

## *A New Frontier, Part 2*

Acts 16:16-40

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We come again to Acts chapter sixteen. I couldn't finish last week, so I'm going to finish it this week. And this is "A New Frontier Part II" as we look at this new frontier that Paul is going into. Luke is with him. Timothy and Silas are with them. And they are facing great difficulty, but also great opportunity. If you have your Bibles with you, please turn to Acts 16:16-40. If you do not have your Bibles, the Scriptures is available for you on the screens.

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace." But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Now, Heavenly Father, by your Holy Spirit and by your Word of power, may you bring this gospel of grace to bear in our lives, in our homes, in our town, in our nation, and in the world—even if it comes as a great threat, costing us. But may it be for your glory and our good. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Ben Witherington, a well-known New Testament scholar, put it well in describing what was taking place in these verses when he summarized it this way: "Paul and his coworkers are those who turn the religious world upside down, offering one God and Savior instead of many (and also instead of the emperor), one way of salvation instead of many, one people of God that is not ethnically defined." This new frontier that Paul had embarked on—by the Holy Spirit's guidance, they did not go to Asia. Rather, they would end up here. They would end up in Philippi. They would end up in a place where they would preach the gospel, and here they were to have great threats—but also, even greater opportunities. And in it, we heard last week of what they saw as their strategy: to remove obstacles that were culturally bound for the sake of the gospel, but also to rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And so here they find themselves under great threat, and here we see how they utilize it for great opportunity. Let's look together at the threat—and indeed, more than one—the threats that come to Paul and Silas.

What we see first and foremost is true of every single place that the gospel is called to be preached, and that is this. The threat comes both to people personally because of the idols that we hold, but it also comes to threaten—not just personal idols—it also comes to threaten cultural practices. Personal idols and cultural practices. You see, the gospel that Paul was preaching was getting ready to threaten a particular group of men and their personal idols and their cultural practices. And the gospel began to confront them personally and culturally. And what's important is this: they were greatly threatened, but they were not willing to be honest about it. So let's look at it in depth. You'll see here in the early verses, beginning in verse sixteen, of what had happened.

So let me set the stage culturally of what is going on. Paul and Silas are going about, they're preaching the gospel, and they're being followed by this woman who is described to us as a slave girl. We're also told that what is true of this slave girl is that she had been given over by her masters to a spirit of divination, which was common during that day. And through that spirit of divination, she was giving prophecies. And they would bring her around to different places, set her up for shop, and she would give prophecies in exchange for money. This was widely practiced, this was well-accepted, and they simply used it to leverage it for their own personal gain.

Now, what is interesting about the passage is that it tells us how she would increasingly go around—and at first, reading it in English and understanding it from our cultural context, it's hard to understand why Paul became annoyed, which is why we need to understand what is going on. So she's following them around, and the passage tells us that she was announcing this as Paul was preaching—she would say, "These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation!" On its face, it would seem like, hey, they've got a cheerleader. Except the problem is, we need to remember to whom they are preaching. They are preaching in a Gentile context, and most of those who are hearing the message would not have had any prior knowledge of the history of who Christ is from a Jewish background, what he'd come to do as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. They would have had no working ground or foundation for the gospel itself. So when this slave girl given to a spirit of divination and prophecy was walking around with them pronouncing what seems to us like a good message, it would have been received by first-century Gentiles as simply a proclamation of Roman gods, not of the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

And when she announces "they proclaim the way of salvation," they would not have understood it as the gospel understands it, that Jesus Christ came as the Son of the Living God, proclaimed the gospel of God, and then lived it out in giving himself as a sacrifice for sin on the part of human beings to reconcile human beings to their Heavenly Father, was dying on a cross outside of Jerusalem, was buried for our

shame and our sin, and was raised on the third day victorious over sin and death—when she announces the proclamation of the way of salvation, they would have never had that background. They would have understood it as perhaps an announcement that the Roman gods are being pronounced, and that their way of salvation would have been through perhaps financial gain or rescue. If they simply paid their sacrifices to the worship of Caesar, they would receive good in return. It would have never been understood in the same way that Paul was preaching.

And so Paul, it says, became greatly annoyed. Now he became annoyed for three reasons. First: as I just said, her message would never have been received as the same message that Paul was preaching. That's first and foremost why he became annoyed and proceeded without circumstance to exorcise this demon. Secondly: if he would have allowed her to continue to proclaim these things, their message and their ministry would be intricately associated with what she was doing and with what she was saying, thereby putting the gospel at risk. Thirdly: that because she was a slave girl and then given over to a spirit of divination and tracked around by her owners to simply give prophesy—meaning that what she was spewing was not true of her—and because her message was not true of her nor its message tied to the gospel of Jesus Christ, then to allow her to continue would be to allow truth and lies to seemingly be coming from one person. And so Paul, after being patient, brought it to an end. And when he does, he turns not just her world upside down—he turns her owners' world upside down.

And so what was it that this threatened? Well, it certainly threatened their personal idols—of what? Of control. Manipulation. Their ability for financial gain. I mean, consider for just a second—these guys were so money-hungry. Listen to their defense before the magistrates. This is what they say:

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city."

They say nothing about financial gain. They're using their own racism—for that's what they're trying to stir up—against Jews. And they're trying to stir up trouble for Paul and Silas, because they're "causing a stir," they're asking us to participate in things that are foreign to our culture. So what are they doing? They're not only trying to protect—they think, or they say—their cultural power; they're trying to also protect their own financial gain. And they lie, and they cover it up.

And what is interesting is this is very common throughout human history. I was born and raised in the South. Now, many know of the South as the Bible belt. I still have no clue why it was called the Bible belt, for from 1615 to 1965, religion and the gospel was used to defend slavery and racism and segregation. My question is this: did the gospel ever threaten that structure? You bet it did. Did it cause an upheaval? You bet it did. But it took a long time, which is why I personally—and I'm speaking for myself as a Southerner—I do not refer to the place where I was born as a part of the Bible belt. I don't know what Bible was being preached there, because I was raised in it. I heard the gospel, but it was not threatening my views in racism or cultural power. American by birth, Southern by the grace of God. This was the kind of mantra I was raised on—not everybody in the South, but what I was raised on. And so the thing that I've been so thankful for is how the gospel over the last forty-plus years, fifty-five years, has increasingly been preached, and it is challenging and has challenged and there has been great change in the South. But it took a long time. But I've also seen it here as well in the Northeast, in the mid-Atlantic. It just looks different.

But I will tell you, if we believe that we can hold to the Christian gospel and not have our own personal idols and our own cultural practice called into question, then we really don't understand the gospel. If it doesn't make us uncomfortable, then we need to question how we really heard the gospel. Because indeed, this is precisely what happened. And Paul and Silas were thrown into jail. It stirred up a great trouble.

But I will tell you, if we can't see in this passage how the gospel went to the very core of how this particular group of men earned their money, how they viewed women, how they viewed people from another race and another culture—if we don't see in that a picture of what the gospel means to do in us, we're missing the power of the gospel. It means to turn us upside down and inside out. And it's hard, and it's painful, and we will want to resist it. But it means to truly free us from being bound to any particular culture and any particular kind of cultural practice, and idols that really do not free but only enslave—and never really deliver on what they promise. Money can only ever promise but never truly delivers on happiness. This is what the gospel is called to do: it threatens.

But what is interesting is that it not only brings threats to Paul by placing him in jail, it also provides great opportunities. We know that it provides great opportunities for the gospel because of this: not once during this segment of the drama does Paul ever declare that he is a Roman citizen. He willingly goes for the sake of the name of Christ to be punished and to be thrown into jail unjustly and unlawfully.

I was reminded as I was preparing for this sermon of a great quote from one of the early Christian martyrs in 1555 well before the reformation—Hugh Latimer. He and his friend Master Ridley were indeed burned at a stake in the middle of Oxford. And this is what Hugh Latimer said as they were lighting the fires because of their proclamation of the gospel and wanting the Bible to be translated into English. Hugh Latimer says: “Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.” And indeed, that candle was not put out. Everyone here is a recipient of the gospel, and you're hearing it because it came to these two men, and their martyrdom.

But before them, it came in the early church. It came through these men put in jail. And they weren't just put in jail. They were whipped. And they weren't just put into a normal cave prison. The text tells us that the jailer was instructed to put them into the deepest parts of this cave-like prison. Don't think of it in terms of modern prisons. This would have been encompassed by ground. It would have been a cave in the ground. And they were put in the stocks, it tells us, in the inner parts of the prison. Those parts and being put in shackles was not just an expression of being in jail. It was further punishment. And the place where they were put was only reserved for the worst offenders and criminals.

What you're seeing is, in fact, Paul beginning to live out what he was preaching. He was suffering for the sake of Christ. We know Paul understood this, because he would write later when he was in prison at a different time, to his friends and brothers and sisters in Christ at Philippi—when he would write in the Book of Philippians chapter one, “Now I want you to know, brothers, what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” Now at this point he's in jail in Rome. And he says as a result of his being in jail—“As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly.” And he would say later in that very same chapter, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” For Paul, going to prison for the name of Christ was opportunity in and of itself.

And so what does he do? First, he displays the mission of Christ in public life. What do I mean? He understood that opposition to the gospel didn't shut it down but rather gave it a greater place to grow. So what does he do? They declare their trust in Christ and God's character. The text tells us they began to sing hymns. And they began to pray. And everyone who was in prison with them heard those hymns. Commentators all around say, what could they have been singing? Most likely they were singing the psalms of David, declaring God's character, God's rescuing power, his redemption, his ability to bring justice and righteousness. And everyone was hearing this. It was an opportunity to declare trust in Christ.

It was also a way in which they could see themselves associated with the suffering of Christ. Isn't it interesting that they never had to go to jail if they simply had said at the very beginning, “We are Roman

citizens.” But they laid down their personal, individual rights for the sake of the gospel. The gospel, for Paul, trumps whatever cultural rights he had. The gospel trumped his cultural rights.

So not only does he see this as an opportunity to see the mission in public life, though receiving severe punishment, but he also sees it as an opportunity to love his enemy. You see, now it goes from singing hymns to the Lord allowing for an earthquake to take place and those doors to be opened. And the jailer—afraid of what would happen to him if these prisoners who were put at the deepest crevices of the prison, seen as the worst of offenders, had escaped—was willing to take his own life. Now why is this significant? Paul sees him and he cries out, “We’re here!” The reason why that is significant is I want you to see the train of the gospel. We saw it impact Timothy’s life when we first meet him in the first part of chapter sixteen. It then goes to a businesswoman, Lydia. It now has gone to a slave girl who is set free from a spirit of divination. Some commentators suggest that perhaps she was taken in by those who were Christians and professing faith. We’re not really sure if she ever professed faith—hopefully she did. But now it’s coming to a jailer who was representative of the oppressive power, the power structure. Paul could have simply said, “Fine with me.” But he doesn’t. He seeks to pronounce love for his enemy, and he rescues this man. He rescues this man by saying, “We’re here.”

And then he seeks to rescue the man by pronouncing the gospel. It’s a beautiful thing that the gospel would change these kinds of lives, and now it’s changing this jailer’s life. It reminds me of the fact that Jesus on the cross, as he prayed to the Father, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Jesus would make a body of Christ out of those who were once his enemies. Stephen as he was being stoned in the early part of the Book of Acts, he says the same words. “Lord, forgive them for they do not know what they do.” Paul, now in jail, says, “Sir, do not do that. We are here.” What a beautiful picture of the opportunity for the gospel to demonstrate love for one’s enemy.

But finally, it is also this—that when this jailer’s life is transformed, he says, “What must I do?” And the most simple of gospel summaries are given to him. He says, “‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.” This man was amazed that they did not flee to save their own skin. This man was amazed that not only did they not escape, but they were seeking to rescue him. And he asks, “What must I do to receive what you have?”

And isn’t it interesting? He doesn’t lead him through a series of intellectual points that he has to agree with. He simply says to believe. And when the Bible says believe, it’s saying to receive the gift of Jesus Christ and his life for yours, and he will set you free, for he was raised on the third day. Believe and you will be saved. He didn’t ask him not to be a jailer anymore. He didn’t ask him not to be a Roman citizen anymore. He simply saw a man who did not know the Lord, disregarded his station, his oppressive power, and simply said, “Believe and receive.”

But finally, after he eats at the jailer’s house—what a beautiful picture, the whole family was baptized. Can you imagine—what was that meal like? This man practices hospitality immediately. He seeks to bring healing to their wounds, which must have been massive wounds. And then he clearly took him back to jail. That’s where he was the next day, because the magistrate says, “Hey, by the way, let them go.” He comes in and says, “Paul, go in peace.” And then something curious happens. Paul says, “Nope.” Finally, Paul says, “No. I’m not going to let you let us go secretly. Make them come and set us free publicly.” Now why would Paul do that at this stage of the game?

Why didn’t he bring this up before? It’s for this: for the love of the gospel. That’s why. You see, as one commentator said, if Paul had declared his Roman citizenship early on at the beginning of this whole thing, it would seem as though Paul was declaring his trust in being a Roman citizen and not in Christ. But now that he has suffered for the name of Christ, now that the gospel has gone forth, to be set free now quietly would mean that the public injustice that had taken place would now be associated with Paul and therefore the message of Christ. And so Paul says, “I don’t care”—essentially—“about me. I don’t want the

gospel to be associated with a public injustice. So let them come publicly and pronounce our freedom. Let them publicly acknowledge that we are Roman citizens, so that the injustice is on their account, not on the account of what we have done." It wasn't about Paul as an individual Roman citizen. It was for the sake and love of the gospel, that it would be free to be preached and not associated with injustice. And so they were set free.

The gospel now is getting ready to explode again in the Book of Acts. And as John Stott said in his wonderful commentary these words, "It would be hard to imagine a more disparate group than the businesswoman, the slave girl, and the jailer. Racially, socially, psychologically, they were all worlds apart, yet all three were changed by the same gospel and were welcomed into the same church." So here, yet again in the Book of Acts, we learn that when suffering comes to the Christian on the account of the name of Christ or the gospel of Christ, the Christian can now see what the pattern is. That when we suffer for his name and for his gospel, we don't suffer in vain. We need not worry about our own individual rights first and foremost, but see it as an opportunity that the gospel would have power, as Paul and Silas respond humbly and the Lord opened up doors. That the Lord would allow these three people and their lives to be transformed, it is now getting ready to multiply across the Gentile world in the chapters to come. Paul really did not have any cultural power at that moment. He didn't trumpet up his own rights and position. He put Christ and the gospel first.

Let me say this to you. If you are Christian, as ones who live in the United States, let me say in case—perhaps you disagree with me; if you disagree with me, let's talk about it—but I want to say to you, Christians no longer have any cultural power. The cultural war is lost. The church is no longer the center of communities. No one's calling up pastors and going, "What do you think about the latest and greatest thing in the world?" We are the butt of jokes. We are the description in the worst and most vile of cartoons. Our Bible is torn apart and picked apart. Christians are called idiots. They're called unthinking roves and masses of people who simply use religion as a crutch. They're bigots and homophobes. They hate women. They don't like freedom. Oh, and they're just a bunch of Republicans. People say all kinds of things in the United States about Christians—and around the world.

But, my friends, what this passage teaches me is that there is not one person who professes the name of Christ who should hang their head because of our loss of cultural power. Rather, let them trumpet before the masses how foolish we are. Let them call us names. Let them make fun. Let them say that we're against all the best of American culture and practices. Fine, I say! Let's love them enough to humbly walk and preach the gospel. Not so that I can have cultural power again, but that Christ may be glorified. And maybe, just maybe, instead of seeking the seat of power, if we who profess the name of Christ love our neighbors and coworkers who do not look or act or believe like we do—we love them sacrificially, not because we are trying to thrust them into the kingdom but because we love them, they are human beings. We love them because they are not yet born. We love them because they are men and women. We love them not because they're rich or poor but because they are made in the image of God. And maybe we love them whether they're Americans or Muslims or French or British. It doesn't matter. We love them because they are human beings—because we were once enemies of the living God, and he died for us regardless of any of those things. And maybe if we just do that, by God's grace, maybe the gospel will grow more in the next two thousand years than it ever has before. Because the Christian is not interested first and foremost in our citizenship in this nation, but because of our reception in the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ alone and for his glory. Let's pray.

Father, now I pray, make us a people who are transformed from the inside out, because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And may that gospel that takes hold of us—may it turn us inside out and enable us to love everyone for the sake of Christ, to speak the truth, but to do so lovingly and humbly, not because we're Americans, but because of Jesus. And may it be to your glory. As the psalmist said, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your Name be glory." Amen.