

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL OVER ALL OPPOSITION

Acts 16:16-40

INTRODUCTION

I recently finished a book entitled, “Masters of the Air” which is a history of the 8th Army Air Force that played a vital role in defeating Germany in WWII. One of the themes in the book is to recount the ways in which Germany sought to counteract the bombers in their relentless attacks. For example, when American bombers began attacking aircraft manufacturing facilities the Germans dispersed the manufacture of the various components into small, hidden factories in the countryside. The Germans devoted hundreds of thousands of men to repairing the damage done by the bombers so that railroads and plants would be quickly repaired after bombing. The Germans developed the most sophisticated radar aimed anti-aircraft guns. The air war was like a game of chess where each side would develop a tactic or strategy or weapon and then the other side would figure out a way to counteract the advantage gained. In WWII the Allies eventually overcame all the weapons and strategies the Germans developed and on May 8, 1945 won the victory over the Germans and freed the enslaved people of Europe from their tyranny.

In some ways the story of the book of Acts is a history of how God overcomes all the strategies and weapons that the world and the devil has erected against his work of freeing all of his people from the tyranny of sin and the threat of his wrath. We are following that story this morning as we examine Paul’s proclamation of the gospel in the Roman colony of Philippi. He is in the city with Silas, Luke and Timothy. They have come to Philippi, one of the leading cities in Macedonia in the confidence that God has people in this city that he intends to save. Last week we looked at the first people God saved in Philippi, a religious businesswoman named Lydia and the members of her household.

This week, as we follow the story of God’s continuing to save people in this city, we are shown the battle that rages against the gospel. In this passage we will see how God overcomes all opposition to the gospel. He saves his people through the gospel in spite of all the forces arrayed against the gospel. This passage reminds us that we are in a world war. Now, the outcome of this war is not in doubt. However, it is a war that must be fought. There are casualties in this war. There are costs associated with fighting this war. God’s goal in the conflict is to save all of his people from their willing slavery to sin, the world and the devil by means of the gospel.

MAIN POINT

God saves his people through the gospel in spite of...

I. Demonic deception (vv.16-18)

Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke are on their way to the place of prayer outside the city walls on the bank of the river. Presumably they are going to pray and worship the Lord and to preach to those who are gathered there. As they walk through the streets of Philippi they are confronted by a slave girl who has a spirit of divination. She is a fortune-teller who earns money for her masters by her powers of clairvoyance. She follows Paul and his companions, screaming in a loud voice, “These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” At first Paul ignores the slave girl but eventually, after several days of being followed around by her he turns and commands the spirit in the name of Jesus to come out of her and it does.

There are significant parallels between Paul’s casting out of this spirit and Jesus casting demons out of people. On two occasions the gospels record that a demon speaks through a person and identifies Jesus. Once, in the synagogue at Capernaum a demon possessed man says, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” Then when Jesus met the demon possessed man who lived in the tombs in the region of the Gerasenes he screamed, “What do you have to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” In both cases demons correctly identify

Jesus and publicly bear witness to who he is, just as the spirit in this woman correctly describes Paul and what he is doing. The reason I draw your attention to these parallels is to show that the spirit that is in this woman is clearly demonic. The woman is demon possessed. Thus we are confronted with two questions. Why would the devil make such a clear and truthful statement about Paul and the gospel? Satan, we are repeatedly told, is the enemy of God, of Christ and of the church. He is out to discredit and destroy the gospel, not promote it. So why would a demon give such clear and persuasive testimony to the truthfulness of the gospel and the character of the witnesses to the gospel? The second question is related to the first: why didn't Paul immediately cast out the demon and then why did he cast it out? Why did he get rid of all the free advertisement?

First of all this demon is engaged in deception in two ways. First, in v. 16 when Luke identifies the spirit that possesses the woman he uses a word that would be meaningless to us because we do not know Greek mythology but would be completely understood by the first readers of his book. He literally says about this slave girl: "...a certain slave girl having a spirit, a Python, met us..." He uses a proper noun "Python" which is a character in Greek mythology. The idol worshipping Romans believed that the spirit of this mythological creature is what enabled fortune-tellers to be able to predict the future or give accurate advice. Thus, this demon deceives the people of Philippi into ascribing power and authority to the false Greek gods by enabling this slave girl to accurately tell the future.

This same form of deception is occurring all over the world even at this day. While most of the fortune-telling practices in the world are simply man-made trickery there are individuals who are possessed of supernatural insight but it is insight that comes from the devil. You can know it is demons that are involved because these people do not promote the true gospel of Jesus. Rather, every fortune-teller promotes false ideas about God and his salvation. Many, maybe even most of the people in the world decide what is true based on their experience rather than upon God's revelation of the truth in Christ. So when other humans appear to have supernatural power to forecast the future people are naturally inclined to pay attention and to believe all that they say. I trust you know better. Supernatural ability is no reason to trust what someone says. Rather we know what is true only through God's revelation given to us through his word.

The second form of deception that this demon engages in is of a more serious and deadly type. Everyone in this town knows that this slave girl is possessed by the spirit of Python and thus a spokesperson for the Greek gods. Thus by her endorsement of Paul and of his message she is insinuating that there is no distinction between the Greek gods and this God whom Paul is talking about. In fact, the title, "Most High God" which is used frequently in the Greek translation of the OT for Yahweh is also used to describe Apollo the head of the Greek gods. Additionally "salvation" is also a word used frequently in Greek mythology, as it is in all religions. Every religion promises salvation. Thus, by apparently endorsing Paul and his gospel the demon is blunting the distinction which Paul is seeking to make between the gospel of Jesus and the Greek religious system. If this slave girl were permitted to continue her "testimony" people would only see Jesus as another god within the Greek system. The distinctiveness of the gospel would be destroyed and a religion that combines Christian ideas and pagan ideas would have been born.

We must as Christians be continually on guard against those who appear to promote Jesus but who are in fact promoting a false religion. The greatest harm over the centuries has come to the church not from attacks from outside the church but from teachers who look like Christians and sound like Christians but who are not Christians. Jesus warned us to always be on our guard against false prophets who come to us in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. Paul warns in 1 Timothy 4 that there are going to be teachers in the Christian church who will be espousing the doctrines of demons. Just because people talk warmly about Jesus or appear to have supernatural powers does not mean they are promoting the true Jesus, the true gospel. We must be prepared to cast out the deception of demons if we are going to make it safely to heaven. We must ask hard questions of anyone who teaches, including me and be rigorous in our own study of the Bible so we can spot and resist the deception of demons that is at loose in the world.

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- *And in spite of...*

II. Human greed and prejudice (vv.19-24)

When the owners of the slave girl realize that their hope for profit went out of the slave girl when the demon went out of her, they are furious. They violently seize Paul and Silas and drag them off to the local magistrates. They are not impressed with the fact that Paul by the name of Jesus has authority over the spirit of “Python” in the girl. They are not impressed with the freedom from demonic oppression which has come to this girl. They care about one thing: making money. Their profit making enterprise has been destroyed by these apparently Jewish religious fanatics. However, when they drag Paul before the local authorities they do not mention their loss of income. If they argued that Paul and Silas should be punished because they were able to cast out the spirit by the name of Jesus they would have been promoting the superiority of Jesus over their own gods. Therefore, they appeal to the racist sentiments and nationalistic pride of these Roman authorities. They make sure everyone knows that Paul and Silas are Jewish. They accuse them of disturbing the peace when it was their slave girl who was the one disturbing the peace. They appeal to Roman pride essentially claiming that a good Roman citizen cannot follow the teachings of Paul about Jesus. These words incite the crowd that has gathered and so the magistrates, without giving any opportunity for Paul and Silas to defend themselves, order them stripped of their clothes and beaten with rods. They are then thrown into the innermost part of the local jail and their legs are put in stocks.

This is the first recorded attack against Christianity that is not motivated by Jewish hostility against Christian teaching. This attack on the gospel and upon Christians is not motivated by religious conviction but by greed and prejudice. Jesus tells us that we cannot serve God and money. Paul told Timothy (1 Timothy 6:9-10), “Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” The gospel and greed are like oil and water, they cannot mix together. Wanting to be rich, being consumed with worry about money and possessions, organizing your life around the accumulation of money or the things that money can buy are all barriers to enjoying Christ as he is revealed in the gospel. Greed not only motives active resistance to the gospel by unbelievers but it is an often hidden sin in the hearts of those who profess faith in Christ and causes professing Christians to resist Christ.

This past week I was at the Forest Lakes District fall conference. A fellow EFCA pastor spoke to us and he made a very insightful observation. He said “I’ve had people in my office confessing all manner of sexual sins and failures to read the bible and pray but I’ve never had anyone come to me to confess the sin of greed.” That’s true for me as well. Just as lust is wanting to have sexual relations with a person to whom you are not married so greed is wanting to have money or possessions that you do not currently have. Both are hell-deserving sins and must be confessed as sin by Christians. Christ died so you can be forgiven of your greed just as much as he died so you can be forgiven of your lust.

Just as greedy people resist the gospel because it calls us to believe that Jesus is better than money so racist people resist the gospel because it calls us to believe that those who are not like us are equal to us. Racist, prejudiced people do not like the gospel’s declaration that we are all made in the image of God, we are all equally guilty before God because of our sin and we are all equally accepted and loved by God through faith in Christ. If I am accepted by God through Christ then I am a person who accepts and loves all other humans regardless of their skin color or their economic standing or their educational status or their ethnicity or their age or their gender. Again, racism is another of those hidden sins within the Christian community that must be exposed and confessed as sin. We all need to confess to the Lord as sin our prejudices. The gospel and disliking people because they are different from us do not go together. You are resisting the gospel if you are not resisting your prejudices.

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III. Human despair and division (vv.25-34)

Verse 25 is an amazing description of how Christians respond to unjust treatment. Paul and Silas are bound with shackles on their ankles, most likely sitting on a filthy dirt floor in complete darkness, perhaps yet naked, with their backs bloodied and bruised from the beating they received; praying and singing hymns to God. They are here not because of doing evil but because of doing good. They are here illegally. They are Roman citizens who have not been given a fair trial as the law requires. They have no idea how long they will remain here, nor how they will be treated. If you were looking for reasons to be in despair, they certainly have them. Yet, they are not in despair, they are praising God. They are not in despair but full of joyful confidence in Christ. They are not singing because they know that God is going to send an earthquake. They are singing because they are amazed that God has loved them and given up his only son for them and has promised them eternal life not because of what they have done but because of what Christ has done. Christians joyfully worship God in the midst of despair producing events because of the promises of the gospel.

There is a hymn we regularly sing here at River Hills. It is entitled “It is Well with My Soul.” It was written by Horatio Spafford in 1873. He was a wealthy businessman who lost everything in the great Chicago Fire in 1871 and then, 2 years later, his four daughters were killed when the ship they were on collided with another ship out in the Atlantic Ocean. He wrote this hymn while sailing from America to meet his wife in England who had survived the collision. Listen to these two verses from his great hymn:

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul

The gospel enables Christians to rejoice in the midst of great suffering because of the promises that are given to us in Christ. That Christ has regarded my helpless condition and given his own life for my sins so that I am loved and forgiven is a ground for hope and joy no matter what happens. So Christians sing for joy in the midst of despair inducing tragedy because of the promises we have been given through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

While Paul and Silas are worshipping the Lord, God sends an earthquake that throws open the doors of the prison and unshackles all the prisoners. Instead of immediately running out the door Paul and Silas remain in the prison and somehow are able to persuade the other prisoners to remain as well. Why do they not flee? There are two other stories in Acts where God’s spokespersons are imprisoned and the Lord supernaturally releases them from prison, the 12 apostles in Acts 4 and Peter in Acts 12. Most likely Paul would have known these stories. Why did he not conclude that God was setting them free? In both of those other stories the Lord, through an angel, spoke to the apostles and Peter telling them to leave the prison. Paul received no such direct revelation and so he waited to see what God would have him to do. He knew that being a fugitive from Roman justice would severely hamper his ability to travel freely and preach the gospel and so without direct command from God he decided to wait and see what would happen. In addition, he held the other prisoners as he knew

they were guilty criminals and again, he didn't want Jesus and himself to be known as those who freed guilty prisoners. So he didn't take matters into his own hands but waited to see what God would do.

The earthquake awoke the jailer and he rushed to the jail and seeing that all the doors were open he assumed that all the prisoners were gone. He knew that he would be killed for permitting all to escape and so for the sake of honor prepared to take his own life. Suicide is the desperate act of despairing people to escape the pain of life. As he lifts up his short Roman sword to plunge it into his chest Paul cries out that he and the rest of the prisoners are still there. Amazed, the jailer calls for lights and he rushes into the prison and falls trembling at the feet of Paul and Silas. He immediately knows that the earthquake has come and his life has been spared because of the God whom Paul and Silas worship. Perhaps he remembers how cruelly he threw these wounded men into this pit and slapped their legs in the stocks on the previous night and now their God has repaid his cruelty with this enormous kindness. He is overcome with relief and fear of this great God and so as he brings them out of the prison he asks them to tell him how it is that he can be saved.

Paul and Silas, in the middle of the night tell the jailer and his entire household the gospel of Jesus. Luke only gives a brief summary of the content: "believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household." However, according to v. 32 they explained far more. Whereas we were told in the case of Lydia that the Lord opened her heart so that she could pay attention to what Paul was saying and then she and her household were baptized, here we are told that the jailer cleaned their wounds and then he and his household were baptized. Then he fixed a meal for Paul and Silas. We are told that this man who was recently on the verge of suicide is now rejoicing, he and his house because they had come to believe in God. The work of God in granting this man faith is not reported by Luke but only the effects of God's work are reported. The gospel overcame his despair and his cruelty. Just hours earlier he was a cruel jailer who happily enforced the unjust sentence upon Paul and Silas and now he is treating them as honored guests. The difference is the gospel. The gospel conquered his hardheartedness and his despair and it united him and his family to Paul and Silas. He joins in the joy of salvation with them. Do you see that? The story begins with Paul and Silas rejoicing in the Lord and it ends with the jailer and his house rejoicing in the Lord. This is what God does through the gospel; he conquers hard, despairing human hearts and unites former enemies in the joy of salvation.

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IV. Human injustice (vv.35-40)

The next morning, the magistrates, assuming the beating and imprisonment of Paul and Silas will teach them a lesson send the police officers that had beat them to tell them they were free to go. However, Paul will not cooperate. He now informs them that he and Silas are Roman citizens and that if the magistrates think they are going to get away with this miscarriage of justice in secret they have another thing coming. Paul demands a public apology and a public demonstration that he is innocent of the charges made against him by the magistrates themselves publicly releasing them from the jail. Why didn't Paul tell the magistrates he and Silas were Roman citizens before getting beaten up? He didn't speak up then for the same reason he is speaking up now. He didn't try to avoid the persecution by using his Roman citizenship so there would be no question as to where his confidence lay and so that he would be in solidarity with the small church that was forming in Philippi. Most likely most of the Christians were not Roman citizens and so could not escape persecution through legal means. So if Paul were to have used his citizenship to avoid unjust treatment it would have shaken the confidence of the young church in the gospel. However, now he insists upon exposing the injustice of the magistrates in order to intimidate them and so make them think twice before they attack another Christian.

When you have been conquered by the gospel, when your life and your security does not belong to this world, when you are citizens of a different kingdom, the way you respond to injustice is forever changed. Since our life is hidden with Christ in God then we do not defend our lives here. We endure the hostility and rejection of others without defensiveness because Christ is our defender and we know that having our rights taken away here cannot affect the life we have in Christ. Being mistreated by men means nothing to us because we will never be mistreated by God, we will never be rejected by him. So we regularly do not demand our rights so that we can preach the gospel and display the greatness and glory of Jesus. However, we do fight for justice for others. We do use the legal and political system to protect the rights of others. This is God's world and he has established the authorities for the purpose of rewarding those who do good and punishing those who do evil and so we use the authorities God has established in order to help the weak and the oppressed. The gospel enables us to overcome injustice done to us by enabling us to not seek revenge but to meekly take it and we overcome injustice done to others by courageously defending their rights no matter the cost to ourselves.

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- *Human injustice*

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