

“How Jesus Changes Lives – Part 4”

Text: Acts 16:19-40

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on September 29, 2019 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** British Columbia is the most irreligious province in Canada. In 2001, 35% claimed to have no religion. By 2011 that number rose to 44%.
 - It is becoming increasingly common to meet people who have little to no Judeo-Christian background, who don't know the basic stories of the Bible like Adam and Eve, who have never been in a church, and who have a slightly negative views of Christians and Christianity.
 - Do you know someone like this? I sure do. I long for them to know Jesus. I pray for them. But sometimes it feels like there are just too many barriers in the way.
- This morning we are completing our series through Acts 16. Today we are looking at the story of a man who was a prison guard at the local jail in the city of Philippi.
 - At the beginning this man has nothing to do with Jesus and treats Christians in brutal ways. At the end he and his whole family are rejoicing in their new-found faith in Jesus and are part of the church in Philippi.
 - What happened? It's got something to do with an earthquake that shakes the very foundations of his life. Let's look at this story in order that we might learn one of the most common ways that God changes peoples' lives and the role that we can play in it.
- Let's ask four questions about this prison guard: first, *what kind of person is he?* Second, *what prepared him to encounter Jesus?* Third, *what happened to him that he embraced Jesus?* Fourth, *what were the results?*

WHAT KIND OF PERSON WAS HE?

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** First then, **what kind of person is he?**
- Notice in the first place that *he is a blue-collar guy with a family.*
 - He has a good blue-collar job as prison guard and verse 33 says he has a family.
- Second, *he is a rough ex-military guy who knows how to hurt people.*
 - The job of being a prison guard was given to military veterans when they retired. Philippi was a retirement town because the Emperor gave all kinds of benefits to soldiers who retired there. So here we have a man who has been trained as a soldier and travelled the Roman Empire. He's seen things most people have not. He's done things that have hurt people.
 - You can see hints of this in verse 24. **READ 24 - *Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.*** Rather than just putting them in the outer ring of cells, he throws Paul and Silas into the inner prison, which is the maximum-security cell. He roughs them up even more by putting their feet in wood stocks. These stocks were attached to the floor and set wide apart. So, Paul and Silas had to sit or lie on the cold floor with their legs pulled apart and fastened to the ground. Very uncomfortable. But this guy doesn't care.

- Finally, *he has no Judeo-Christian background and no interest in it.*
 - We saw a few weeks ago that there aren't even enough Jews in this Philippi to form a synagogue and the good news about Jesus has not yet reached this city. So, he has no background. However, we also looked at the story of Lydia. She had no background but sought out the handful of Jews and attended a prayer meeting in order to learn more. Not this guy. He's not interested.
 - We might say that **(SHOW SLIDE 3) he is an unshakeable man with no Judeo-Christian background.**
- So in modern terms he is like a middle aged blue collar guy who retired from the Navy and is raising his family in Esquimalt. Because of his background he got a job working government security at the Parliament buildings and spends his downtime training in Mixed Martial Arts at a local gym. He sees no need for God, Jesus, or church in his life.
 - Do you know anyone like this man? How can such people ever see their need for Jesus when there are so many obstacles in the way?

WHAT PREPARED HIM TO ENCOUNTER JESUS?

- Having seen what kind of person he is, let's ask a second question: **(SHOW SLIDE 4) What prepared him to encounter Jesus?** Here I want us to see that **(SHOW SLIDE 5) Although he does not know it, the tectonic plates under his life are moving in such a way that his life is about to be shaken by an earthquake.**
 - God is secretly putting things in place so that this man can encounter the saving power of Jesus Christ. Let me show you three things that prepared him for the earthquake that is about to hit his life.

GOD'S INVISIBLE HAND

- **(SHOW SLIDE 6) First, God's invisible hand brought Christians inside the walls of his life.**
 - Let's pick up the story. Paul and Silas have been brought before the magistrates. They have been beaten with rods and turned over to this prison guard. He locks inside the walls of the prison but he does he know that one of God's purposes is to bring them inside the walls of his life.
 - Even Paul and Silas can't foresee this. They didn't say, ***"I wonder how we could reach the ex-military population of Philippi. I know, let's get arrested, beaten, and thrown in prison so we can tell them about Jesus."*** No, this is all the invisible hand of God at work to save this prison guard.
- Most of us read this wrongly. We read it as a story of God miraculously freeing Paul and Silas from jail through an earthquake. But that is *not* the point of this story. We know that is *not* the point because Paul and Silas stay in the jail. After the earthquake, they don't run away. They stay and talk with the jailer and his family, whose house would have been on the property. The next morning, they are still in the jail until, as verse 39 says, the magistrates came to the prison and "took them out."
 - So, this is not a prison break story. It's a story of Jesus setting a prison guard free. It begins by putting Christians in his life.
- Maybe God is doing the same with you. Christians, could it be that the very people who most oppose you are those whom Jesus wants to save? Could it be that his invisible hand has brought you into their life? Or maybe you are not a Christian. Could it be that the invisible

hand of God has brought you among all these Christians today because he wants to do something amazing in your life?

- Let's continue on and see what else prepared this prison guard for the big moment.

UNINTENTIONALLY LEARNING ABOUT THE GOSPEL

- **(SHOW SLIDE 7) Second, he unintentionally learned some things about the gospel.**
 - There is something that has always puzzled me about this passage. How does this prison guard go from knowing nothing about the God of the Bible to asking Paul and Silas what he has to do to be saved?
 - His question reveals that somewhere along the line he has gained a basic understanding of God, of his sin, and of the fact that he will face judgment. How did he learn this? There are a few clues in the story.
- Notice he uses the same word as the slave girl in the story that we looked at last week. He asks how to be **“saved.”** The slave girl followed Paul and his friends around the city yelling, **“These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.”**
 - Did the jailer know what she said? It seems very likely. Paul and Silas were in jail because of what just happened with her. Prison guards kept logs of prisoners and the charges against them. So, this man would have heard the story of this girl—of what she said and how her life had been changed.
- Additionally, Paul and Silas pray out loud and sing songs. Apparently, they do this for a few hours. Verse 25 says the other prisoners listened. Did the prison guard also listen?
 - Then he saw how the earthquake broke all the chains and set them free. In this he sees that the God Paul and Silas serve is on their side but that he has treated them poorly and so is afraid of the judgment he will face from their God.
- Again, this should encourage you. Paul and Silas are not following some sort of strategic plan for evangelism. They are just living their lives, going about their prayers, singing together, and talking about God.
 - It is the same for you and I. Who knows what seeds are planted along the way? Who knows when God will use them for his purposes.
 - So, this man has unintentionally picked up a few pieces of truth along the way.

WATCHING HOW JESUS' PEOPLE SUFFER

- **(SHOW SLIDE 8) Finally, he saw how Jesus' people suffered.**
 - Look at verse 25. **READ 25 - About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.** What?! Their bodies are still aching from the beating they received. They have open wounds. The blood is still drying. They sit in total darkness. They are so uncomfortable they can't sleep.
- Yet, they pray and sing. What kind of songs did the jailer hear coming out of that prison cell? Did he hear something like, **“When sorrows like sea billows roll/Whatever my lot/Thou has taught me to say/‘It is well, it is well, with my soul’.”**
 - Did he hear something like, **“Blessed be your name/On the road marked with suffering/Though there's pain in the offering/Blessed be your name.”**
 - Or did he hear something like, **“Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him! How I've proved Him o'er and o'er/Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!/Oh, for grace to trust Him more!**

- Whatever he heard, the jailer knew there was something uncanny about these men.
 - You can see it after the earthquake as well. Paul, Silas, and the other prisoners could have easily beaten and killed this one prison guard for how he treated them. But they don't. Paul saves his life and speaks kindly to him.
- All through history, it has been the way Christians suffer that has drawn so many to Jesus. People have watched as Christians courageously chose to die brutal deaths rather than deny Jesus. People have watched as a plague hit a city and everyone fled leaving their own family members to die but Christians chose to stay and care for the sick and dying knowing they would die themselves. People have watched as Christians were treated in terrible ways and yet have forgiven their enemies.
 - In 2006 a young man broke into a little Amish one-room school house in Pennsylvania. He took hostages and shot five children, all girls from ages seven to thirteen. He then shot himself. By that evening members of the Amish community had gone to the home of his parents and said, ***“We lost children. You lost your child. We forgive your son and want to love and support you through your grief process.”*** The shooter had a wife and children. Three days later the funeral of the shooter was held. Half the people were Amish.
 - All across the country people said, ***“how can anyone forgive such a thing?”*** Four years later some secular socialists wrote a book called *Amish Grace*. After interviewing many in the community, they reported that the Amish believe Jesus died forgiving his murderers and to be a Christian is to have that kind of love and forgiveness at the centre of one's life.
- My Christian brothers and sisters, one of the greatest ways we bear witness to Jesus is through our suffering.
 - A few weeks ago our family had lunch with a friend who is middle aged and has cancer. The prognosis does not look good. Her chemo treatments are brutal. She is completely bald. Yet she said, ***“I'm filled with hope and I'm not afraid to die.”*** I said, ***“Can you tell my kids why.”*** She said something to the effect of, ***“Because of what Jesus has done I know where I am going. I can't wait for heaven.”***
 - Her hope in the midst of real suffering was a powerful witness to the hope that can be found in Christ.
- Maybe you're not a Christian but are looking into Christianity today. Jesus can give you the emotional resources to face the very worst things in life.
 - So there you have it. Three ways that this unshakeable man has been prepared for the earthquake that is about to hit his life—an earthquake that will result in his salvation.

WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?

- **(SHOW SLIDE 9) Third, what happened to him that he embraced Jesus?** The answer is that **(SHOW SLIDE 10) his personal and professional life were so badly shaken that it provoked him (for the first time) to ask the right question.**
 - Let's pick it up at verse 26. ***READ 26 - and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.***

- In one moment, his professional and personal life completely collapse. He stares in horror at the prison doors hanging open. Under Roman law, prisoner guards were put to death if their prisoners escaped. So, he decides to commit suicide.
 - Look at verse 28. **READ 28** - ²⁸ *But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”* ²⁹ *And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas.* ³⁰ *Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”*
- The earthquake did not just shake the foundations of the jail, it shook the foundations of the jailer’s life. You would think that once he saw the prisoners were all there he would feel fine. But he isn’t fine. He’s worse. This unshakeable man is now trembling with fear before Paul and Silas.
 - Why? Because this crisis in his life has enabled him to see what he never saw before. With piercing clarity, he sees that there is a fate worse than death and that is to stand before the Judge of the Universe as one who is guilty.
 - Previously he had always excused and justified his actions. But not anymore. This professional and personal crisis has caused him to ask the biggest and most important question we must all ask: what must I do to be saved?
- He saying, ***“I see now that there is a God. I see that I have sinned. I see that I cannot excuse or justify my actions. So, please, tell what I have to do to escape what I deserve? I’ll do anything. I’ll give away all my money for what good is all the money in the world if I lose my soul? I’ll say 10,000 hail Marys. I’ll give up drinking. I’ll clean up my language. I’ll volunteer my time. I’ll meditate. Just tell me what I have to do to be saved from judgement.”***
 - It is right here that we once again stand amazed at the heart of the Christian message. The heart of Christianity is not about what you must *do* to be saved. What a terrible burden to spend your life *doing* more and more in order to try and gain acceptance from God. No, the heart of Christianity is the word “gospel,” which means “good news.” News is something that has already happened. Good news is something that has happened that fills you with joy.
 - And listen, the good news is that Jesus has *done* something for you that you cannot *do* for yourself. Jesus has lived the perfect life that you should have lived. Jesus faced the judgement that you deserve to face for your sins. So, the wonderful news of Christianity is that you can be saved from judgment because of what Jesus has *done*. How can you enjoy this amazing gift?
 - You simply have to entrust yourself to Jesus to save you. You simply have to call on him to *do* for you what you *cannot do* for yourself.
- Look at verse 31. **READ 31** - ***And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”***
 - The prison guard cannot believe how wonderful this good news is. That is why in verse 34 he and his family are rejoicing.
 - Maybe you are not a Christian but you are here today checking it all out. Could it be that God has brought you to hear this message? All your sins can be forgiven. It is possible to be rescued from judgement and hell. The good news is that you don’t have to do anything to earn this because Jesus has done it all for you. You

simply have to entrust your life to him and call on him saying, **“Jesus, save me from my sins. Save me from judgement because of what you did for me.”**

GOD’S MEGAPHONE TO ROUSE A DEAF WORLD

- So how does God rescue urban people who have no Judeo-Christian background, no interest in it, and who are even hostile to Christians?
 - One of his most common ways is to use a personal or professional crisis. When the foundations of your life are shaken you start asking the important questions that you’ve always ignored like, **“Is there a God? Can I know God? What is the meaning of life? Is there life after death? Can I be forgiven for what I’ve done?”**
 - We typically ignore these questions when life is good but God often uses a crisis to shake us up and make us think about what really matters. As C.S. Lewis writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 11) “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”**¹ Let me give two examples of this.
- Two weeks ago, the pastoral team had the privilege of having lunch with the family our church sponsored as refugees to come to Canada. The husband has two brothers. They were also refugees in a camp in Sudan that had 30,000 people.
 - We heard more about their seven years in the camp. The conditions were very difficult. Each person was given a tarp and a few poles. They would walk 2 hours to cut down long grass to make walls for their tarp roof.
 - But God did amazing things in that camp. Each day they would make coffee. The smell of it would carry through the camp and many people would come and sit in their tent, which was about 15x15 feet. Since it was 40 degrees outside in the desert, they would sit in their tent all day drinking coffee and talking about the Bible with people.
 - We asked if anyone became Christians. They said, **“oh yes.”** We asked, **“How many?”** **“Oh about 90% of the people that came.”** **“How many people is that?”** **“About 60 people.”** One said that when all of your life is stripped away you are more open to discuss things like this.
 - He said that God used these times as a sort of **“love push”** toward himself.
- I’ve been thinking lately about a man that a bunch of people in this church went to University with. I will call him Jim. Jim was not a Christian but was a very moral guy. Jim has also had success tremendous personal success. He played on the UBC basketball team. He married a beautiful woman. He went on to work on the coaching staff of an NBA team that won the championship. Just this week he was featured on the CBC for his work this summer in bringing basketball camps to poor kids across East Africa. All of his personal and professional dreams were realized.
 - But a while ago his marriage collapsed. It got so bad that he and his wife drew up their divorce papers. They signed them but couldn’t mail them because it was the weekend. On Sunday morning his wife said, **“Do you want to go to church today?”** He said he intended to say, “no” but somehow said, “yes.”
 - Sitting in church that day with his life falling apart around him, he heard about what Jesus had done for him. He received Christ and his whole life changed.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Chapter VI.

- We could multiply these stories over and over again. When life is good we often ignore God but when the foundations of our life are shaken we start asking the big and most important questions and God draws us to himself.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

- **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** Finally, and very quickly, **what were the results?**
 - The prison guard is so amazed by this good news that he wants those he loves to hear about it. He takes Paul and Silas to his house and verse 32 says Paul and Silas **“spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.”** His rough exterior becomes one of compassion as he washes Paul and Silas wounds.
 - Then verse 33 says the family was baptized. Baptism is the first step after a person receives Jesus. Have you been baptized? And then notice in verse 34 that he and his family are rejoicing.
 - This man’s life has been utterly transformed by Jesus.
- Christians, your role is the same as that of Paul and Silas. Just live your life for him. His invisible hand will bring you into people’s lives.
 - When the moment is right, turn a conversation toward Jesus and what he can do for the person. You never know the effect it will have.
- Remember that up to Acts 16 the good news about Jesus had not yet spread to what we now know as the continent of Europe. It had only been in Asia. But God called Paul and Silas to go over to Philippi, which is in modern day Europe. Do you realize the domino effect that happened from here?
 - Paul and Silas could never have seen the strategic importance of this little mission’s trip to the entire history of Europe and the western world. After this, Christianity spread all around Europe and then Europeans came to North America. Our entire western civilization, including ideas like democracy and human rights grew out of Christian ideas in Europe. Likewise, great social actions like prison reform, the establishment of hospitals, the rise of science, and the abolition of slavery came out of Christians from Europe.
 - Europe also became the base for the entire modern missions movement. From there William Carey and Amy Carmichael went to India, Hudson Taylor to China, Adoniram Judson to Burma, David Livingstone to Africa, and so many to North America.
 - It is a basic historical fact that this little missions trip that Paul and his friends took to Europe was a turning point in the history of Western civilization. Who knows what the invisible hand of God is doing as we live faithfully for him in our city.
- So that is Acts 16. This chapter has taught us what it looks like to take the good news of Jesus to a leading city like Victoria. We are to go to the city, to live in community with each other, to expect opposition from spiritual powers, and to tell people the good news about Jesus.