

Multifaceted Salvation

A Sermon on Acts 16:6ff

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The last three passages in our Acts sermon series have dealt with various problems and questions that have arisen as the gospel has advanced into the Gentile world. The bulk of Acts 15 considered the **theological** question of whether believing Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, prompting us to consider the nature of **salvation by grace**. The end of Acts 15 portrayed the **practical** question of whether Paul and Barnabas should give John Mark a second chance to serve as a missionary, prompting us to think about how to handle disagreements on **secondary** and **tertiary** matters. And the first section of Acts **16** presented us with the **strategic** question of whether it would still be wise to **circumcise** Timothy, leading us to consider the question of **laying down our rights** for the sake of **gospel advance**.

This evening our text returns to a **more straightforward** description of gospel advance in the Gentile world, following Paul's second missionary journey. Here in the main part of chapter 16, Paul brings the gospel west across the **Aegean Sea**, into Europe. Although the ancients would not have thought in those same geographical terms, sharply distinguishing between the continents of **Europe** and **Asia** as we do today, it's certainly the case that **Luke** sees this as another significant advance for the gospel. Macedonia was the home of **Alexander the Great**, the man who had conquered and united much of the ancient world, spreading Greek culture and making Greek the lingua franca (common language) of the Mediterranean world. It was ultimately because of **this Macedonian** conqueror that Luke wrote Acts in **Koine Greek** rather than some other language.

But this gospel advance into Macedonia was **also** significant because it was a step closer towards **Rome**. While the **Greek** empire of Alexander had certainly influenced the history of God's people (think, for example, of **Hannukah** and the book of **Maccabees**), **Rome** would leave a much **larger** imprint on the memory and

imagination of God's people. Not only was the Roman empire **larger** and more **enduring**, it would be one of the shaping influences on the **early Christian church**, as well as the force that not only **conquered** Jerusalem, but **destroyed** it and its **Second Temple** in **AD 70**. Most significantly, remember that the **Lord Jesus** was crucified by **Roman soldiers**, and his claims of **exclusive Lordship** would be interpreted by both adversarial Jews and later Roman emperors as **treasonous**.

Notice that Luke **underscores** this theme of the gospel's advance into **Roman territory** by highlighting the status of **Philippi** as a **Roman colony**.

Given that Acts 16 is a **dense and well-known** passage, we could probably find at **least 3 or 4** sermons in this passage. We could consider it from the perspective of **strategy** for church planting, missions, and evangelism. Or we could approach it from the perspective of **covenant theology**, thinking about the significance of these two **household baptisms**, and making a case for the **inclusion** of covenant children in the sacraments. Or we could consider it from the perspective of **spiritual warfare**, considering how to engage with both supernatural and human **opposition** to the gospel. Or we could approach it purely from the perspective of **God's sovereignty** in **salvation**, a theme which is obvious in all three stories.

While I hope to at least touch on **some** of those themes as we go through the text this evening, my main focus instead will be more broadly on the **multifaceted nature of Christian salvation**. And that is because I believe that **salvation** is the main **focus** of this passage. Notice as we read the text that we have **three consecutive stories** of **personal salvation**, all of which **climax** with the question and answer of verses **30-31**, "Sirs, what must I do to be **saved**?...**Believe** in the Lord **Jesus**, and you will be saved, you and your household."

Acts 16:6ff

This is the word of the Lord...

Please keep your Bibles open, and may the Lord enable us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Our sermon text illustrates **five** aspects of **Christian salvation**.

First, it shows us that **Salvation** means **Enlightenment**. Look again at verses 11-15 and consider how the **conversion of Lydia** illustrates this theme. Here we have a **Gentile God-fearer**, that is, a Gentile who has come to acknowledge and trust in the God of the Hebrew Bible, who attends synagogue services, and who lives an upright life, but has not been circumcised or come under the more distinctive aspects of the Mosaic law. Like Cornelius, Lydia was a woman of faith and prayer prior to hearing Paul's preaching of Christ. Notice in verse 13 that she was taking part in the worship and prayer of this tiny Jewish community at Philippi. As many commentators have pointed out, the Jewish presence at Philippi seems to have been so small that they did not even have a formal synagogue (*which required a minimum of 10 Jewish men*), so, in its absence, they met by the river for what was probably an imitation of a simplified synagogue service: prayer, scripture reading, words of exhortation, and blessing (perhaps some ritual washings as well).

Though she was a God-fearing woman acquainted with the Scriptures, she still needed to hear the good news of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus who knew the law and the prophets but didn't understand why Christ had died or that He had been raised, she, presumably, had most of the puzzle pieces of Biblical knowledge, but she still needed the light of the gospel to show her how to put them together into their true configuration: a portrait of Christ.

The Bible has a term for this process of coming to a saving knowledge of Christ: **enlightenment**¹. Think, for example, of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in chapter 1, "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of **wisdom** and of **revelation** in the **knowledge** of him, having the eyes of your hearts

¹ Sadly, the term has been claimed by both Western and Eastern forms of unbelief ...

enlightened, that you may know what is the **hope** to which he has called you.” Or think of how Paul describes salvation in Ephesians 5:14, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will **shine** on you.” It makes sense that Paul would prefer to describe salvation this way when you remember the description of Paul’s conversion just a few chapters prior in Acts: being blinded by the heavenly light of Christ!

The term emphasizes the depth of our need for grace. We are, by nature, spiritually blind. Our minds, as Paul puts it, our darkened. Even though God has clearly revealed himself through creation, sin causes us to twist and suppress that knowledge so that our thinking becomes futile. Or to put it in terms of verse 14 here, apart from God’s grace, our hearts our **closed** to the gospel, **locked** up, **sealed** off.

But here we have a beautiful picture of the Lord Jesus, conquering darkness by His sovereign grace. He comes to Lydia by His word, by his Apostle, and by His Spirit.² As Sinclair Ferguson put it, he turns the key of the gospel in her heart, unlocking it to receive him as her Savior and Lord.

The scene is a reminder that our salvation not only requires knowledge from God, what we call special revelation, but also that we need the enabling, regenerating grace of God to **receive** that knowledge, what we call “illumination.”

This is at the heart of what Jesus meant when He said, “I am the light of the world.” He teaches us the way of life, and His Spirit enables us to believe and follow Him.

But our need for enlightenment doesn’t **end** with conversion; on the contrary, conversion ought to be only the **dawn** of our enlightenment! It is instructive to remember that Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 1 was a prayer written **for Christians!** In the Institutes, Calvin described our ongoing need for enlightenment this way, “Nor does Scripture teach that our minds are illumined **only** on **one day** and that they may **thereafter** see **of themselves**. For what I have just quoted from Paul has reference to **continuing progress and increase**. David has aptly expressed it in these words:

² Notice, by the way, the identity between the “Holy Spirit” and “the Spirit of Christ” in verses 6 & 7. Perhaps this could serve as a helpful prooftext for the “double procession” (filioque) doctrine of the Western church contra the Eastern Orthodox church?

“With my whole heart I have sought thee; let me not wander from thy commandments.” Psalm 119:10 Although he had been reborn and had advanced to no mean extent in true godliness, he still confesses that needs continual direction at every moment, lest he decline from the knowledge with which he has been endowed.”

This is why, in our morning services, Pastor Steven always prays a brief “Prayer of Illumination” before the sermon, and why I always say something like “May the Lord enable us to understand, believe, and obey His word.” Understanding, faith, and obedience are all gifts from the Lord.

Lydia’s conversion ought to humble us with the reminder that every genuine insight that has helped us grow has come to us by the sovereign grace of Jesus. It is also a reminder to pray that the Lord would shine the same light on those who have not yet believed in Him.

Salvation as Enlightenment.

Secondly, salvation as Deliverance. Look again at verses 16-19 and consider how this exorcism illustrates the theme of **deliverance**. Look again at verse 16 and notice the phrase “spirit of divination.” The Greek there literally says “having a Python spirit.” That’s because, in pagan Greek religion and mythology, the way to discover the future was to consult the oracle at Delphi, which had originally been guarded by an enormous serpent, later slain by Apollo.

The connections with demonic oppression here should be obvious. Divination is one of the sins explicitly forbidden in the Mosaic law (Lev 19:26 & 31), and often associated with idolatry. The kind of divination practiced here is associated with idolatry, which Paul tells us is rooted in the demonic (1 Cor 10:20). Moreover, Satan is often symbolized as a serpent (Rev 12:9). Most obviously, the girl’s supernatural abilities are being exploited for money (Acts 16:19).

This girl is enslaved twice over: once to men, and once to a demonic spirit!

Paul is “greatly annoyed” by her (vrs 18), not only, we assume, because he feels **compassion** for her misery, but because her **message undermines** his preaching of

the gospel by associating it with idolatry and magic. Look again at her words in verse 17, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” The ESV supplies the definite article here, interpreting this girl as correctly identifying Paul and his message. But the Greek has no article, and, as many commentators point out, pagan religions of the time also talked about a “most high god” among many gods, and various ways of “salvation.”

In other words, to a thoroughly pagan audience such as you would have expected to find in the Roman colony of Philippi, this message of the slave-girl would have easily been confused with the standard fare of pagan religion.

And that seems to be the most likely explanation for why this demonic spirit would be shouting this message. It seems that the demon was **not** attempting to **publicize** Paul’s gospel, but rather to **confuse** his audience by associating Paul with dark magic and pagan idols.

And this fits into a theme we have already seen in Acts: Luke is eager to draw a clear distinction between the dark magic of idolatry and the miraculous signs and wonders of the apostolic church. We saw that in the story of Simon the Magician in Acts 8, as well as in the story of Bar-Jesus in Acts 13.

Once again, we should see in this exorcism the presence of Jesus. Not only does this episode have numerous parallels with exorcisms which the Lord performed,³ it is performed in His name and by one of his Apostles. Even more to the point, this is a scene in which the sword of Jesus’ mouth strikes and defeats a serpent, thus rescuing a young woman.

It would hardly be a stretch to call this scene the gospel in miniature: The Lord Jesus rescuing us, His bride, from the dominion of sin and Satan, by the gospel. Think, for example, of how Paul describes the redemptive work of Christ in Colossians 2:14-15, “by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its

³ Alistair Roberts points out that this exorcism especially parallels the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac in Luke 8:26-39 because both exorcisms bring financial loss to those who were profiting from the demon possession. See Leithart, Theopolis Podcast, below

legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Him.”

But the rescue of the possessed servant girl is not the **only** illustration of salvation as deliverance. We see this same aspect of salvation illustrated in an equally dramatic way in the release of Paul from the prison.

Remember that the word salvation not only refers to our deliverance from the consequences of sin, but also to our deliverance from our enemies. Look again at verses 25-31 and notice the parallels with the story of Passover. Like the ancient Israelites, Paul here is in bondage to cruel masters who have beaten him with many stripes. Like the Passover event, Paul is rescued through a dramatic, supernatural judgment that happens at midnight, the same hour when the angel of the Lord brought death to the firstborn of Egypt. Like the Israelites eating a meal in the middle of the night, Paul too eats in the middle of the night (verse 34), but in this case, eats **with** the defeated enemy, the Philippian jailer, who has also come to acknowledge and believe in the Lord.

But this physical deliverance of Paul should, like Passover, remind us of the greatest act of deliverance: the atonement accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ. Look again at this passage and notice that the parallels with the crucifixion and resurrection. Compare verse 16 (“going to the place of prayer”) with verse 25 (“about midnight”) and you’ll see that this deliverance happens on the Lord’s Day- the day when we remember the resurrection of Christ. Notice the earthquake of verse 25 and remember that Matthew’s gospel records two earthquakes: one at the crucifixion of Christ, and the other at his resurrection. Look again at verse 24 and notice that Paul is not only in the prison, but in the “inner prison,” that is the maximum security portion, and he is confined in the night, symbolic of the grave. Most telling, look at verse 24 and notice that description of Paul’s feet being “in the stocks.” The Greek word which the ESV translates here as “stocks” is literally the word for “wood,” which is the exact same word that Luke has already used three times in Acts to refer to the cross of wood upon which Christ was crucified.

These two stories of deliverance remind us that our God is a mighty Savior, and that we not only need deliverance at the beginning of our Christian life, but all the way through. In our conversion we are rescued from the ultimate penalty of sin as we hear the gospel, trust in Christ with saving faith, and are baptized. In our Christian lives we are progressively being saved from the power of sin, as we partake of the means of grace, as the Lord tests us, and as His Spirit gradually conforms us to the image of Christ. And we long for the great day when we will be fully rescued from the presence of sin, dwelling in a renewed, cleansed, glorified world.

In many ways, our lives are the story of being delivered by the Lord: from our own folly and pride, from disasters, illnesses, and death, from malicious and evil people, from the spell of the world, from the lies and accusations of the Evil One, from the worst consequences of our sin, and from an eternity of desolation, punishment, and despair.

Some of us have freshly experienced the Lord's deliverance, and if that is you today, then let this be a reminder to express your thanks to Him in praise, in giving, and in testifying to others of His faithfulness. Others of you may be more like Paul in verse 25, in the dungeon, waiting on Him to act. If that is you this evening, then note how Paul waited with prayer and singing. Perhaps he was singing psalms of lament, or imprecatory psalms, or psalms that simply called on the Lord to save His people.

Or perhaps you are more like the servant-girl this evening, completely in bondage, helpless, in the dark, beset on every side. Perhaps a loved one of yours is enslaved to an addiction, or plagued by a perplexing mental illness. Even from such demons, the Lord Jesus can deliver His people. Let us pray, sing, and hope towards that end.

Salvation as deliverance.

Thirdly, Salvation as Forgiveness. Look again at verses 25-34 and consider how the conversion of the jailer illustrates this theme. Look again at verse 27 and remember the story of Peter's escape from prison. Remember that the sentries in Acts 12 were executed for the escape of Peter. Doubtless the jailer here thought that

the same sentence would fall upon him after being publicly humiliated. But I think that there is an even more profound layer to his fear in this passage. Look again at verse 29 and ponder why he falls down on his knees before Paul in a position of fear and reverence. If the jailer was merely concerned about punishment from the Roman authorities, why did he beg and plead with these men? Why not try to overpower them? Why the question of verse 30, “sirs what must I do to be saved?” If he was only seeking salvation from human authorities, the answer was obvious: catch the prisoners before they escape!

Although this jailer had probably heard little or none of Paul’s preaching up to this point, he was perceptive enough to realize that this earthquake had been a divine judgment, an unmistakable warning that Paul’s heavenly lord was angry about Paul being beaten and arrested. And while it’s doubtful that the jailer had a sophisticated or Biblically precise doctrine of sin at this point, he knew enough to know that he was guilty: he was part of the system that had beaten, shamed, and arrested this ambassador of a mighty god.

It’s impossible to know what the full extent of what was going through the jailer’s mind in this moment, but it’s likely that this thought led to others: other sins he had committed, other stains on his conscience. Being a jailer in a Roman colony, it’s very likely that this man was a retired soldier. Perhaps his mind went to other acts of injustice and oppression which he had taken part in.

In any case, this man realized that judgment day was upon him. This was similar to a theophany: here was the holy ambassador of the divine judge. This was his personal doomsday, and he knew that he needed to be saved from the judgment that his sins deserved.

And this brings us to the jailer’s climactic question, and the answer which sums up all three scenes of this chapter, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved? Believe in the Lord Jesus.”

It was an answer which he did not fully understand, which is why Luke tells us that Paul explained it in more detail (verse 32). But even with his infant, fragmentary understanding, he reached out to the Lord Jesus in faith and was saved.

Again we should note the presence of Jesus here in this theophanic experience. The Lord Jesus was in the earthquake, putting the fear of God into this man. The Lord Jesus was here in the word of gospel combined with the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, stirring this man's heart up to saving faith. The Lord Jesus was here in his apostle Paul, washing away this man's sins in the sacrament of baptism.

This conversion is the polar opposite of Lydia's: a moment of crisis, terror, sudden confrontation, and judgment. But it lead to the same result: forgiveness of sins, peace with God, joy and fellowship in Christ.

The contrast of these three conversions is instructive for us. Some of us are converted in moments of great crisis. Some of us are converted gradually, almost imperceptibly. Some of us the Lord draws gently, others in an almost violent manner. Some of us already have a good deal of biblical and theological knowledge when we come to faith, others hardly any.

But, in every case, the Lord is sovereign. We are dead in sin, but He raises us to new life. We are blind and darkened in mind, but He illuminates our minds with gospel truth and the power of the Spirit. We are in bondage to the flesh and the Evil One, but He liberates us. We are guilty and condemned, but He places that punishment upon Christ so that we can be declared forgiven.

Like every judgment scene, this one in Acts 16 is proleptic, that is, it reminds to look forward to the Great Judgment that will one day come upon the living and the dead. As Christians, it reminds us that we are simply sinners saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus. And for those outside of Christ, it should be a warning: come to Him now in faith before it's too late! Today is the day of forgiveness and mercy! Today your sins may be washed away! Come to him today and know the joy of being at peace with God!

Salvation as Forgiveness

Fourthly, Salvation as Vindication. Look again with me at the last paragraph of this passage and notice the theme of vindication. Remember the charges that were levelled against Paul in verses 20-21. They were based on racial prejudice “these men are Jews,” and exaggerated claims, “they are disturbing our city” and “advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept.”

In one sense the claims were partially true. Indeed, it is quite true that the gospel is, in one sense, fundamentally disruptive to every society because it rearranges our allegiances. Indeed, as we have seen here and will continue to see throughout Acts, non-Christian societies in many ways are built on idolatry, and the Lordship of Christ challenges that at a fundamental level. There will be much worse disruptions to come in this book (think, for example, of the riot that ensues at Ephesus when people turn from idolatry and magic to Christ). Along the same lines, we could point out how many Christians were killed simply because they proclaimed that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar.

But at the same time, it is rather disingenuous for these men to make these accusations and arguments about Paul in this context. Because these men aren't sincere worshippers of Caesar, concerned about his shrine being preserved, nor are they worried that Paul is an angry revolutionary whose M.O. is cause violent riots and chaos. These men aren't fastidious, traditionalist Romans who are deeply concerned with following the procedures and customs of Roman culture. If they were, they would not have rejoiced in this Roman citizen being accused without a trial.

Instead, these men are greedy, selfish bullies who are just angry that Paul has incapacitated their cash cow, the demon possessed girl. And so they look for some accusations that will resonate with the magistrates and that will stick to Paul.

But, as many commentators have pointed out, it was a serious infraction of Roman law to condemn and punish a Roman citizen without a trial. This could have brought shame and punishment upon the magistrates of this Roman colony, especially since there was no substantial evidence that Paul was acting like a revolutionary or criminal. While it may in one sense be very true that Paul's gospel

ultimately had disruptive and subversive implications, in terms of his actions, Paul had done little more than talk to people and save a girl from demon possession.

It's important to see in this moment the parallels between Paul and the Lord Jesus. Both were unjustly accused and condemned, stripped, arrested, beaten with stripes, publicly shamed, placed onto or into wood instruments of torture (the cross or the stocks). But both were vindicated: Paul in an experience that resembled a resurrection, and the Lord Jesus in his **actual** resurrection.

This vindication was a foundational moment for the Philippian church, which is, I think, the main reason that Paul insisted on a public apology from the magistrates. Without this vindication, it would have been very easy for opponents of the faith to dismiss and marginalize the Christians of Philippi simply by pointing out that their founder, Paul, had been condemned as a criminal. This would have made it very difficult for the Philippian church to get a foothold in the city. Paul's vindication cleared the air of the charge that the Christian faith was nothing more than the dangerous, revolutionary, violent, trouble-making religion of criminals and malcontents.

And in that sense, Paul leaves us an example to follow. Notice in this passage how Paul balances BOTH the call to suffer for the name of Christ AND to fight for the church...BOTH to willingly suffer injustice at the hands of his political enemies AND to use political means to fight against injustice. When it came to his own personal welfare, Paul willingly took a beating and imprisonment. But when it came to the infant church of Philippi, Paul did not shy away from wielding the rights and privileges of his Roman citizenship.

As I was thinking of this balance in Paul's life, I was reminded of a World Opinion piece written this week written by Erika Anderson, entitled, "A warning for all Christian organizations: The priests of progressivism seek power to discriminate against believers." In the article she describes how "one of the country's most significant Christian adoption and foster care organizations lost funding for its long-time refugee resettlement program" because they required their employees to sign a

statement of faith, which was simply the Apostles' Creed. She describes how that organization is now suing the state for religious discrimination.

In the article, she defended their decision to fight this in court saying, "Bethany's decision to fight was right, given that Christian organizations and churches increasingly face religious liberty perils.... Fighting back—and winning—at this point is essential, as it will set a precedent for future religious liberty cases in the state."

This is a pattern that we will see again in the book of Acts: While he was willing to suffer enormously on a personal level without ever striking back in anger or vengeance, he also was willing to fight legally and politically for the survival and freedom of the churches he founded. So should we.

But this scene of vindication should make us think about greater things than legal battles in court or appeals to Caesar. This scene is a reminder that an essential aspect of our salvation as Christians is that we will be vindicated with Christ on judgment Day.

Just as Jesus was vindicated in his resurrection, so we will be: Shorter Catechism 38 puts it this way, "At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity."

Salvation as Vindication.

Lastly, Salvation as Fellowship. Compare verse 15 and verse 40 and notice how Paul's time in Philippi begins and ends with Christian hospitality. Lydia hosts Paul after her conversion and then again before he leaves. Compare that with the jailer hosting Paul after his conversion. Notice as well the phrase "the brothers" in verse 40 and consider that this is the beginning of a new community.

Although we could think of Acts 16 as three stories of conversion, we could also think of it as one story of the birth of a new church. Here we have three very different people: an Asian, wealthy, independent, God-fearing businesswoman; a Greek, slave-girl, and a Roman jailer, most likely former military man. And yet, here there are

united by one common faith, one common baptism, one common Lord, one common theme of salvation by grace alone.

Paul didn't know all the reasons why the Lord forbade him to preach in Asia, or why the Lord gave him the vision of Macedonian man begging for help. Paul didn't know who would respond to the gospel he taught, or why a demon possessed girl was harassing him, or why he had been beaten and arrested.

But the Lord did. Just as he directed Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, the Lord knew exactly who he had already chosen from the foundation of the world to respond to the gospel with faith. The Lord knew how each of these experiences and trials would build his church.

And so it is today. The Lord continues to build his church through the perplexing and unexpected events of our lives. He is gathering a fellowship from every walk of life, and growing a family from every tribe and tongue.

Acts 16 is a reminder that Christ saves us from the isolation of sin, by incorporating us into His body, the church. We have a heavenly citizenship,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, (ESV)

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