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While Going: *The Mission of All Christians*

Some Truths You Need to Know

Acts 16

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The last three weeks we've been reminding ourselves that no matter how you word it, at the end of the day the mission of the church is to go and make disciples. Whatever else a church involves herself in that always has to be primary. That is the mission. But as soon as we start talking about evangelism, outreach, sharing your faith—whatever language you want to use—most people would say there are emotions that come with that. There's a certain anxiety or fear; maybe for some it's a guilt and a sense in which *I need to do that*, that feels kind of like this obligation. But it's not a very comfortable experience, and so what we talked about three weeks ago maybe we just need to back up and re-think this a little bit.

If the message is actually *good news*, why do we have those emotions? What if what God was asking of us is to have a kind, compassionate, respectful conversation with someone we genuinely care about regarding the message of Jesus, the person of Jesus that has so changed our lives? What if the goal was at the end of those conversations, the person we are talking to always feels more valued, more respected, more listened to than they felt before the conversation? Rather than thinking of it as some obligation, wouldn't that seem more like it's a gift that we can offer to the people around us we genuinely care about?

So that's what we've been doing over the last couple of weeks—trying to reframe that, to think about it differently. I want to end the series this morning by going through Acts, Chapter 16. It's a chapter that has several truths that I find to be very helpful in reminding myself of what I need to know is true in sharing this message with others. So if you have a Bible, turn to Acts, Chapter 16. It's a lot of chapter, but the only way to make sense is to tell the whole story, so we're going to put it in high gear and go for it. Chapter16, verse 1:

> **Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.** (*NASB, Acts 16:1-5)

The first truth is one that we have talked about a lot, so I'm not going to elaborate a lot. But the truth is that *we need to remove all unnecessary obstacles to have a meaningful conversation about Jesus*. We don't have to argue; we don't have to debate. We don't have to get side-tracked with all kinds of discussions that, at the end of the day aren't productive towards our desire to have a meaningful conversation about Jesus. It's just not realistic to expect people that don't know Jesus to have a Christian worldview. It's also unreasonable to expect people that don't know Jesus to live like a Christian. So there's going to be a lot of stuff there that we just don't need to try to change and fix until somebody encounters the resurrected Christ.

Now the way it comes out of this text is to understand that Paul and his missionary team are taking the message of the Jerusalem Council which is Acts 15, the previous chapter. They're taking that decree, those decisions, out and about, and Paul wants to take Timothy. Timothy is a grown man. His mom is Jewish; his father is Greek. So Paul has a concern that the Jews, where they are going, knowing that Timothy's father was a Greek, would be side-tracked by the thought as to whether or not Timothy has been circumcised.

So now here's where it gets interesting. The decision that was made in Acts 15—the decree—the message that they are delivering is: According to the Jerusalem Council, you do not have to be circumcised to be a Christian. So Paul is circumcising Timothy, as a grown man, in order to remove an obstacle, so they can have the conversation that the decision was: you don't have to be circumcised. Now for a grown man, in a first century culture, to be circumcised was no small deal. There was a significant sacrifice to this. But in order to just simply remove an unnecessary obstacle to get to the message of the gospel of grace, Paul has Timothy circumcised. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he said, "To the legalist, I became a legalist in order that they might hear the message of the gospel." This is just a classic example of that. So we've talked about this. Don't allow unnecessary obstacles to prevent a meaningful discussion about Jesus. Verse 6:

> **They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.** (Vs. 6-10)

I think the second significant truth in this story is *the need to be very sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit*. Paul and company wanted to go to Asia because there were lost people in Asia. But the Spirit of Jesus stops them and says, "I don't want you to go to Asia; I want you to go to Macedonia." As the story unfolds, we find out the reason is because God had already prepared the ground for the gospel in Macedonia. And so it was the leading of the Spirit that led Paul and his team to fruitful ground. I think there's always a risk that we can become too clever. And the more clever we become, the less dependent on the Holy Spirit we are. This is again, one of the dangers of having a memorized presentation and a couple of questions to get into it and to go for it. We don't tend to be really sensitive to the Holy Spirit; we depend on the presentation. We depend on what we've practiced, and oftentimes we're not nearly sensitive enough to whether or not God is leading us to have that conversation at this moment.

Another way to think about it: most of you probably have in your head kind of a mental list of those people whom you would like to have a meaningful conversation with about Jesus. That's fine. But it's good to be aware that your list and God's list may not be the same list; so don't think automatically you know. God knows. So there is always the requirement to be sensitive to the Spirit's leading you. I would suggest to you it is entirely possible that if you were to imagine in your mind this morning the person in your world you think is the least likely to ever have interest in Jesus, may be the very person that God is preparing to hear the message.

Over the years, every time I make that statement, months later there's always somebody that comes up to me in the hall and says, "You won't believe this, but that's exactly what happened to me. The person I had in mind that day when you said it that I thought was the least likely to ever have

interest in Jesus, has now come to faith in Christ." So just make sure we're always sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Verse 11:

> **So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a *Roman* colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.** (Vs. 11-15)

The next truth I think is a critical truth to understand: *Only God can open a human heart to understand the message of the gospel.* The text is very clear it wasn't the cleverness of Paul's presentation; it wasn't the power of persuasion. The text says, "The Lord opened her heart to the message of the gospel." I think this takes a tremendous amount of pressure off. If I think what's required is me being able to answer all the objections, answer all the questions, to have a perfect presentation in a very persuasive fashion and at the end of the exchange close the deal, that is a lot of pressure. The fact is, unless God opens the heart, that person is not going to understand the message. So there's a partnership here. The partnership is: it's my responsibility to kindly, compassionately, faithfully proclaim the message. But then it's up to God, and only God can open a human heart to hear and understand the message.

So here's something to keep in mind. The moment you find yourself exuding some level of pressure to close the deal, you've crossed the line. Now you've misunderstood what's your part and what's God's part, and now you're trying to do God's part. You be faithful with your part and trust God with His part. As long as you understand the message by which you are saved—in other words, if you have trusted Christ as Savior—you are well equipped to have the conversation. It doesn't have to be more complicated than that. Just share with someone the message that has so transformed your life: the message of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. You don't have to be able to answer all the questions and the objections. There are hundreds of resources out there for people who genuinely have questions and want those questions answered. But, at the end of the day, it still must be a God thing to open a human heart to understand. Verse 16:

> **It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment. But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans." The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order *them* to be beaten with rods. When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the**

jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. (Vs. 16-24)

Now the last part of that paragraph, it's worth noting that the idea is that they were thrown into the most secure part of the prison, what we might call maximum security—the inner prison, into the stocks, into the chains. The truth that I think comes out of that section of the story is basically to remember *always expect conflict*...always expect conflict! It doesn't mean there will always be conflict, but I would expect that. Why? Because it is spiritual warfare. What is at stake is the eternal destiny of a human soul and there's no way the enemy is rolling over without a fight. So just because there's conflict doesn't mean I did something wrong, doesn't mean I should have done something differently. I would just expect it. But often the conflict is not with the person that you are conversing with. As a matter of fact, if you do it the way we've talked about it, there may not be any conflict with that person. It typically is with family members, friends, outer circle, churches, other people somehow involved in the process who begin to stir up the conflict, and you find yourself wondering: what did I do wrong? Should I have done this differently? What we fail to realize sometimes, this is all out spiritual war. We should expect that, which is the reminder we need to be very diligent to pray whenever we are engaged in sharing the gospel with others. There is a bigger war at play.

In this particular story there is a slave girl who's possessed by a demon, and there is a group of men who have figured out a way to profit from her calamity. So they use her for themselves. She ends up following Paul and Silas around and actually what she says is very good. "*These people represent the most high God and are proclaiming His salvation*," and whenever somebody reads this text, the first thing they say is, "What is the problem with that?" There's no problem with that. It's actually a really good message. The problem is that the people knew this is a slave girl who is possessed by a demon, so every time this message comes out of her mouth, it is discrediting the message, and so she is just making it more and more difficult for people to believe the message is legitimate. The text says Paul finally got so annoyed he turns around and he casts the demon out and the girl is set free.

Now I would suggest to you this is a big problem. Under the umbrella of Christianity there are people, individuals, churches who say the right words, but because of how they live, because of their life style, because of how they behave, because of how they say it, it tends to discredit the message, and it's not helpful at all. Just because somebody is using the right words doesn't mean that message has credibility, and sometimes we find ourselves thinking it would be very helpful if you'd really just be quiet, because you're not really helping the cause very much.

Well, that's a similar thing that Paul is dealing with. So now this slave girl has been miraculously set free but the problem is: this group of men who have been making a profit by taking advantage of her very difficult situation, now no longer can use her to make a profit. So they're upset about it, so they create the conflict and they make up lies that aren't true about Paul and Silas. And they get the magistrates all worked up, and next thing you know they are getting beat up and they are being thrown into maximum security for something they actually didn't do. All of this just reminds us there is a spiritual war going on, so we have to continually engage God in prayer and remember that there is likely to be unexpected conflict. That's just part of the mission. Verse 25:

But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer awoke and saw

> **the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 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 together with all who were in his house. And he took them that *very* hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his *household*. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.** (Vs. 25-34)

One quick note, at the end of that paragraph there is a very clear statement that the reason the household was baptized is because the household believed. There are people that use this text to make it say something it doesn't say. The text is very clear...*they all believed*...which was the basis by which they were baptized. But more to the point, to understand this principle: what if we viewed life through the lens assessing every experience for how God might use that experience to advance the cause of the gospel? We talked about this last week and Paul was our model. From Philippians 1:12, Paul was sitting at that time in a Roman prison and yet he looks around him and he says, "This is really an awesome opportunity. This place is filled with people that don't know Jesus." He comments specifically on the fact that the elite Roman guards, the Praetorian Guards, were actually there as an audience to hear the message of the gospel, people he would never have had the opportunity to share with, apart from being in prison.

This time he's in a prison in Philippi. Now stop and think about this. They had been obedient to the Spirit of God. The Spirit led them to Macedonia, specifically to Philippi. They proclaimed the message. They set the captive free. The reward for that is they get beat up by a bunch of thugs and thrown in maximum security. It would be very easy to sit in a prison in chains and a stockade—which would have to be a very unpleasant experience—and to say, "God, what is the deal? You said to go here. I've come. I've proclaimed the message. I set the captive free and the thanks I get is I wind up in chains in a prison cell!"

But Paul's perspective is to view life through the lens of how might God use this experience to advance the cause of the gospel. So rather than a pity party, he looks around and says, "There's this bunch of people in here that probably don't know Jesus. Let's have a worship service!" So Paul and Silas have a worship service and the text tells us the prisoners *listened*. Then God brings an earthquake and the chains come loose; the gate is opened up, and now it is an opportunity for everyone to escape—but no one escapes. Part of the miracle of this story is the fact that the people that were in prison, they weren't a Sunday school class. These were bad guys, sentenced to maximum security, and now in the moment when the chains are off; the gates are open; it's an opportunity to escape; not one single prisoner escapes. That in itself is miraculous! The jailor comes back; he sees what's happened; he's about to kill himself, and Paul stops him, and says, "Wait a minute, fellow, we're all here." The jailor is so shocked, so amazed, that he can only come to one conclusion, which leads him to basically grab Paul by the lapels, and say, "*Sir, what must I do to be saved?*"

Now that's the line all of us would love to hear. Wouldn't it be great if Monday morning, wherever we're at, somebody runs up to us, grabs us by the lapels, and says, "Please tell me what must I do to be saved?" If only it was always that easy. But don't forget what preceded this moment which led to the question and the jailor and his family come to Christ. They are baptized and there is the

beginning of a movement that would result in the planting of the church in Philippi. Quite a remarkable story!

What would life be like if we always viewed our circumstances such as they are—the highs and the lows—through the lens of saying, "How might God use this to somehow advance the gospel?" I would suggest to you over your lifetime as a Christian, your opportunities to effectively share the message of Jesus will be much more effective in the hard times, in the struggles, in the pains, in the difficult circumstances of life, far more opportunities than in the times when everything seems to be going well. The fact of the matter is that when we're going through struggle and pain and hard times, it's in those moments that the difference Jesus makes becomes obvious to the people around us. So it's critical that in the most difficult moments of life, we view life through this lens of how might God use this to advance the cause of His gospel?

> **Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, "Release those men." And the jailer reported these words to Paul, *saying*, "The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace." But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out." The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city. They went out of the prison and entered *the house of* Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.** (Vs 35-40)

That last paragraph is my favorite paragraph in this story. I am convinced that Dr. Luke, as he records this part of the story, does so with a smile on his face. You have to go back and remember that Paul and Silas, when they were declaring the message of Jesus, building the church, stirred up this conflict and the magistrates beat them up and threw them into maximum security. In their mind, "We've stopped this thing." And yet, as the story unfolds, the policemen come along and say, "Okay, you're free to go," and Paul says, "I don't really want to go. You do realize we're Roman citizens and this is a Roman colony and, under Roman law, you do not have the right to beat us up in the streets like thugs and throw us in prison without a trial."

We talked about this last week and we are reminded in this text—Philippi was a Roman colony. That was a really big deal. It came with all the advantages and perks of being a Roman citizen. Rome prided itself on the fact that they were a civilized people. So they didn't just have thugs in the streets beating people up and throwing them in prison. It was required, if you were a Roman citizen, that you would be arrested; there would be a trial; there would be witnesses, and a verdict would be rendered. So Paul is saying that, "You have no right as a Roman colony to act like a bunch of thugs and throw us in prison. As a matter of fact, I think I might go back to Rome and tell them." That's kind of the implication there. So suddenly the magistrates come to the prison and one can only imagine what the conversation was, but they bring them out and the text says, they were begging them to leave town. So they go from the tough guys throwing them in prison to begging them to, "Please, please do us a favor and leave town."

I think the way the end of this text is written that basically Paul and Silas just kind of mosey down the road to Lydia's house, visit Lydia and the church in Philippi that's now been established. They spend some time together; they encourage one another; they have a little coffee; they eat a couple of donuts, and when they're good and ready, they just kind of stroll out of town on their way. I think

that's kind of the heartbeat of how this text ends. It's a way of saying that this is the church of Jesus Christ and you can't stop this. To the government, to the world religions, to anyone else who would try to stop it, this is the narrative version of what Jesus said in the gospels: "I will build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. You can't stop this."

It's very important for us to understand the church of Jesus Christ is not just another human institution. It's not just a fad. It's not just another organization. It is the church of Jesus Christ, and, at the end of the day, God wins and His church will be triumphant. No government, no country, no world religion can stop that! (clapping)

So remember this: When you, as a Christ follower, invest yourself in the life of another, you're investing into something that ultimately will triumph. You are investing in the church that will matter for eternity. God has invited us in to be a part of something that will matter forever. This morning we celebrate the lives of people who have been radically changed by the power of Jesus. This morning we remind ourselves why the mission matters, because it's about people and people's lives that have been changed for eternity.

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that You love us and You sent Jesus to die on a cross to be the Savior of the world. Lord, for whatever reason, at Your perfect timing You opened our hearts to hear and understand the message of salvation. Lord, we are reminded this morning that for every one of these people that celebrate new life in Christ, there was a moment when somebody cared enough to share the truth with them. Lord, we celebrate that together. In the powerful name of Jesus, Amen.

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