

# Acts 16

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[ 0 : 00 ] All right, good evening, and my name is James. I'm a staff team here at St. Silas, and if you've joined us for the very first time this evening, a massive warm welcome to you.

It's great that we can join together virtually, isn't it? And it's great that you're here tonight. You're in the right place. So let me start in a word of prayer as we start, and then we'll crack on into this great, riveting passage.

So, Father, we thank you that we can meet together as your church, together virtually, and we pray that you'd really speak to us this evening. Please help me to speak clearly. Help us to listen well at home as we think about and reflect on Jesus, our great King. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, a little while ago, I was lucky enough to go to Jordan, and one of the great sights in Jordan, other than the Wadi Rum down in the south where they film all the movies, is the ancient Roman city of Jerash.

And it really is spectacular. You see, as you approach the city, you go into the city, on your left-hand side, there's this amazing hippodrome, and it's totally intact for all intents and purposes.

[ 1 : 13 ] You feel like you're on the set of Ben-Hur. And then you walk down this great, splendid mall, as it were, ancient 2,000-year-old walkway.

And ahead of you is this great marketplace, the Agora, that's been paved over, and it's got all these columns surrounding you. And there's this magnificent amphitheater there.

And then up on the hill, overlooking that, is this temple. And then further down south, there is another temple. And everything about it says this is Rome.

Everything has been built to impress you, to put the visitor in absolute awe as you go in. But the most spectacular thing about visiting Jerash is the Ark of Triumph that you go through as you enter the city.

And it was built for Emperor Hadrian's visit in 129 AD. And it is absolutely huge and spectacular. And Emperor Hadrian, he would have walked through this arch when he visited like a triumphant Roman general.

[ 2 : 24 ] And all his enemies might have been kowtowed behind him in chains. All the local folk who rebelled against him. And he would have no doubt have spread bread amongst all his supporters and thrown out goodies for them and treats.

And he would have had a great impressive retinue of people behind him, all his supporters, all the people who believe and trust in him.

And that really is the point of this passage this evening of Acts 16. It's a passage where we're brought to the very center of the Roman Empire to Philippi, Little Rome, as it were.

And here we see the bigger and better Hadrian, King Jesus, supreme and conquering and active, saving his people. Jesus is Lord, full stop.

That's the point of this passage. And it's a passage that really subverts the way we think about Jesus at the moment. So we might be looking at coronavirus and we might look at the church today.

[ 3 : 32 ] We might say that Jesus, if he is in control, he's not really doing a very good job. We might say that coronavirus is a bad thing, that it's an evil thing, and that Jesus can't control it.

And we imagine that Jesus is stuck in this cosmic wrestling match with the demonic and evil realms. And we're not sure if he's going to come out on top.

Or we might go to church. We might look at how we do church at the moment. We might see only, what, 200 views on YouTube or something like that. And we think, oh, that's a bit pathetic.

What's this all about, really? And it doesn't look as though Jesus is in control. And the temptation for us, then, is to look inwards and to look to ourselves and our institutions to make our own salvation.

But this passage says, Jesus is Lord and he still reigns. So I wonder what your lockdown secret guilty pleasure has been.

[ 4 : 36 ] And I don't know if I should share this, but I'm going to share it. My guilty pleasure at the moment is the Rugby Beast YouTube videos. And it's these videos where you watch great big rugby players trashing one another.

And they've got this absolutely spectacular one. It's called David and Goliath. And it starts off, you know David and Goliath, where the little guy overtrumps the bigger guy. And then the clip goes, this movie is not about that.

And then you just watch these giant rugby players trashing other rugby players. So you've got Dwayne Vermeule in there throwing Aaron Smith around like he's a beanbag.

And then you've got Kieran Reid smashing opposition all over the show. Or you've got Ndolo running down the wing and just smashing through eight, nine, ten players on his way to score yet another try.

And that's a bit of a picture of what Jesus is like in this passage. He is the undisputed champion conquering everything that's in his way.

[ 5 : 38 ] And so by way of context, Luke has been painting a picture of all the nations coming into God's kingdom as God's word goes out.

But in this chapter, Luke pulls back the curtain, as it were, and he gives us a little glimpse behind the scenes of how Jesus is at work saving his people.

And how he is really the Lord that is at the head of this great train of these people going into his kingdom. So in this chapter, we're going to look at three points.

And the first one there is Christ is Lord who saves those who believe, verses 6 to 15. And then we're going to look at Christ is Lord who conquers all opposition, verses 16 to 26.

And then finally, we're going to consider Christ is Lord who calls you into his household, verse 27 to 40. So the first point there, Christ is Lord who saves all who believe, verses 6 to 15.

[ 6 : 40 ] Now the book of Acts is sometimes called the book of the Acts of the Apostles. But it could just as well be called the book of Acts of the risen Lord Jesus by his spirit in the world.

And we see this in the very first section of our reading here. That Jesus may be in heaven, but he's still very much in charge.

So just look down at verse 6 with me. And we see here that Paul is being kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. Jesus is withholding him. He's stopping him.

And then verse 7 we see, we read, the spirit of Jesus did not allow them. He doesn't allow them to go and preach somewhere, but in fact sends them somewhere else to preach.

And we remember that on this big missionary journey, the second of Paul's great missionary journeys, preaching the gospel and strengthening the churches in the region of Turkey and Greece.

[ 7 : 40 ] And we could get distracted by all the mechanics here of how the spirit's working and how the visions are working here. But Paul, in verses 9 and 10, but Luke interprets their meaning for us in verse 10.

And Luke's the author there, where he writes, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. You see, the thing that Dr. Luke wants to highlight for us here, and the big thing that we see Jesus actively doing in this passage is spreading the gospel out.

Jesus wants to save people, and he wants the whole earth to be filled with the good news of his death and resurrection. And I don't know if you're anything like me, but I find that I very easily get distracted in the Christian life.

I might get drawn aside by wondering about, oh, what's going on in verse 9 and 10 with these visions and stuff? I might get distracted by doing social action and good works, and that becomes the big gospel thing for me.

So increasingly, as I grow older in the Christian faith, I find myself asking myself this question. Am I doing what Jesus is doing?

[ 8 : 55 ] Am I sharing the good news? Who have I told the gospel to today? And if I haven't shared the good news today, what am I going to do about this?

And then in verse 12, we see that the gospel has started to reach even the very inner courts of the Roman Empire at Philippi. And so in the book of Acts, we have seen the gospel go out to Jews in Jerusalem, and then out to the pagans, and then out to the Greeks, and to the Gentiles, and all of those.

And now we see the gospel going out to the Romans. And Philippi is a Roman colony, and that is, it's probably populated by pensioned off Roman soldiers who've been granted citizenship, given a piece of land.

And whatever that might look like to be a Roman colony, the important thing to pick up here is that for the Philippians, being a Roman citizen is a very big thing.

It's the thing that defined them. And so as we see Paul and Silas arriving at Philippi, what do they see them doing? They go to a place of prayer on the Sabbath, as was their practice.

[10:10] And the place of prayer is really a precursor to what a synagogue would have been. It might have been a place set aside that the Jews may have gone to in that city if there wasn't a synagogue built at that time.

And here at this place of prayer, they meet Lydia. And Lydia is a well-off person. She's a God-fearer. And Jesus has brought his apostles, as Jesus has brought his apostles to Philippi, so Jesus has opened Lydia's heart in verse 14 to respond to what Paul has declared to her, that she may believe the good news and be saved.

And so in Lydia's conversion, everything that we see has been done by Jesus. Jesus is the Lord who saves people. And so sometimes my friends may ask me, James, what about those who haven't heard the gospel?

And Dr. Luke answers this question for me. He says, Jesus is more passionate about saving people and sharing the good news than you and I ever will be.

Jesus has moved heaven and earth for people to hear the gospel in his great kindness and mercy.

And so the right question to ask then is, how will we respond to what we have heard?

[11:33] What will we do with the little bits that we do know, considering they come out of God's kindness? Will we respond like Lydia does here in Philippi, by listening in verse 14?

And so in this opening section, we see that Christ is Lord who saves those who believes. And next we're going to consider that Christ is Lord who conquers all opposition, verses 16 to 26.

And I think the question that many of us ask is, if Jesus is Lord, then why does he look so powerless? Why is his message opposed?

Why does he look so puny and insignificant? He can't be Lord. Surely not. And Dr. Luke says, nothing is further from the truth. Let me show you.

So I wonder if you might look down at verse 16. And here we see Paul and Silas, they encounter a female slave who's been possessed by a spirit. And it gives her this great power of being able to tell the future.

[12:42] And then notice how the spirit describes Paul and Silas when they meet her. These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved.

And then look at what happens in verse 18. Finally, Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her.

And presumably Paul would have said that because he didn't want to be associated in any way with the demonic. He didn't want it to look as though his message was being endorsed by her and by this evil spirit.

But notice what happens. Immediately, the spirit leaves her. And so we see this opposition by the demonic here and it's vanquished by a word at the mere mention of Jesus' name.

And the next opposition that we see in this section here is that the apostles meet is that of the authorities and the mob, the crowd in the next section.

[13:48] And they've been stirred up by the disgruntled owners of the slave girl who've seemingly lost their way to profitability. They're more concerned with profit than with her welfare.

And notice here, Luke really slows down the action because he wants us to see how bad things are for Paul and Silas and Luke and the absolute impossibility of their rescue here.

Notice how they are stripped. And then we see how they are beaten. And then we consider how they are flogged. And then we see how they are imprisoned.

And they guarded carefully. And they placed inside an inner cell. And not just placed, they're locked up in the stocks. And it is an absolutely impossible situation.

Well, how could the Lord Jesus reign and rule here when his messengers are locked up? But then look down and read verse 26 and see what happens there, surprisingly.

[14:52] Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundation of the prisons were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open and everyone's chains became loose.

You see the mob and the authorities look very powerful here. They seem to have the upper hand. They lock Paul away. They lock away the gospel. But Jesus is absolutely in charge. And he even orders creation to achieve his purposes. And so sometimes we might think, so if Jesus is, it looks as though Jesus isn't in control.

How can I trust him? How can I believe that his word is trustworthy? How can I trust Jesus when I see coronavirus and all the hardships in the world around me at the moment?

And Luke's response to that question is can we trust Jesus? Is have you met him? Have you seen him? Have you seen that he is Lord in directing his apostles' steps?

[ 15 : 54 ] Have you seen that he is Lord in over people's hearts, calling them to respond? Have you seen him as Lord in how he's vanquished the demonic? Have you seen him in Lord in how he cares for and rescues his apostles?

And Lord in ordering his creation. And he does all of this for our benefits and for his glory. He is the absolute undisputed Lord in this passage.

But then notice then that because Paul and others, they recognize Jesus' authority and power, look how they respond in the midst of these great troubles and trials while they're still in prison before they get rescued.

It's a great challenge for us, isn't it? So just look down at verse 25. How do they respond? With praying and singing hymns to God. And so they've been beaten, they're flogged, they're locked up and they're praying and they're singing hymns.

They are completely dependent on God. They're leaning on him even in the midst of their greatest pain and hardships. And they've recognized that these hardships have actually been a great blessing from God.

[ 17 : 08 ] That they were a sign that they were entering God's kingdom. So early in Acts, we read that Paul says to the disciples and to believers that through many trials and hardships, we must enter God's kingdom.

And here we see that in practice. They were leaning on God and rejoicing in that they were sharing in Christ's sufferings. Notice how they were treated is exactly the same way as Christ was treated. that he was stripped naked, that he was flogged, that he was beaten and presumably that he was imprisoned all on unjustly trumped up charges.

And so Paul and Silas and Luke, they recognize this and they lean on Christ knowing that they are simply walking in Jesus' footsteps which would have been a great confidence to them.

And it's an incredibly moving image and picture, isn't it, of this absolute hopelessness but this total dependence on Jesus. And I wonder what the other prisoners in that jail cell might have thought when they saw what Paul and Silas and Luke had gone through and how they'd seen them react in dependence and trust.

[ 18 : 27 ] How might have they been moved and been made to think about who Jesus is and worked in their lives. But notice also the trust and obedience that Paul, Silas and Luke display and how they respond when they are liberated, when that earthquake strikes.

I wonder if you were absolutely amazed by this. You can't see this happening in any of those prisons in Brazil or down south in England. But what do they do? The earthquake comes, the chains are loosed and they do nothing.

They don't escape. Why? Because they are trusting in God. For whatever reason that is, why they don't, they trust absolutely in God.

But then, I wonder if you started wondering there, if the earthquake wasn't to liberate them and wasn't to free them, then who was this earthquake for? And the answer is that Jesus sends this earthquake to save the Philippian jailer.

Isn't that amazing? And so that brings us to our third point there, that Christ is the Lord who calls you into his household. Verse 27 to 40. Well, a couple of years ago, more than a couple of years ago, there was this great earthquake in Cape Town.

[ 19 : 46 ] And the thing about Cape Town is it's not on a fault. So it's not really the place where you should get earthquakes. And the rector of quite a big church in Cape Town, St. James Kenilworth at the time, was a chap called Frank Retief.

And I heard Frank Retief speaking of his experience of pastoring this church through this great earthquake years and years later. And he said it was absolutely amazing because through this earthquake, all the neighborhood got bound together.

And the gospel went out as people saw the kindness of Christians, as neighbors started telling their neighbors about the good news of Jesus.

And at this time, they saw hundreds and many more people coming into church and being saved and coming to recognize that Jesus is Lord. And that's what we see here as this earthquake works for the Philippian jailer's salvation.

And so the question that drives this last point is really the question that the Philippian jailer asks in verse 30 there. Lords, what must I do to be saved?

[ 20 : 57 ] And so Paul and Silas are quick on a response in verse 31. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household. And chapter 16 is absolutely relentless in driving home this point.

That Jesus is Lord and is active in this world and that if we want to be saved, then we must believe in him. And so last week we considered in chapter 15 how the gospel was acceptable to the Jews and how God was building one people together, a Jew and gentile under one Lord.

Here in chapter 16 and towards the end of the book of Acts, we see this growing theme of the gospel going out amongst the Romans and of how it being seen as acceptable amongst the Romans, that this is the gospel for them.

And so in this Philippian jailer we see a jailer who comes to faith but we also see a proud Roman citizen who comes to faith.

And if you've been to Jerash, remember how we talked about it right at the start, being a citizen of Rome was a big deal. It's a lot more important than it might be for us today. It was the very thing that defined them.

[ 22 : 14 ] And so I struggle to think about what it is that might help us identify in the same way how we think of being a Roman today.

And I thought it might be someone who's perhaps committed to an idea. So the Romans today might be those who are very committed to the idea of being a liberal, who find their identity in that and who are defined by that and who considers everyone who thinks different to them, a second class citizen.

It might be that being a Roman today is the person who lives for money, who's defined by that idea of making money and in the pursuit thereof.

And that's the thing that gets them up in the morning. But this passage calls those people to a higher citizenship and into a new household.

This is the gospel for the Romans, for those people. And so it's a wonderful picture that we see in verse 27. The Roman jailer, he's about to kill himself.

[ 23 : 20 ] The text doesn't say why. Perhaps because he recognized that as a Roman citizen, if he'd let his prisoners go free, then that would be something that would be a big no-no in Roman culture and that he'd face death because of that.

And so we see him, he's trembling and he's fearful in verse 29. And Paul and Silas might have been hard up here. They may have been beaten and trodden down and whipped.

But the jailer is the real person who's imprisoned here by his fear and anxiety. You don't see him singing any psalms and hymns at the start of that section.

But then in verse 34, we read, having heard the gospel, that he is filled with joy because he had come to believe in God.

And so the jailer moves from being suicidally depressed to being joyful because he has come to believe in the Lord Jesus. And it's all because he's heard the gospel.

[ 24 : 24 ] And the astounding thing here is just how powerless the gospel has looked in this section. Paul has been imprisoned. He's been beaten.

The crowds and the magistrates have ruled over them. All the might and pomp and bureaucracy of Rome has come down upon them. And it looks hopeless.

And all of that is hopeless next to the authority of the Lord Jesus in this passage. And I think at this moment it's probably a very real application for a lot of us.

We might be quite depressed. We might look quite down. We might be sad that we're not seeing our friends. Not seeing family. Our job prospects might look down.

We might be feeling quite ill. Friends of ours might be struck down with illness. But the challenge of this passage is won't we see that Jesus is completely and absolutely in control.

[ 25 : 24 ] and won't we turn to him in total dependence and trust believing in him and being saved and joining with those saints of old and singing spiritual hymns and psalms even in the worst circumstances.

Won't we know the joy of knowing and believing in Jesus. And as we come into land here I wonder if you might just look down at verse 31 to 34 and scan and count how many times Luke the author there refers to and his household.

And it seems very odd. Why does he mention that so many times? And it came up at the very start of our reading this evening as well. In Lydia Lydia and her household were baptized.

What's Luke doing there? And then notice then secondly that chapter 16 ends off rather controversially. Just look down at verse 37.

When it is time to be released Paul kicks up a fuss about being a Roman citizen. What's all that about? He says that he's a Roman citizen and he asks for the magistrates and town officials and the authorities to publicly escort them out of prison.

[ 26 : 44 ] What is all that about? And I think what is happening here is that Paul is getting the magistrates to admit publicly that the Christian gospel is not as accused in verse 21 of advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.

Remember that was the charge that got them thrown up and locked up. It was a completely fake charge and that's what Paul is establishing here. But rather the Christian gospel is for Romans whoever they may be.

The Christian gospel is for Romans today as it were. And so Paul is establishing a public precedent being set by having the Roman officials escort them outside.

It's as if the gospel is getting this massive Roman stamp of approval that Christians are okay and welcomed in Philippi. And Paul does this because he wants the Christians at Philippi to be free from abuse and so that they can go on spreading the gospel after Paul, Silas, and Luke have left.

And then by repeating household and their households, I think Luke and Paul is saying you may be in a household that is you may be a citizen of Rome and you might find your identity in money, in liberal values, in a or sport or whatever it is, whatever it is the idea that's captured your heart that rules you that you're absolutely committed to it.

[ 28 : 24 ] You might be very proud of that but Jesus is calling you to a higher household. He's calling you to a higher citizenship.

You see, Jesus is calling you to be a citizen of heaven and into that heavenly household where we'll all sit and feast in that heavenly Zion, that heavenly kingdom with our great and resurrected and all-powerful king, King Jesus.

Let me pray for us as we close. So Father, we pray that we recognize that Jesus is Lord we pray that we recognize that we are members of a higher household, a higher kingdom, that our citizenship is in heaven.

We pray that we show dependence on King Jesus at all times, even when things seem really tough. Please, Lord, may we work with Jesus in spreading the gospel in the world to your great praise and glory.

In Jesus' name, Amen.