

How can the Gospel Prevail?

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Date: 17 September 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as you come back in, please grab your Bibles and turn back to Acts chapter 16. As Warwick said, it actually begins at verse 6, so that's page 1109.

Page 1109. For those who are visiting us, we've been working our way through the book of Acts in the Bible. Today's section is a longer one, so you're going to have to work a bit harder.

And if you're visiting us on today, I'm sorry about that. Actually, you're lucky. Anyway, how about we pray and we'll get into it. Let's pray. Gracious Father, we do thank you again for your word, and we thank you for the truth that it teaches us.

We do pray, Father, that you would help us to focus and to understand, and more than that, to live in light of your word to us this morning. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I wonder if you've ever faced something daunting in life, perhaps a bit like this little guy who's facing the sumo wrestler.

I added the coloured circles just to make it decent for public consumption. But I wonder if, as Christians, we can sometimes feel like that little guy against the sumo wrestler of society.

[1 : 1 9] You know, we want to love people. We want to help them become Christians. We want to see Christ's name honoured by all, and we want to see people saved. And yet, it can feel like a daunting or even an impossible task.

After all, people that we've shared the good news with haven't yet become Christians, and our society as a whole is moving away from God rather than to God.

The workplaces, there's often rules in workplaces that say you're not allowed to talk about religion. There's even state laws that prevent us from praying about certain things in particular. And more than ever in our history, our society is seeking to silence the gospel.

And so how can we have confidence that it's worth still trying to share it? How can we have confidence that the gospel will prevail against this seemingly sumo wrestler of our society?

Well, Luke begins to show us how in our passage today. Luke wrote Acts, and he's divided his material not just in terms of geographical regions, like I showed you last week.

[2 : 2 3] You know, Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth, those geographical regions. He's also divided his book with summary statements, like on the screen.

And so you can see kind of the flavour of them. The Word of God spread. The church was strengthened and increased. The Word of God continued to spread. And last week we saw one where the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

And so even though Paul had started, already started his second missionary journey last week, it seems as though Luke in verse 6 this week is beginning a new section.

Had a summary statement last week, new section this week. And it's going to continue up until chapter 19, verse 20, where we read this summary statement. And in this way, the Word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

This idea of the Word of the Lord growing is not new. We've just seen it in those other summary sentences. But there is new emphasis. Notice the Word of the Lord grew in yellow mightily and prevailed.

[3 : 28] And so what we're going to see from today leading up to that summary sentence is how this Word of the Lord, the Gospel, continued to grow mightily and prevail.

And it starts today with seeing that the Lord Jesus still does doors. So at point 1 in your outlines, chapter 16, verse 6 in your Bibles, have a look there.

He says, Paul and his companions travelled 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.

So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. Now, I realise that these are just a bunch of names. That doesn't mean a whole great deal to us.

And so I've given you an insert to help you get through this passage. I've given you a coloured picture. You know when you read storybooks, you always look for the coloured pictures. Here's your coloured picture. Now the map is busy, but so was Paul.

[4 : 36] His journey is in the red line, and I've tried to put some yellow dots on some relevant stops. I'm not going to go through it all now with you, but if you can look in the middle, sort of almost in the middle of the page at the yellow, where Asia is.

And so just on the outskirts, on the eastern side of Asia, between the green and yellow, is the province or the state of Phrygia. That's where they went and did share the Gospel.

But it seems they wanted to go further into the middle of Asia. But verse 6, the Holy Spirit kept them from doing so. We don't know how the Spirit did that.

Perhaps customs rejected Paul's passport, or perhaps every time they tried to set out, they got sick, or perhaps it was a vision like we see later. We don't know.

And so verse 7, they travelled northwest, so up the red line, up across the northern top of Asia, the yellow there.

[5 : 40] And as they approached Mysia, they wanted to do a right-hand turn back up to the purple, Bithynia. But again, verse 7, the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to do so.

Now, I imagine that would have been confusing for Paul. Remember, he's been commissioned as an apostle to preach the Gospel. And so doesn't Jesus want him to preach the Gospel?

And yet Jesus directs the Spirit to stop him. Notice in verse 7 in your Bibles, the Spirit is called the Spirit of Jesus. And so it's the Lord Jesus here who does doors.

That is, he closes doors in this case. But have you ever heard the expression where God closes one door, he opens another? It's true in this case.

So if you put the maps aside for a moment and pick it up in verse 9 of your Bibles. Verse 9, During the night, Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, come over to Macedonia and help us.

[6 : 45] 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. Interestingly, the man in the vision doesn't say what kind of help he needs.

But Paul knows what Jesus has told him. He knows the Old Testament. He knows that it's the Gospel that helps people for eternity.

And so he concludes that's what God is calling him to do in verse 10. In other words, while God may guide through unusual means like a vision, we heard even this morning from David that he heard a auditory word, Jesus is God, come to Jesus.

It's confirmed by the Bible, God's Word. And that's what happened in David's story. He went to a Bible study group and that's where he got all the answers. That's a good principle for us.

God can guide in any way he sees fit, but it's always to be confirmed by God's Word. Well, in verse 10, at Troas, Luke joins the group because he now says, we got ready.

[7 : 58] And he continues to write we in verse 11. From Troas, we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrass, and the next day we went on to Neopolis.

From there, we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and a leading city of the 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.

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 worshipper of God and the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

In verse 13 there, the top of your page, Paul goes down on the Sabbath day to where he might expect a group of Jews gathered for prayer on the Sabbath. For Paul's practice was often to preach to the Jews first and then to non-Jews or Gentiles second.

And he finds a small Jewish community of women and starts sharing the gospel with them. Among them is Lydia, whom we're told is from the city of Thyatira in the province of Lydia, but interestingly back in the country of Asia.

[9 : 15] I will come back to that in a second. But this city was known for its purple dye which apparently they got from shellfish. Did you know you get dye from shellfish? Anyway, apparently you can. And there was this Jewish community back in Thyatira as well.

And so perhaps this is how she became a successful businesswoman, a dealer in purple cloth. Purple was expensive, royal colours, and a worshipper of God. There was a Jewish community back in Thyatira where she heard about God.

But notice the end of verse 14 or halfway through. As she listened to the gospel message, the Lord, Jesus, that is, opened her heart.

Here is Jesus doing his door work again, this time opening the door of her heart to believe in the message.

And it is interesting that while Jesus closed the door to Paul preaching in Asia, where is Thyatira? I've put it in a big arrow on the screen so you can find it quickly. Thyatira is in Asia.

[10 : 18] And so Paul happens to do what he wanted to do anyway. He ends up preaching the gospel to someone from Asia. It's one of those coincidences or God incidences, if you like.

The gospel ends up going to at least one person from Asia anyway. And so the point is the gospel prevails because the Lord Jesus does doors, both in terms of changing plans, opening and closing doors on Paul to guide him to Philippi, to Lydia, and then opening hearts like the heart of Lydia.

And he still does doors today. I mean, how many of us have had our plans changed? And at the time we are confused by what God is doing, just like Paul would have been confused.

But then when we look back, we can sometimes see how God was at work, can't we? Other times we can't and we'll have to wait for heaven. But we can often see that he was opening and closing to direct.

And how many of us have had our hearts open to believe in Jesus? And so we can have confidence the gospel will prevail in our society because the Lord Jesus still does doors.

[11 : 33] He still opens and closes doors to lead people where he wants and he still opens the hearts of people to believe in him. If you don't believe it, just look around the room here this morning.

But also notice how Lydia responds in verse 15. When she and the members of her household, who apparently were there listening, were baptised, 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 baptised along with her household because as I said, it seems that Lydia's household were there listening in outside the city gate.

And so they are all baptised as well. Our belief and baptism go together. And so if you're not baptised, it's good to do. We saw three baptisms last Sunday night, actually, at 5pm.

It was really encouraging. But that was done to her. Notice her response afterwards. She then offers them a place to stay. As one writer puts it, genuine faith will always lead to good works.

[12 : 46] And what's her good work here? Or to support the missionaries, Paul and Silas. And so for us who believe, are we then responding like Lydia? You know, by doing what we can to support the work of missionaries.

I know many of us do financially, which is terrific, but it would be great to occasionally see a few more from this congregation attend our monthly prayer nights to pray for our missionaries, to support them prayerfully.

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

and direct the plans of his missionaries and our church? We should, shouldn't we? The gospel prevails because firstly, Jesus still does doors, directing his gospel and opening hearts, and secondly, because he still saves.

So point to verse 16. I don't have time to work our way methodically through the passage and read it out loud, so you're going to have to follow along with me with your Bibles open. So in verse 16, if you just look there, you can see that they meet a slave girl who's actually enslaved twice, firstly, by an evil spirit, and then secondly, by evil men who use her fortune-telling skills for profit.

[14 : 25] And she must have been accurate because we're told that she earned a great deal of money. I mean, you don't keep going and giving your money to someone who constantly gets it wrong, do you? So she must have been pretty good at it.

And so you'd think that people would have listened in verse 17 when she follows them around and says, these men are servants of the Most High God, telling you how to be saved.

But in a world where there are so many gods, and there were gods on all the street corners, who offer their own version of salvation, this seemed to spark less attention.

either way, in verse 18, if you look there, after following them around for several days, Paul is annoyed or literally disturbed. But why? Isn't this free advertising?

Wouldn't you be like going, yeah, go for it, keep telling everyone? Well, as we saw last week, Paul is always acting for the good of other people's faith. We saw that last week. And so it seems he didn't want the gospel to be associated with evil spirits, even if they spoke the truth.

[15 : 30] Otherwise, people might think that Jesus is the prince of those evil spirits, which is exactly what the Pharisees accused Jesus of, if you remember. And so while Paul let it go for a little while, the constant connection of this possessed girl to them meant that people would see a constant connection between evil and the Lord Jesus proclaimed by them.

And so Paul commands the evil spirit to leave. But as he does so, notice in verse 18, he does it in the name of Jesus Christ. That's who saves.

And at the end of verse 18, at that moment, it's immediate, the spirit left her. In other words, Jesus is still powerful to save here.

And he still does today. After all, weren't all of us once enslaved by evil? You know, we followed Satan's lies. His biggest lie is that there is no God and don't believe in Jesus.

Isn't that what the world is doing right now? Following Satan's lies? Even without realising it, they're enslaved to his evil. And we once pleased our sinful nature, doing what we want instead of seeking to please God.

[16 : 46] But when we heard the message of Jesus and believed, we were saved from that evil, weren't we? We now know the truth that leads to eternal life. And with God's spirit, we now seek to please God instead of our sinful nature.

We do, don't we? We seek to please God, don't we? Jesus has saved us from evil. And so he still saves from evil today.

Again, if you don't believe it, look around the room. Of course, we may wonder why Paul didn't save this girl from evil spirits straight away. Well, remember, he was called in that vision to preach the gospel in Macedonia.

And so perhaps that's what he was focusing on in obedience to Jesus. Knowing that as soon as he casts his spirit out, he'd lose the opportunity, which is what happens in verses 19 to 21.

Do you see there? Verse 19, the slave owners realise they've lost their chance to make money. And so in verses 20 to 21, they haul Paul and Silas before the magistrates and claim that they're causing social and political upheaval.

[17 : 50] They say they're throwing their city into uproar. It's social upheaval. And they say Paul is doing what is unlawful. It's political upheaval. Of course, neither is true. And what's more, isn't freeing people from evil a good thing?

But often this is what people do today. Christianity is good for our society. It promotes love and forgiveness and faithfulness, caring for one another, working hard.

Are they not good things for our society? And yet, because people simply want to get rid of God, they claim that it causes social upheaval or political upheaval.

So you can't be a Christian and a CEO of a football club anymore. It's too politically charged. You can't do it. And so we shouldn't be surprised when this happens, though, because it's been happening ever since Paul and Silas' day, 2,000 years.

And yet, the gospel will still prevail because Jesus still saves. Here from evil and next from death. Have a look at verses 22 to 24. Paul and Silas are stripped, beaten, flogged severely, thrown into prison.

[18 : 58] And then in verse 24, the jail is commanded to guard them carefully, perhaps because of the power the people just witnessed. So he puts them in the innermost cell, the most secure cell in the whole complex, and puts their feet in stocks as well, just to make sure.

And yet, how do Paul and Silas respond to such suffering? Verse 25, about midnight, Paul, and Silas were praying, I understand that, and singing hymns to God. And the other prisoners were listening to them.

Would you respond like that? I'm not sure I would. But here is a lesson in suffering for the gospel. They were no doubt praying for release, among other things, but at the same time, they were praising God, no doubt with joy.

Perhaps they remembered what Jesus had said. And in Matthew's gospel on the screen, blessed are you when people insult you. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.

They must have been pretty good singers too, because all the other prisoners are listening in. Or more likely, singing is not standard prison practice. And so perhaps they were going, who are these guys?

[20 : 09] What's going on? Either way, the jailer sleeps through it all until the earthquake in verse 26. Verse 26. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken.

At once all the prison doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose. 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 opening doors again, isn't it? This time literal prison doors.

But the focus is on salvation. He's not only saved that girl, but here Paul saves the jailer from physical death.

Because in those days if you lost the prisoner, you didn't just lose your job, you lost your life. I mean, how would the HR department explain that one? But Paul saves the jailer by staying put and then somehow persuading all the other prisoners not to escape.

[21 : 18] How do you do that? 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. 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? You see, given the events of the earthquake, the jailer knew that Paul's God must not be any old Mickey Mouse kind of God, not just one of the many gods of his society, but must be greater than all these other gods.

And he knew he needed to be made right with Paul's God, saved. And so how is he saved? Well, verse 31. They replied, 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 his house. It's by believing in Jesus that they are saved. No doubt the word that Paul spoke to them and the household included how Jesus had died for their sins and saves them from eternal death in hell and instead gives them eternal life in heaven and then later raises them up for new life in the new creation.

And so they believe in Jesus. At this point, can I ask you if you believe in Jesus? It's the only way to be saved. That's what verse 31 says.

[22 : 55] Certainly the jailer and his whole household believe because in verse 33 he washes the wounds of Paul and Silas repentance, which is kind of like a sign of repentance. He wants to put things right.

And then he and his whole household are baptized, a sign of belief. But Luke's point is, I think, here is Jesus again saving not just from evil, like with the slave girl, but from death, including death eternal.

And he saves all sorts of people. In this story, we've seen a white-collar businesswoman, we've seen a poor slave girl, and we've seen a blue-collar jailer.

Some from Asia, some from Macedonia. You couldn't get more different kinds of people, could you? And yet Jesus saves them all. He saves all sorts.

And he still saves all sorts today. If you don't believe me, again, look around the room. We've got so many different countries represented in this room right now. And so we can be confident the gospel will prevail, because the Lord Jesus still saves all sorts of people from evil and death eternal.

[24 : 08] And so it's still worth proclaiming this gospel to our kids or grandkids, our friends or family, as we have opportunity. Sometimes it might be as simple as offering to pray for a person who's in need, or just doing something loving for them.

Both of which might provoke a conversation. Or sometimes our situation might prevent us. But no matter our situation, we're not to lose confidence in the gospel, because the Lord Jesus still saves people.

And for us who are saved, then will we also then respond like the jailer? Verse 34. You see verse 34 there? 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. They rejoice. It was great to hear from David before, how he felt peace and joy in his heart.

I know for us who have been Christians for some years that joy can wear off, can't it? God's love. It's always worth remembering what we've been saved from.

[25 : 23] Evil, death, eternal. It's always worth remembering what it cost Christ to save us from that. Everything, didn't it? His life. In fact, being joyful can also provoke conversation.

One of our wardens at St. John's had a non-Christian friend who asked, why are you always so positive when our world is going pear shaped? Wars, floods, fires, earthquakes, it's all happening.

And she was able to say to her, because of Jesus. Jesus has saved me and given me hope in this life. One of the reasons I asked David to share his story today is because he is living proof of what this passage speaks about, isn't he?

You just start to see the connections if you can remember his story. He grew up in China and he had a plan to stay. Then he went for a holiday to New Zealand and it was so beautiful and peaceful they stayed there and got a job there.

So plans changed. And then he started having this feeling of trying to find the real God. He hears an audible voice saying, Jesus is God, come to Jesus.

[26 : 40] God, he was baptized. And so after lockdown he found a Christian Bible study group. The voice was confirmed by the Bible, the word. And then he believed in Jesus and was baptized.

He went to New Zealand to become a Christian. New Zealand! It's all right. I'm just kidding. He was Jesus doing door work, directing, and more door work, opening his heart.

And then, as I said, responding. He responds with joy, like the jailer. Here is a recent example, living proof, that Jesus still does doors and still saves people.

So even if we sometimes feel like the little kid in the picture, in the face of our sumo society, we can still be confident that the gospel will prevail.

And so as we're able, it's still worth praying. Proclaiming, supporting with joy. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you for the truths that you've reminded us of from this passage today.

[27 : 50] That the Lord Jesus still opens and closes doors to direct us, and he still opens the hearts of people to believe in him. Father, we thank you that he still saves all sorts from evil and death eternal.

And so we pray, Father, that you would help us to have confidence that the gospel will prevail, that we might do what we can as we're able to pray, proclaim and support with joy.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.