

How can the Gospel Prevail?

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Date: 17 September 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, as you are, please grab your Bibles and turn back to Acts chapter 16. You are going to have to work a little bit this morning, but I've got a coloured picture for you as well.

I wonder if you've ever had to face something daunting in life, perhaps a bit like this little guy facing that sumo wrestler.

I tried to add the coloured circles just to make it decent for public consumption. But I wonder if we as Christians can sometimes feel like that little guy when it comes to facing the sumo wrestler of society.

Because we want to see Christ's name honoured by everyone, don't we? We want to see people saved and have that same hope that Judy and Doreen had or have.

And yet it can feel like a rather daunting or even impossible task. After all, when we do try and share the gospel, people don't seem to believe. And society as a whole is moving further away from God than to God, aren't they?

[1 : 22] Well, our society at least. And even there are more rules, workplace rules that forbid religious conversations. I've heard of a number of those. Or even state laws preventing prayer for certain things.

More than ever in our history here in Melbourne, our society is seeking to silence the gospel. And so how can we have confidence that it's worth seeking to share it?

How can we have confidence that the gospel will prevail, that the church will continue? Well, Luke begins to show us how in our passage today.

You see, Luke wrote Acts and he divides his material not just along geographic regions like, you know, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.

Those kind of things we saw last week. He also divides his material with summary sentences like these on the screen. So the word of God spread.

[2 : 25] So the church was strengthened and increased. You get the idea. We ended last week in chapter 16, verse 5 on a summary sentence at the bottom of the screen.

So the churches were strengthened in faith and grew daily in numbers. And so even though Paul had already started his second missionary journey last week, it seems like Luke has started a new section this week in verse 6.

And this section from today all the way up to the next summary sentence seems to show how the gospel prevails. Because that summary sentence at the end, Luke says, in this way, all the things we've seen from today onwards, the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

Now, in some sense, this is not new. It's what the other summary sentences said as well. But notice there is a new emphasis in yellow. The word of the Lord didn't just grow.

It grew mightily and it prevailed against opposition. And so this section that we're starting today up to that summary verse and even in some ways to the end of the book will show in a renewed way how the gospel is unstoppable.

[3 : 45] How the gospel will prevail. And so how will it? How can it prevail? Well, firstly, because the Lord Jesus still does doors.

That is, he still opens and closes doors. Point one in your outlines. And we'll start at verse 6 to 8 on the screen for those online or in your Bibles for those in the pew.

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia.

But the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to do so. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. Now, I realize it's a whole lot of names that don't mean a whole lot to us.

And so here's the colored picture on the back of the outlines is a map of Paul's missionary journey. Now, it's a very busy map. But Paul was a very busy apostle, right? The journey is in red.

[4 : 49] And I've tried to put some yellow dots on some relevant stops. I'm not going to go through it all now. But hopefully you can see if you look at the border, if you look at the middle of the page, roughly the middle, in the yellow is Asia.

And just on the border of the yellow and the green towards the bottom is the region or province of Phrygia. That's where they were preaching the gospel.

And it seems they wanted to go further into Asia, in towards the middle. But did you notice in verse 6 how the Holy Spirit kept them from doing so? We don't know why or how rather.

Perhaps, you know, customs rejected Paul's passport. Perhaps every time they tried, something happened. Or perhaps it was a vision like later. We just don't know how the Spirit stopped them.

And so verse 7, they traveled northwest along the red line up towards the top of the map. And they were going to go kind of take a left down towards Mysia. Sorry, rather, they were going to take a right into the purple Bithynia.

[5 : 56] But again, verse 7, the Spirit of Jesus stopped them from doing so. And so they just continued to travel along the border until they reached Troas.

Now, I imagine this would have been confusing for Paul. After all, didn't the Lord Jesus want him to preach the gospel? Wasn't he commissioned as an apostle?

Wasn't this his very job to preach the gospel? And yet Jesus directs the Spirit to stop him. In verse 7, the Spirit is called the Spirit of Jesus.

And so it's the Lord Jesus here who does doors. In this case, closes doors to prevent Paul from preaching in certain areas.

But have you heard the expression where God closes one door, he opens another? Well, it's true in this case. Because in verses 9 to 10, we read, After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

[7 : 14] Interestingly here, the man doesn't say what kind of help he needs. You know, it could be help with anything. But Paul knows that the help they really need is the gospel.

That helps them for eternity. In fact, Jesus has told him, and the Bible tells him, that's the kind of help they need the most. And so that's what he concludes.

In other words, while God may guide people through unusual means, and he does, I've heard people talk about having visions and hearing voices and things like that. God can do anything.

We must always confirm it with the word, which is what Paul does here. He knows what Jesus' word is, and so that's what he concludes. That's the kind of help he concludes they need.

It's a good principle for us. And so in verse 10, notice it says, We got ready. Luke joins the team now. We got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel.

[8 : 20] And so in verse 11, it continues. From Trias, we put out to sea and sailed straight through Sumathras, and the next day we went on to Neapolis.

From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony, and the leading city of that district of Macedonia, and we stayed there several days. On the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer, like a group of Jews, because it's the Sabbath. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira, named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God.

And the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. So verse 13, they go to a place they might have expected, a Jewish community on the Sabbath to be praying.

And Paul's practice, you remember, was to go to the Jews first, which is why he goes looking for this Jewish community. And he finds a small Jewish community of women, and starts sharing the gospel with them.

[9 : 26] And among them is Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, which is in the province of Lydia, but in the country of Asia.

This city was known for its purple dye, which apparently they got from shellfish. Did you know that? You get dye from shellfish? Anyway, that's what the books tell me. And there was also a Jewish community back in Thyatira.

So perhaps this is how she became both a successful businesswoman, a dealer in purple cloth, that was expensive cloth, and a worshiper of God. She heard about God from the Jewish community back home.

But notice at the end of verse 14, as she listened to the gospel message, the Lord Jesus opened her heart. Here is Jesus' door work again.

This time opening hearts so that people believe. And it's interesting that while Jesus closed the door to Paul preaching in Acts, sorry, in Asia rather, where is Thyatira?

[10 : 31] I'll put it on the screen with a big arrow so you can find it quickly. Thyatira is in the country of Asia, isn't it? And so the gospel still goes to at least one person from Asia.

Here is this coincidence, or rather, God incidence. This is Jesus opening and closing doors, leading Paul to where he wants them, both in terms of changing plans and opening hearts.

And Jesus still does doors today. I mean, how many of us have had our doors closed or our plans changed? And at the time we were confused about what God was doing.

But when we look back, sometimes we can see how there was a plan. Other times we'll have to wait to heaven to see the plan, won't we? And how many of us have had our hearts opened to believe in Jesus.

You see, we can have confidence the gospel will prevail in our society because the Lord Jesus still does doors. He still opens and closes doors to lead people where he wants.

[11 : 40] And he still opens hearts to enable people to believe. If you don't believe that Jesus still does doors, look around the room. Here are people whose hearts have been open to the message.

But also notice how Lydia responds in verse 15. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.

If you consider me a believer in the Lord, she said, come and stay at my house. And she persuaded us. Lydia is baptized along with her household.

It would seem that Lydia's household were there by the river listening in to Paul explain the gospel. And so they are baptized too. Belief and baptism go together. But that was done to her.

Notice her response. She offers them a place to stay. As one writer puts it, as ever is the case, genuine faith leads to good works.

[12 : 40] And here her good work is to support these missionaries, isn't it? And so for us who believe, are we responding like Lydia? You know, by doing what we can to support the work of missionaries.

I know many do financially, which is terrific. But it would be great to occasionally see a few more people come to our prayer nights or prayer afternoons, if you can make it, to pray for them, to support them prayerfully.

After all, prayer is not only one way to support them, but it's also a way to acknowledge that Jesus does doors, isn't it? I mean, if he's the one who changes plans and opens hearts, then should we not pray for him to open the hearts of our family and friends and others?

And should we not pray that he will direct the plans of our missionaries and our church even? The gospel will prevail because Jesus firstly does doors.

And secondly, because Jesus still saves people, point two. Now, I'm not going to have time because it's a big section to read through the passage that Peter read for us. So, just follow along on the screen as I unpack it as we go.

[13 : 53] So, in verse 16, you can see that they meet a slave girl who's actually been enslaved twice, first by this evil spirit, then second by these evil men who use her fortune telling for profit.

And she must have been pretty accurate since we're told she earned them a great deal of money. I mean, you don't keep going to someone and paying for a service when they're no good, do you?

So, she must have been pretty good at it. And so, you'd think that people would have listened to her when, in verse 17, she follows them around saying that they are servants of the Most High God telling you the way to be saved.

But in a world where there are many gods and many ways of salvation, it seems that this sparked less attention. Either way, in verse 18, when she kept it up for many days, Paul is annoyed or literally disturbed and so tells the spirit to come out of her.

But why is he so disturbed or annoyed? Isn't this free advertising? Wouldn't you be happy with it? Well, as we saw last week, Paul is always acting for the good of others' faith.

[15 : 04] faith. And so, it seems that he didn't want the gospel to be associated with evil spirits, even if they told the truth. Otherwise, people might think that Jesus is the prince of evil spirits, the Most High of evil spirits, like the Pharisees actually accused Jesus of being, if you remember.

And so, while Paul let it go for a while, the constant connection of this possessed girl to them meant that people would see a constant connection between evil and the Jesus proclaimed by them.

And so, Paul commands the evil spirit to leave, but notice in verse 18, he does so in the name of Jesus Christ. Here's Jesus who saves. And notice at the end of verse 18, at that moment, the spirit left her.

It's immediate. Jesus is powerful to say. And he still saves from evil today, doesn't he? After all, we too were once all enslaved by evil.

We all followed Satan's lies, like there is no God, it's not true. I mean, the world follows his lie without even realizing it, don't they? And we once too pleased our sinful nature, what we wanted to do, rather than seeking to please God, didn't we?

[16 : 21] But when we heard the message of Jesus and believed, we were saved from this evil. We now know the truth that leads to eternal life. And we now seek to please God, rather than our sinful nature, don't we?

I hope we do. I hope we do. Jesus has saved us from evil. And again, if you don't believe he still does, look around the room. Of course, we may wonder in the passage, why Paul didn't save this girl from evil straight away.

Well, remember, he was called to preach the gospel in Macedonia. That was his vision. And so perhaps, that's what he was focusing on in obedience to Jesus. Knowing that he'd lose the opportunity to preach the gospel if he cast this spirit out straight away, because that's what happens next, in verse 19.

So in verse 19, you can see that when the owners realise their hope of making money is gone, they seize Paul and cause an uproar. But they don't actually complain about the loss of making money. They actually say that he's causing social and political upheaval. Now, they say that Paul is throwing their city into uproar. That's social upheaval. They're saying that they're promoting laws that are unlawful.

[17 : 34] That's political upheaval. Of course, neither is true. What's more, isn't it good to free people from evil? But this is what our society does even today.

Christianity is good for our society, isn't it? It promotes love, faithfulness, caring for others, working hard. These are all good things for our society. But there are some who twist it and say that Christians cause social and political upheaval.

You know, we deny love and marriage equality. That's social upheaval. And you cannot be Christian and CEO of a football club because that causes political upheaval. And so we shouldn't be surprised when it happens in our day because it's been happening ever since Paul and Silas' day.

And yet the gospel will still prevail because Jesus still saves. Here from evil and next from death. And so in verses 22 to 24, Paul and Silas are stripped, beaten, flogged, and thrown into prison. The jailers commanded to guard them carefully, which is why in verse 24, he puts them in the innermost cell, the most secure cell, and puts their feet in stocks as well, just to be sure.

[18 : 43] And yet, how do Paul and Silas respond to such suffering? Well, verse 25, about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

Would you respond like that? I don't think, I don't know if I would actually. But here's a lesson in suffering for the gospel. They are praying, no doubt for release, among other things.

But at the same time, they were praising God, no doubt with joy. Perhaps they remembered what Jesus said. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven.

And they must have been pretty good singers because the other prisoners were listening in. Or more likely, singing is not standard prison practice, is it? And so maybe they were trying to work out who these guys are.

Either way, the jailer sleeps through the whole event until the earthquake wakes him up. Verse 26, suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prisons were shaken. At once, all the prison doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose.

[19 : 56] The jailer woke up. And when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, don't harm yourself.

We are all here. Here is the theme of Jesus doing doors again, isn't it? This time literally opening cell doors. But the focus here is on salvation.

Firstly, Paul saves the jailer from physical death. In those days, if you lost the prisoner, you didn't just lose your job, you lost your life. But Paul saves the jailer by staying put and somehow convincing all the other prisoners to stay put.

He says, we're all here. Perhaps they were scared of Paul or wanted to listen more. Either way, the jailer is saved from physical death and then from eternal death.

So verse 29, the jailer called for the lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, sirs, what must I do to be saved? Given the events of the earthquake, the jailer knew Paul's Lord was not just one of many gods of that day, but he was greater than all of them.

[21 : 10] And he knew, therefore, that he needed to be made right with Paul's God. He needed to be saved. And so he asks, what must I do to be saved?

And Paul responds, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household. Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in the house.

It is by believing in Jesus that we are saved. And no doubt the word that Paul spoke to the jailer in his household included being saved from eternal death in hell and given eternal life in heaven and then later the new creation.

And so at this point, you've just heard the word of the Lord, how Jesus has died for us to save us from eternal death and give us eternal life. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus, whether you're in the room or online?

For it's the only way to be saved from evil and death eternal. Certainly it seems the jailer and his whole household believe because in verse 33, at that hour of the night, they kind of show they are repentant, they wash their wounds, they kind of try and put things right and they are baptized as a sign of belief.

[22 : 30] But Luke's point here, I think, is that Jesus saves. These are servants of the Most High God showing you the way to be saved. Or what must I do to be saved?

Jesus saves from evil and death eternal and he saves all sorts of people. Here we have a white-collar businesswoman, Lydia, from Asia.

We have a poor slave girl and a blue-collar jailer from Macedonia. I mean, those three people, you couldn't get more different, could you? And yet Jesus saves them all.

Jesus still saves all sorts. And again, if you don't believe it, look around the room. We have people from a multitude of countries and walks of life in this room right now.

You see, we can have confidence the gospel will prevail because the Lord Jesus still saves people. All sorts from evil and death eternal.

[23 : 27] And so the gospel is still worth proclaiming to our kids, grandkids, our friends, our family, as we have opportunity.

Sometimes it might be as simple as offering to pray for someone who's in need or seeking to love them, both of which might provoke a conversation. Or sometimes our situation might prevent us, but whatever our situation, we're not to lose confidence in the gospel in the face of our sumo society because the Lord Jesus still saves people.

And for us who are saved, then look at how the jailer responds in verse 34. In verse 34, I'll have to look in the Bible. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them.

He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God, he and his whole household. He's filled with joy.

Do we respond with joy? I know that joy can sometimes wear off when we've been Christian for a number of years, can't it? Which is why it's worth remembering that we can still be... Sorry, it's worth remembering what we've been saved from.

[24 : 42] Evil and death eternal. Our chains have been loosed, if you like. Spiritual chains have been loosed. We've been set free, as we'll sing in our last hymn. It's worth remembering what it costs Christ to save us, his awe, so that we might continue to be joyful and thankful.

In fact, being joyful can also provoke conversation. One of our wardens at St. John's, her non-Christian friend asked her why she was always content and, you know, relatively positive when our world is, you know, going down the gurgler, it seems.

You know, wars and disease and so on. And so this warden at St. John's was able to say, well, it's because of Jesus. He's saved me and given me hope in this life. Let me finish with a story, a true story, which kind of captures some of the things we've seen in our passage today.

It's of a man called David who he, along with his wife and son, have joined our 1030 congregation just recently. David grew up in China and he planned to stay there.

But when he went to New Zealand for a holiday, he saw it was a really nice country and so they decided to change their plans and stay in New Zealand and he got a job and worked there.

[26 : 00] Over time, he had this feeling that drove him to look at different religions, to search for the real God. He'd been told the real God was Buddha, but that never sat right with him.

And in fact, he told me just recently that at one point he heard a voice that said, Jesus is God, come to Jesus. And so after lockdown in New Zealand, he found a Christian Bible study group and that voice was confirmed by the word, the Bible.

And he said, three months later, he believed in Jesus and was baptised. And afterwards, he felt great joy in his heart.

I mean, does that not capture what we've seen of Jesus who opens and closes doors, who directs him to New Zealand of all places? No, nothing against New Zealanders. And then opens his heart to believe the message and then he's filled with joy.

Here is a recent example of how the Lord Jesus still does doors and still saves people. And so even if we sometimes feel like that little guy against the sumo of society, we can still be confident that the gospel will prevail.

[27 : 17] And so as we're able, it's worth praying, proclaiming, and supporting with joy. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this reminder that the gospel will prevail because the Lord Jesus still does doors, still directs the gospel and still opens people's hearts.

And Father, we thank you that the Lord Jesus still saves all sorts. And so help us, we pray, as we are able to be prayerful, to take opportunities to share and to support with joy. Help us in this, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.