Acts 16:11-40

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Preacher: Rev. Jordan Senner

[0:00] Father, may the words of my mouth and the many meditations of our hearts be pleasing and We're praying that the seeds of the gospel find good soil and very much fruit for all who are there, and we're also praying that the Holy Spirit would strengthen the bonds of fellowship between our brothers and sisters there.

So we miss them, but we pray for them as well. If you'd please open up to Acts chapter 16, that's page 9 to 5. I want to begin by reading verse 25 of Acts chapter 16.
About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. So the question I want to ask this evening is, what sort of God inspires praises from prison?
I read a book a number of years ago called The Sun Does Not Shine, How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row. It's written by a man named Anthony Ray Hinton, and he tells a story of how he spent 30 years on death row for a crime that he did not commit.
And he was so angry over being unjustly accused of this crime that he did not speak for the first three years he was in prison. And he talks about the moment in his book when he finally broke silence and spoke for the first time in three years.
[1:53] It was precipitated by the fact that the person in the cell next to him had just found out that his mother had died, and that he would never see his mother again in this life. And he was weeping in the cell next to him.

And this inmate, who hadn't spoken for three years, felt compelled to say something to try to console his brother. And so he found himself saying words to his brother, who was weeping in the other cell, saying words that he had had a hard time himself believing for the last three years.
He said to him, God may sit high, but he looks low. He's looking down in our pit. He's sitting high, but he is looking low.
And so the question I want to ask is, what sort of God inspires praises from prison? And here in Acts chapter 16, we are invited to join Paul and Silas in praising God, not from the nice, cool, and calm, and collected serenities of heaven, but from the stench of a jail cell.
And isn't that often where we're challenged to pray and praise God? Not in the heavens, but in the so-called hells of life. When a child goes off the rails and we have no clue what to do about it.
[3:08] When an addiction rears its ugly head again and we feel absolutely powerless in the face of it. When a judge judges unjustly and there's nothing we can do about it.

When a loved one suffers abuse or a relationship breaks down. Isn't that where belief in God is really tested? And it's an important question for us to ask, both because of our lived experience in this life, but also because of where the gospel of God is moving in the world.
We discover in the book of Acts that the gospel has a knack for going where humanity is most desperate. Where humanity is most in need of help.
Let me remind you, which Susan showed the kids quite beautifully, that in Acts chapter 16, we're in the middle of Paul's second missionary journey. And the gospel has been moving so far through Paul's missionary journeys in somewhat small, rural towns.
And now, at this point in Acts, the gospel is heading for the major urban centers of the ancient world. And so it's moving from small to big. Philippi and Thessalonica and Athens and Corinth and eventually Rome.
[4:19] That's where Paul's heading. If we were to put it in modern terms, it's Paul's going to the Vancouver's and Toronto's and Los Angeles's and New York's and Beijing's and Shanghai's of the world. He's going to the major urban epicenters.

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Now, if any of you have lived in a city for any amount of time, and I know you have because you're right here, cities are glorious and gritty places, aren't they? I mean, cities have this tendency to magnify what is best and worst in our humanity.
Like, all the beauty and the brutality, the culture and the chaos, the money and the inequality, the incredible creativity and the deep despair. Like, the city is a really exciting, yet a very tough place to be a Christian.
And one of the questions that Luke wants us to explore as we come upon the second missionary journey of Paul is, how will the gospel do in the greatest cities of the world? And I want us to hit this question from two angles.
Is when the gospel goes into the greatest cities of the world, what does the gospel do? What the gospel does, number one. And number two, what the gospel is.
[5:33] And I want to say at the very end how I think what the gospel is, is why the gospel is so powerful to do things in the city. So let's begin with what the gospel does when it hits the major cities of the world.

And I'm being a little cheeky here because point one actually has three points in it. Number one, the gospel, when it hits the city, it reaches people.
And it reaches into every nook and cranny of the city, and it reaches all types of people in the city. Luke gives us three conversion stories in Philippi that give us little glimpses of what this looks like.
In verses 13 to 15, God opens the heart of a wealthy businesswoman. She trades in purple clothing. In other words, she sells clothing that is for the wealthy and the famous.
If she lived downtown, she would work for Gucci and Louis Vuitton. She's a top sales exec rep. She is a woman of status. She is a woman of means.
[6:34] And we are told that God opens her heart to hear what Paul says about Jesus, and she is baptized. She becomes a Christian. The second little conversion story comes in verses 16 to 18, where Paul frees a slave girl from an evil spirit in the name of Jesus Christ.

And the slave girl, it's told, she has a spirit of divination. But if you actually look at the original language, it says she has the spirit of a python. And so a python in the ancient world, this is referring to Greek mythology.
It was thought that there was a snake, a python, that guarded the oracle of Delphi, of Delphi, in the ancient world, which was at the Temple of Paulos, so a really important place.
And this particular oracle was where people thought the gods made their prophetic voice most clear on earth. It's where people would go to seek advice and prophecy about what's going to happen in my life.
What decision should I make? What, should I go to war or not? Should I marry this person or not? All these sorts of things. They would go to this oracle expecting the gods to speak with prophetic clarity.
[7:44] And as the story goes on, at one point, Apollos didn't quite like that the snake had some sort of guardianship of this oracle. And so Apollos slays the snake and takes over the power of prophecy.

And so what you have here, with Paul freeing the slave girl in the name of Jesus, he's literally freeing her not just from some random evil spirit, but from this whole way of viewing the world that dominated the Greco-Roman world.
Where you were dependent on different gods in different places for their favor towards you. Where they could turn on you at any given moment. And where you needed to go to oracles in order to discover what was going to happen in your life.
You didn't have to fear any of that. You didn't have to do any of that anymore because Jesus was here. That's what we're discovering as the slave girl becomes free in Jesus' name. And the third little conversion story that we see is in verses 25 to 34.
A Roman jailer and his family believe in the Lord Jesus and they are saved. Now here's the point. Luke is saying that no one in Philippi is beyond the reach of the gospel.
[8:55] When the gospel comes to the ancient cities of the, to the great cities of the world, it will reach everybody. A wealthy merchant, a slave girl, a Roman jailer. In other words, upper class, lower class, and middle class.

Male and female, slave and free. The gospel will go to those who are, who are dealing with the beauty of purple clothes. And it will go to those who are in the dank, dingy darkness of a prison.

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In other words, the gospel will reach all people. And this was really significant in the ancient world because it was a highly stratified social system.
So you know how, in modern days, how do we think about what defines our identity in modern days? It's, it's, it's how I feel in my gut, right? It's the sense of, um, my internal desires and thoughts are what define who I am.
Now those can shift any given day. So it's hard to, to, to get a clear grasp on who I am. But it's, it's the internal parts of me that, that define who I am. And if I'm truly going to be myself, then I need to listen to the internal voice and do whatever it says.
[10:03] And express myself in that way. Now in the ancient world, human identity was thought of in a completely different way. You, um, your identity was defined by your position in society.

Were you born in the lower class, in the middle class, in the upper class? Your identity was defined by the role that you had in that society. And your identity was defined by who you knew and how much power the people you knew had.
In other words, you were defined by your place in society, not by your internal desires. And so hearing this gospel is for everybody would have undercut the whole social stratification of the ancient world.
And would have said that God's love and mercy and forgiveness in Jesus Christ has come to reach all people. Which is why Paul says astonishingly to his dear friend Timothy, this is good 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 it's part of the reason why verse 40 is so powerful. It's a little reminder of this gospel reality. Once Paul and Silas are released from prison, they, they go immediately to visit Lydia.
[11:21] Remember the first convert. And her home has quickly become a gathering place for all the other new converts in Philippi. And, and it says that when they saw the brothers, or it could be translated when they saw the brothers and sisters, they encouraged them.

In other words, Luke is using family language here to describe all the people who are being converted in Philippi. They are now part of one family in Christ Jesus. The gospel reaches all people.
But the second thing the gospel does when it comes to the city is that it disrupts. It not only reaches, but it disrupts the city.
Because the gospel has this wonderful way of exceeding our greatest expectations and exposing our deepest sins. The gospel has a wonderful way of setting the captives free and of challenging the status quo.
And especially in societies that are built on the backs of spiritual captives, the gospel will unsettle. I think of the multi-billion dollar pornography industry, just for example.
[12:25] The more the gospel grabs a hold of people's hearts and frees them from that addiction, the more other people are going to lose money. And it's going to unsettle them. And we see this unsettling happening.

For the greedy owners who are profiting off the oppression of the slave girl, the gospel evokes rage. This is the first time in Acts where we get anyone who is non-Jewish opposing the work of the church and the gospel.
And did you notice, it doesn't come until the people of Philippi feel the economic impact of the gospel in their city. This is something that we're going to see in Ephesians, in Ephesus as well, in Acts 19.
Because sometimes sin and evil is very lucrative. But you cannot love God and money, says Jesus. And if you love money, you will hate God.
And so one of the things that the gospel does when it comes into the city is it shakes up all those things that replace God for us. And as it frees people, it unsettles the economies of the cities.
[13:33] You also see the desperate jailer who despairs of his own life. The gospel unsettles his despair and brings him to a place of reverence and rejoicing.

And you also see the prisoners who are wrongly convicted. The gospel unsettles the very foundations of the prison. And he frees them out. So one of the things that, and did you notice the tactic of those who brought charges against Silas and Paul?
In verse 20, they're depicted, Paul and Silas are depicted as those who will disturb the peace of the city. We need to lock these people up because they are disturbing the peace of the city.

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And in verse 21, they're depicted as those who are against the law and order of the city. In other words, they're disrupting the status quo.
And so what we see is when the gospel comes into a major city, it creates friction because it puts pressure on those aspects of the city's life that are out of sync with the kingdom of God.
[14:38] And I think this means two things for us. Let me pause there actually for a moment. Are you following me on this? Are we okay? Okay? All right. That was really half-masked, friends.

That was really half-masked. I know it's warm. I'm wearing a wool sweater. It's okay. We're good to go. But we're talking about what the gospel does when it comes to the city.
And I think that's something that we should all be interested in. Because we all live in a city. And we all believe that the city needs good news, don't we? And so we're wanting to know what happens when the good news of Jesus in particular comes to the city.
And we're discovering that it reaches all types of people in the city. There's no one beyond the reach of it. And that's really good news. And the other thing we're discovering is that it disrupts those aspects of the city that are out of sync with the kingdom of God.
And when we're in the city, we know things are out of sync. Every day we walk by somebody who doesn't have a house. Every day we interact with somebody who may be doing deceitful deals behind closed doors.
[15:43] Every day we recognize that this world is not the way it's supposed to be. Amidst all the beauty of the city, there is profound brokenness and injustice. And it's really good news that the gospel comes and unsettles those things.

And when the gospel does that, it means two things for us. It means that when the gospel goes forward, it's not always going to be smooth sailing for us. It means there's going to be opposition. And opposition can come in many forms and it will come in many forms. And interestingly, I don't think Paul and Silas themselves saw it coming when they went to Philippi to encourage the church. I mean, think about their first, the first conversion with Lydia. It starts on the Sabbath at a prayer meeting by the river. How much more peaceful and idyllic does it get than that?
And yet, they find themselves in a Roman jail. And God, it doesn't mean that God wasn't faithful to his promise. Because God never told them that they wouldn't suffer or they wouldn't face opposition.
[16:49] What God told them is that the power of the Holy Spirit would come upon them so that wherever they found themselves, even if it was in a Roman jail, they would be able to be witnesses to Jesus in that place.

And so when the gospel goes forward, it's not going to be smooth sailing. It will be met with opposition. And Luke wants us to know that. But the other thing that we need to know about this is that when it seems that the gospel has come to a dead end, we must trust that it is not so.
In other words, the Lord will shake the prisons in which the world seeks to shackle the good news of Jesus. And in the end, the gospel is going to be victorious over the world's best efforts to limit and contain and hide and reject Jesus.
So let me recap where we've been so far. The gospel reaches all people in the city. And the gospel is an unsettling, disturbing force in a fallen city.
And thirdly, the gospel sets people free in the city. Sets people free. Did you notice how Luke highlights not only that Lydia and the jailers are converted by the gospel, but he highlights that Lydia and the jailer also respond to the gospel in a very particular way, through baptism and hospitality.
[18:11] In both conversions, the fruit of faith in the Lord Jesus is baptism and then some form of hospitality. It's amazing. When you look at Lydia, verses 14 and 15, when God opens her heart, what does she do?

She opens her home. Verse 15, after she was baptized and her households 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. In other words, she didn't take no for an answer. In the Bible, In the Bible, her wealth now becomes a gospel asset, used to support the church, used to support the mission of Jesus.
And we see a similar thing with the jailer as well. When he believes in the gospel, what does he do? He washes the wounds that he helped inflict. And then he opens his home and he feeds the bodies that he helped imprison.

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Look at verse 34 with me. Then he brought them up to his house and set food before him. And he rejoiced, along with his entire household, that he had believed in God.
[19:33] I just love that picture of a rough jailer who beats people and abuses people, all of a sudden tenderly washing wounds and setting food before people.

There's this sense of joyful immediacy in him. And this isn't something that can wait for Paul and Silas to be released from prison. They are brothers and sisters in the Lord now. And so this is the least that you would do for family to offer such hospitality.
And so what we're discovering throughout the book of Acts is that there is a way of life that emerges from believing in the word of life. We're discovering that there is a way of relating to one another that emerges from believing in the Lord Jesus.
And there's a way of stewarding money and possessions and homes and food that emerges from receiving the riches of God's grace. So the gospel of Jesus is good news for the city because it reaches all people.
And it disrupts at every level in the city. And it doesn't disrupt just in order to disrupt, but in order to draw us into the family of God, which is why the gospel frees us up, not only for baptism, but for hospitality to one another.
[20:47] So that's what the gospel does when it comes into the city. But the question that I'm left with is we still haven't answered the question, what is the gospel? If the gospel does all those things, then what is the gospel that is so powerful to do all that when it comes to the major cities?

And this is what we discover when we are in the depths of the jail cell with the jailer. He is quite literally about to take his life, what I think today we would call suicidal ideation, or what Kierkegaard once called sickness unto death, that deep, cavernous, existential despair that leads us to consider the possibility of taking our own life.
And in the dungeon of his despair, the light of the gospel shines on the jailer. Paul says to him, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. And notice how Luke twice reminds us that all of this happened in the middle of the night in verse 25 and 33.
And so the jailer has to call for lights in verse 29. But that mirrors his call for salvation in verse 30. What must I do to be saved? In other words, I think Luke is dramatically depicting the spiritual reality of what is happening for the jailer here.
The light is shining in the darkness, and the darkness of shame and despair is not overcoming it. I mean, this jailer, everything in his life has quite literally been shaken by an earthquake from God.
[22:20] There's nothing left to lean on. He has hit rock bottom and finally come to the end of himself. And yet in the depths of his despair, God reaches out to him in love, throws him a lifesaver, and offers to pick him out of the quicksand of his life and set his feet on the solid rock of Christ.

Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. It's faith alone in Christ alone, nothing more, nothing less. It's actually quite simple. And I think the key point that I want you to see is it's because the gospel is faith alone in Christ alone that the gospel does everything else that we just talked about in the cities that is wonderfully powerful and good news.
It's because the gospel is faith alone in Christ alone that the gospel reaches all people. It's not based on race or ethnicity or nationality.
The gospel does not take into consideration education or intellectual capacity. The gospel cannot be swayed by the power of public opinion or government officials.
And the gospel does not care about our resumes or our CVs or our bank accounts. It cares where each of us and every one of us places our trust.
[23:41] Is it in Christ alone, through faith alone? And this is also why the gospel unsettles and disrupts our world, because Christ will not allow us to put our trust in anything that will not last forever.

He alone is the only unshakable reality of our lives, the same yesterday, today, and forever, and everything else in life fades and rusts and decays if it's not built on the Lord Jesus.
So if you build your life on the affirmation and acceptance of others, it's not going to last in the end.
And if you build your life on the comfort and peace that you can have just in your circumstances, it's not going to last in the end because those are going to change.
And if you build your life on the contentment that work or money can bring you, it's not going to last in the end. Because the gospel disrupts our lives in part because it exposes our illusions about what lasts.

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And it exposes our delusions about what has ultimate meaning. And it brings us back to the place of realizing it's faith alone in Christ alone that can sustain us.
[24:56] And this is also why the gospel frees us from radical hospitality. Because our identity is not in what we own or what we purchase or what we earn or what we acquire anymore.

Because our trust is in Christ alone, the passing things of this world are no longer what our hearts are attached to. So we're glad when we can give the things that the Lord has given us for the sake of others, for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.
We're happy when we get to share. We love to give and we long for others to receive and we want to welcome others into our lives because our lives are starting to reflect the generosity that God has shown us.
A pastor once said, God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. And I think I would like to add, we are most generous toward one another when we are most satisfied in him.
So, I want to return to our original question and wrap things up. What sort of God inspires praises from prison?
[26:06] Well, I would say not just the sort of God who sits high and looks low, in other words, pities the desperate, but the sort of God who reaches down to the desperate and saves them.

The sort of God who spares no effort to find his way to those who are in the prisons of despair and darkness. The sort of God who reaches out to the upper class and the middle class and the lower class and everything else in between and offers them the gift of eternal life in the Lord Jesus Christ.
And this truly is good news for the greatest cities of the world. See, we live in a pretty great city, I think, in Vancouver.
Some of you are not so convinced on it yet. That's okay. If you haven't noticed, it gets beautiful from time to time. But it's a multicultural city that connects Asia to North America in a lot of ways.
And that's how Philippi was in the ancient world. Philippi was on a major trade route and it connected Asia to Europe. Lots of people came and go there. We live in a city that's fabulously wealthy and proud to be Canadian most of the time.
[27:18] Yet there are many slaveries that still lurk on our city streets. Some of them not so hidden and others very hidden. And there are many busy worker bees doing their jobs on a day-to-day basis, building these towers that remind me of the Tower of Babel.

Massive skyscrapers and seek to do so many things to protect our city. And yet I wonder sometimes if you took away the significance of that work, how much meaning would be left in their lives.
See, I think the gospel of Jesus is a great gift to our city because it saves us from the wrath of God and it saves us from our own sin and silliness. And when God does that, he gives great focus to our money.
He gives great freedom from spiritual oppression. He gives great meaning to our lives and most of all, he gives us himself. Wherever the Lord has placed you in the city, whether it's with the wealthy or with the oppressed or with the blue-collar workers or with the prisoners, wherever the Lord has placed you in the city, you can be assured of these two things.
That the God we worship is worthy of all our praise. and that the God we worship is mighty to save. He reaches into the city.
[28:36] He will disturb everything in the city that's not aligned with his purposes for us. And he will free us from spiritual captivity so that we can experience what it's like to have the joy of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So brothers and sisters, this is good news that the Lord has given us today. And as you go out into Vancouver this week, may he make you happy in him and happy to be bearers of good news.
Amen.

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