings between people and, in effect, what has Jesus done here?

[22 : 58] He has planted a church in the prison. The prison has actually almost been transformed into a church. The prison now has proclamation of the gospel and of the word of God.

It has singing, it has sacraments, it has food, it has conversions, it has joy. You know, Jesus has done a wonderful thing and transformed this prison into something else if only for the night.

The jailer has now found the same joy that allowed Paul to sing. And anyway, it seems that Paul and Silas go back to their prison cell.

They don't just walk off or sleep in his house. They go back to their cell and wait for what to do in the morning. Very submissive and obedient to the government. And so there's one final scene where word comes in the morning that they're free to go.

We don't know why that word was sent. And Paul and Silas actually protest. So verse 37 says, No, no, we're not leaving.

[23 : 59] They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens and have thrown us into prison. And now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not.

Let them come and take us out themselves. And then the amazing thing, so the magistrates, you know, have to come down and apologise because it's a very patriotic Roman colony and Paul knows his rights under Roman law that he has been mistreated and so gets from them a public apology and then, and then they leave.

They go to, they go to the church that's been planted in Lydia's house and they leave. So, so why does Paul do this? Why does he stir up the government in this way and rub it in to their face?

I think he does it because he, it's not because he's personally kind of vindictive or wants to be, get revenge in public. He wants Jesus to be honoured in the public sphere and by his flogging, Jesus has been dishonoured.

People have bagged, the crowds bagged it on him publicly, the Christians were put down and so now he has Jesus honoured by having justice done through the Roman, through the rights of a Roman citizen.

[25 : 14] What's on Paul's mind is the honour of Jesus Christ which brings me I think to, I think that is the theme of this whole chapter and I want to challenge you with this that the whole time Paul is a model of using every circumstance to magnify his master using every situation, every suffering to look for opportunities to honour Jesus and to speak about Jesus.

Paul is not just obsessed with his own comfort. He doesn't just want to be trouble free. What he wants is to proclaim Christ and even in persecution to keep proclaiming Christ.

it's actually I think a reflection of the heart of God. What does God want? Well, does God just want your comfort? Clearly not because we are not comfortable all the time.

So it must be the will of God that there is something greater he wants in your lives. What is that? It's the magnification of your master. It's the honour of Jesus.

That's what God wants in your good times but also in your hardship. When you are insulted for being a Christian well he wants you to bear that name so you can bring glory to your master. [26 : 34] When you are lied against when there is injustice against you because you are being godly and you have followed Jesus he wants you to wear that and look for ways to honour him in that.

In fact if you go back to the slave girl she suffered a lot but her conversion brought much glory to Jesus in that it led to the chain of events that put them in jail and led to the conversion of the jailer and all these other things.

So even our sicknesses our sufferings in that sense can be used by us as we hope in Jesus to show people how trustworthy he is.

As we sing while we suffer we show people how great our master is. So the challenge I think is to not waste your suffering is to not waste your hardships by simply pleading for God to spare you of them.

You can pray for that but don't just pray for that use your suffering and hardship to find ways to honour him to pray that his name would be magnified to trust him more to tell others about your hope in your pain to sing to him in your suffering to lift him up to ask who has God put in this hospital room with me that I can share the hope of Jesus with.

[28 : 00] God can free every Christian God can send an earthquake and free every persecuted Christian God can heal every sick Christian we know that but I think God allows and even ordains and plans to use our suffering so that in the world there will be a suffering witness to the great saviour so that in the world as we carry our cross for Jesus Christ we will bear witness to the saviour who died on a cross for us that's the purpose of carrying your cross so that people see your hope in the one who died for you on a cross friends that's the challenge can you sing while you suffer can you sing to Jesus while you suffer for the name of Christ it's not that we are sort of masochistic and we like pain we don't we hate it we tell Jesus that but even in the midst of pain we put our hope and trust that he lives and he reigns and we will conquer death make

Jesus Christ your lifeline in times of suffering decide today make it your discipline to sing as you suffer commit your cause your hardship to your saviour who cares for you I believe that if you do that in due time in his time he will do more than you ask or imagine just as he did in Europe through this sort of really kind of clunky start to the preaching of the gospel in Europe he did amazing things he did more than people expected or imagined he will do that through your witness to others in your suffering and he will do it in his time Lord Jesus we we love you Lord and we love the love that you reign over us that one day we will conquer death through you you will raise us from the dead you will sustain us in suffering as we bear the marks of suffering for your name so Lord

Jesus give us the power your great power to sing to you give us power to express our conviction and hope in you despite how we actually feel and despite the pain or trouble we are in for your name Lord Jesus be glorified through us and our witness to you Amen