

Acts 16:11-40

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Date: 04 June 2023

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[0 : 00] It is Trinity Sunday, and I have the privilege of living somewhat near a church that has incredible billboard quotes. So as I was coming in this morning on the bus, I saw the Holy Trinity, the only love triangle that works.

Like, the courage is somewhat admirable. Well, friends, this is the day that the Lord has made, and let us rejoice and be glad in it. Jesus is alive. He is ascended. He sits on the throne, and he is at work in the world.

And the Father is about the business in the world of putting all things under the feet of this risen and ascended Lord. And the Spirit is commissioning and empowering and moving God's people out into the world to gather all people to believe in this risen and ascended Lord.

So what we see unfolding in Acts and in our own lives is the whole Trinity at work to seek and save the lost. It is Trinity Sunday.

Now, I must admit to you that I have spent a vast majority of this week wishing I were preaching a different passage. One that more directly lends itself, just lets me kind of, lets my theological juices just soar in talking about the life of the Holy Trinity.

[1 : 21] But I, over time, slowly but surely, have come to think that Acts 16 is quite fitting for the occasion. Because Acts 16 invites us to ask a really simple yet searching question.

What sort of God inspires praises from prison? What sort of God inspires praises from prison? In his book, *The Sun Does Not Shine, How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row*, a man named Anthony Hinton tells a story of how he spent 30 years on death row for a crime that he did not commit.

He remarks how his anger over the injustice of his conviction was so deep that he did not speak for the first three years he was in prison. And his silence was only broken when he could not handle the weeping of another inmate any longer, and he had to find some words to console him, and he found himself saying, after three years of silence, God may sit high, but he looks low.

He's looking down into the pit. My brother, God may sit high, but he looks low. What sort of God inspires praises from prison?

Here in Acts 16, we're invited to contemplate the triune God, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, not from the serenity of the heavenlies, but from the stench of the jail cell. And isn't that where we're often challenged to pray and praise God?

[2 : 55] Not in the heavens, but in moments in our lives that feel like hell? A child goes off the rails. An old addiction rears its ugly head.

A judge judges unjustly. A loved one is abused horribly. A relationship breaks down yet again. And aren't those the places where our belief in the Holy Trinity, his glory and his majesty and his goodness, is really tested.

It's an important question, both because of our lived experience, but also because of where the gospel of God is moving in the world. Throughout the book of Acts, we discover that the gospel has a knack for going where humanity is most desperate.

So let me remind you that Acts chapter 16 is in the middle of Paul's second missionary journey, which began all the way back in chapter 15, verse 36. So far in Acts, the gospel has generally been moving through small, somewhat rural towns.

But now, the remainder of Acts, we find that it's heading for the major urban centers of the Greco-Roman world. So here it's Philippi, and then it's Thessalonica, and then it's Athens, and then it's Corinth, and eventually Paul's going all the way to Rome.

[4 : 09] So the gospel is going to the Vancouver's and the Toronto's of the ancient world. The New York's and the Los Angeles's, the Shanghai's and the Beijing's, and cities tend to be those places that magnify and highlight and bring out both the best and the worst in human life.

So how will the gospel fare as it goes into these urban centers? These places of culture and diversity and money. These places of power and politics and pluralism.

I think as we discover Paul and Silas's mission to Philippi, we discover four aspects of the gospel that are good news for the cities of our world. And the first is this, simply that the gospel is for all people.

The gospel is for all people. Did you notice in verses 13 to 15, God opens the heart of a Jewish woman who is a wealthy merchant, and her whole household is baptized. And then in verses 16 to 18, Paul frees a slave girl from an evil spirit in the name of Jesus.

And then in verses 25 to 34, a Roman jailer and his family come to believe in the Lord Jesus, and they are saved and they are baptized. So in just 30 short verses, we have upper class with Lydia, we have lower class with a slave girl, and we have middle class with this Roman jailer.

[5 : 34] In this highly stratified ancient world, your identity tended to be fully bound up with your position and your role in society. This is a little bit different than how our modern world tends to work, where our identity tends to be defined by our internal desires.

In the ancient world, your identity was defined by your position and your role in society in relation to others, how you rank. And so we see here, the gospel cuts across this society of social stratification, and the love and the mercy and the forgiveness of Jesus Christ comes and lays claim on all people and all aspects and sectors of society equally.

So we have male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, oppressed and oppressor, individuals and households, adults and children.

I mean, what other thing makes inmates and the jailer who puts them in jail pay attention simultaneously? This is good, says Paul in another letter, and it is pleasing in the sight of God, our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

And this little truth, this gospel reality, is the note that our passage ends on if you look at verse 40. Once Paul and Silas are released from prison, they immediately go to visit Lydia, this new convert, whose home has quickly become the gathering place for the new converts in Philippi.

[7 : 08] And when they saw the languages, the brothers, the brothers and the sisters, they encouraged them. Notice how Paul, in summarizing these different people who have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, at the very end, he uses family language.

They now form one family in Jesus Christ. The gospel is for all people. And the second thing that we see is that the gospel for all people is an unsettling or a disruptive force in a fallen world.

This passage is not neat and tidy. The unexpected is around every single corner. And I think there's a point here. It's that when the gospel actually comes into a place, it exposes our sin and it exceeds our expectations.

It sets the captives free on the one hand and it challenges the status quo on the other hand. Especially in this passage, when it's a society built on the backs of spiritual captives, the gospel is going to unsettle.

And we see this economically and spiritually and even politically. From the greedy owners who profit off the oppression of a slave girl, this gospel creates rage because they are losing profit.

[8 : 27] This is a little side note, but do you notice there's a couple places in Acts where persecution doesn't occur against the church until the society is feeling the economic impact of the gospel?

That happens here in Philippi and then in chapter 19, it's going to happen in Ephesus as well. As the gospel takes down the idolatry that fuels people's profits and gains. And so you see, economically, the gospel is unsettling, but it's also unsettling spiritually.

This desperate jailer who despairs of his own life, the gospel is evoking both reverence and joy. How might I be saved? And then politically, notice how Paul and Silas, these prisoners who have been wrongly convicted, they don't just say, let us get out of jail free as quickly as we possibly can.

The gospel evokes from there a hunger for righteousness that causes them to be willing to confront the authorities for the sake of the church in Philippi. And so, wasn't it Jesus himself who said, blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God?

But do you remember what Jesus says directly afterwards? He says, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The truth that Jesus, I think, was getting at there by putting those two statements side by side is the truth that is being lived and illustrated in Acts chapter 16.

[9 : 54] The peacemakers will also be the persecuted. Because those who come to bring the gospel of peace to the world, to proclaim the prince of peace to the world, will often be seen as disrupting the status quo, and they will suffer for it.

Did you notice in verse 20 the tactic of those who brought charges against Paul and Silas? They are depicted as those who disturb the peace of the city.

These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city, verse 20. And then verse 21, they are those who thwart law and order. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.

When the kingdom of God comes into contact with the kingdoms of the world, it creates friction and unsettling pressure. And this means two things for us.

It means when the gospel goes forward, it's not always going to be smooth sailing, friends. Opposition will come in many forms. You know this.

[11 : 04] Many of you have lived this far more decades than I've been alive. Opposition can often make us feel tense. It can even make us feel sheepish because the world around us feels chaotic and unpredictable and potentially painful.

But we're told that Paul and Silas, they went into the church not expecting any of this. They went to the church in Philippi to encourage them, and they started their evangelistic mission on the Sabbath day at a prayer meeting near a river.

What seemed safer than that? They did not see Roman jail coming. Yet God was faithful to his promise to them, not that they wouldn't suffer, but that he would pour out his spirit upon them and that they would be his witnesses in the world anywhere that they found themselves.

So when the gospel goes forward, it's not going to be smooth sailing. And the second thing this means for us is that when it seems that the gospel has come to a dead end, we must trust that it is not so.

When it seems that the gospel has come to a dead end, we must trust that it is not so. And I think this is increasingly important for us in the Western world, where it feels like being Christians and belief in the gospel is becoming more and more of a minority thing.

[12 : 22] It's easy for us to just grow disheartened with that reality. But what we discover here is that the Lord will shake the prisons in which the world seeks to shackle the power of the gospel.

That the Lord who set the earth on its foundations will shake the foundations of our man-made and self-made prisons. And that in the end, the gospel will be victorious over our best efforts to limit and contain and hide and reject it.

So the gospel is for all people, but the gospel is also an unsettling force in a fallen world. Are you all with me? Is everybody all right? Okay.

Let's take a deep breath. Got two more to go. And the most important point, by the way, is number four. So just as we're going there, this is not an order of importance.

Number three, the gospel sets people free for hospitality. Did you notice how Luke highlights not only how Lydia and the jailer are converted by the gospel, but also what their response to the gospel is?

[13 : 35] And this happens throughout Luke because Luke's trying to show us a way of life that the gospel leads us into as well. In both conversions, the fruit of faith in the Lord Jesus is hospitality in some form.

So in Lydia, for example, when God opens her heart, she opens her home directly afterwards. Verses 14 and 15. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

And after she was baptized and her household as well, she urged us saying, if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay. And she prevailed upon us.

So in Lydia, we see that insistent hospitality is depicted as fruit of the gospel of grace. You know those people that are insistent in the way they want to serve you. Her wealth now becomes a gospel asset and is used to support the church and its mission.

And then in the jailer, when he believes the gospel, what is the thing he does? He washes the wounds of those he helped oppress. He invites them into his home and then he has a meal with him.

[14 : 44] So in verses 34 and 35, when he brought them up into his house and set food before them, then he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

There was this sense of joyful immediacy in his acts of service. It's like the second he knew that Jesus Christ was Lord, he was washing the wounds of those who confessed him as Lord as well.

And he was setting food before them. So what we're discovering throughout the gospel of Acts is that there is a way of life that emerges from belief in the word of life. There is a way of relating to others that emerges from belief in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a way of stewarding our money and our possessions and our home and our food that emerges from receiving the riches of God's grace in our lives. And this is a little side note, little bonus side note.

We see here that the spirit of the early Christianity is distinctively different than both the spirit of Marxism and capitalism. Marxism says, no personal possessions, only state ownership.

[15 : 56] And capitalism says, yes, personal possessions, but for building personal capital. Capital. And the spirit of early Christianity, which we see here and throughout Acts, acknowledges personal possessions, but it places the emphasis on how I steward those possessions, voluntarily, sacrificially, and joyfully for the good of others.

Especially the church. And so we discover that the gospel is for all people. It's an unsettling force in a fallen world, and it sets people free for hospitality.

But the foundation of all those things is the fourth one. It's that the gospel is faith alone in Christ alone. And this we discover in the dungeon of despair.

The jailer. When he comes to the end of himself. What we might call having suicidal ideation. In verse 31. The light of the gospel shines on him.

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved. You and your household. Notice how Luke reminds us twice that this happened in the middle of the night.

[17:10] So as the jailer calls for lights in verse 29, it mirrors his call for salvation in verse 30. What must I do to be saved? So that Luke is dramatically and visually depicting the spiritual reality of what is happening here.

Light is shining in the darkness. And the darkness of the jailer's shame and despair cannot overcome it. When we come to the end of ourselves, it's here that we discover the pure gospel of God.

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved. It's faith alone in Christ alone, nothing more and nothing less. And as I said, it's this fourth one that undergirds the previous three.

Why is the gospel for all people? It's because it's not based on race or ethnicity or nationality. It's because it's not based on education or intellectual capacity.

It's because it's not based on the power of public opinion or government politics. It's because it's not based on our CV or bank accounts. It is based on faith alone and Christ alone.

[18:19] And that's why the gospel is for all people because all people, regardless of who they are or where they come from, can believe in the Lord Jesus. It's also why the gospel unsettles and disrupts our fallen world because Christ will not allow us to put our trust in anything that's not going to last forever.

He is the only unshakable reality in life, the same yesterday, today, and forever. everything else fades and rusts and decays. If your life is built on the affirmation and acceptance of others, it's not going to last.

If your life is built on comfort and peace in your present circumstances, it's just not going to last. And if your life is built on contentment, satisfaction, and your family, and your work, and your income, that's not going to last either.

See, the gospel disrupts our lives because it exposes our illusions about what lasts, what has ultimate meaning and significance.

And it says to us, the gospel is faith alone in Christ alone. That is the only solid ground to stand on. And third and finally, this is why the gospel sets us free for radical hospitality.

[19:40] Because our identity is not wrapped up in what we own or what we purchase or what we experience or what we earn or what we acquire. Because our trust is in Jesus Christ alone, then we can hold these temporary things of our lives somewhat loosely.

Our hearts not too grieved to give them away or share them freely. We're happy to share. We love to give. We long for others to receive. We want others to be welcomed.

and our lives in this way start to reflect to others the generosity that God has so richly poured out on us. A pastor once said, God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

And I would want to add to that, we are most generous toward others when we are most satisfied in him. The gospel is faith alone in Christ alone.

which returns us to our original question, what sort of God inspires praises from prison? I would say it's not just the sort of God who sits high and looks low, i.e. pities the desperate, but it's the sort of God who comes down to seek and save the desperate when they have nothing to save themselves through faith alone in Christ alone.

[21 : 02] And my dear brothers and sisters, I'm just assuming there are some of you who came here this morning quite desperate. We all are. Spiritually, morally, relationally.

Here we see a literal prison, but there are many times where we walk into church and we just feel trapped in a prison that we cannot escape. Whether it's a prison of our own making or of somebody else's making.

And I'm here to tell you this morning that Christ has come to save you. He has come to loosen the bonds of oppression, to set the captives free from their sin, and to declare the year of the Lord's favor for you.

If God can make a way of salvation run through the prison cells of Philippi, I'm pretty sure he can make a way of salvation run through your life as well.

believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. You and your household. And as we experience that saving work in our lives, maybe we too will open our lips and our mouths will declare his praise.

[22 : 16] I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.