

Acts Chapter 16 v 16 - 40

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 October 2019

Preacher: Joel Metcalfe

[0 : 00] Acts and chapter 16. Acts and chapter 16. And we're going to begin reading from verse 16.

If you have one of the Red Church Bibles, then that is page 1112. 1,112. Just while you're finding that passage, just to remind you that the Knowing God group is meeting tomorrow evening at 7.30.

And if you don't know about that, but were interested in it, then please have a chat to me. Also to say that please be praying for Tuesday for the funeral of Tony Moore.

Tony had no, his sister will be there, and his niece probably only about five or so, immediate family. None of them are believers. Please, if you're free on Tuesday, please could you come along to that funeral service just to show our support and as we give thanks for Tony's life and pray for those family members who have no knowledge of the gospel, that the Lord would speak to them and make them aware of himself.

So, pardon me. So Acts 16. And verse 16. This is the passage that Joel's asked me to read and then he's going to come and preach from in a moment or two.

[1 : 29] Once, when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune telling.

She followed Paul and the rest of us shouting, These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved. She kept this up for many days.

Finally, Paul became so annoyed, he turned around and said to the spirit, In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her. At that moment, the spirit left her.

When the owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, These men are Jews and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas. The magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison.

[2 : 39] The jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening to them.

Suddenly, there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once, all the prison doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose.

The jailer woke up. When he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, Don't harm yourself.

We're all here. The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

They replied, Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household. Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.

[3 : 44] At that hour of the night, the jailer took them and washed their wounds. Then immediately, he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them.

He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God, he and his whole household. When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order, Release these men.

The jailer told Paul, The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace. But Paul said to the officers, They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens and threw us into prison.

And now do you want to get rid of us quietly? No. Let them come themselves and escort us out. The officers reported this to the magistrates. When they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed.

They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of prison, they went to Lydia's house where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them.

[4 : 52] Then they left. Those who would like to make use of the Sunday school, the crash would like to go and do that now, please. Satan's at work, isn't he?

And perhaps around the world, in the persecuted church, the people that are persecuting Christians, they don't know what they're doing. When Jesus hung on the cross, he said, Father, forgive them.

They don't know what they do. Perhaps people don't know why they're doing what they're doing. Perhaps people don't know who Christians are, what the message is. But the fact is, Paul, he hadn't done anything wrong, had he?

He was sharing a message of love. And all he'd done was set this woman free. And he has this terrible persecution. Now, that was thousands of years ago.

And you might think that's quite far removed from our situation today. But actually, the fact is, as we've seen on the video, that persecution goes on all around the world today.

[5 : 52] All around the world today, persecution is a reality. There are Christians who are falsely accused in Pakistan, in North Korea. There are Christians who are thrown into prison simply for sharing their faith.

There are Christians who are persecuted. There are Christians who are tortured. They're beaten. And so this example of Paul, we can actually see that today. So the first thing I want to look at, I'm going to go through three R's.

The first R is the reality of persecution. Persecution is a reality. According to Open Doors, Open Doors are an organization that try and support the persecuted church.

And apparently, 245 million Christians around the world are under high levels of persecution, meaning they're ostracized by their society.

It's hard for them to live as Christians in their society. That's one in nine Christians in the world, which is, it's a high level, isn't it? That shocked me when I read that.

[6 : 55] That's a lot of people. And so persecution is a reality. And the fact is, as Christians, we have a responsibility not just to look after one another in Whitby, but actually we have a responsibility to pray for, to look after, to love our brothers and sisters who are part of the body of Christ in the world, wherever they are.

Richard Wernbrandt was a pastor in Romania under the communist occupation of Romania. And he was thrown into prison for his faith and he was tortured for 14 years in prison.

And he started the organization Release, which is an organization which again supports Christians around the world. But he says this, he gives this graphic illustration of how Christians in the West, what is our responsibility to those under persecution.

And he says this, when I was beaten on the bottom of my feet, my tongue cried. Why did my tongue cry? It was not beaten.

It cried because the tongue and feet are both parts of the same body. And you free Christians are part of the same body of Christ that is now beaten in prisons, in restricted nations, and even now gives martyrs for Christ.

[8 : 22] Can you not feel our pain? That's a, it's a tough thing to, to hear, isn't it? And I, I must admit, looking into this, this talk, preparing for this talk really opened my eyes to the extent of persecution around the world.

But what he's saying is true. We're part of the same body and where one part of the body feels pain, the whole body should feel pain. Paul puts it like this in 1 Corinthians.

He says this, but God has put the body together, giving greater honor to parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. And so, we're one body, aren't we?

Think of Saul on the road to Damascus and Saul is persecuting Christians. He's throwing them into prison. And he gets knocked off his horse, there's a bright light and a voice comes from heaven and Jesus says this, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

[9 : 38] Now why would Jesus say, why are you persecuting me? Because Paul is persecuting the church, isn't he? He's persecuting believers. But Jesus is saying this, when the church is persecuted, when the church feels pain, I feel pain.

I'm one with the church. The last prayer that Jesus prays before he goes to the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his trial is a prayer of unity.

He prays that the church might be one with each other, the church might be one with him. And so as a church, we're one body. We're to love, we're to pray for, we have a responsibility for every believer, whatever country, whatever situation they're in.

And so, you know, we can say that, we can say we have a responsibility, but what can we actually do? How can we, can we really help people on the other side of the world? You know, under political tyranny, what can we really do?

Well, I just want to suggest three things that we can do as Christians that we have power to do. And the biggest thing we can do, as Peter's already mentioned, is prayer.

[10 : 51] We can pray for our brothers and sisters on the other side of the world. And sometimes, if you're like me, it can be tough to pray for people that we don't know, that we've never met.

But actually, I think that's a lack of faith. God answers our prayers just as much for those on the other side of the world as he does for our friends, for our family, for those that we know. We're actually commanded to pray for all people.

In the book of Hebrews, it says this, continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

And so the way we pray, it's supposed to be we pray as if we were in prison with them. That can be a hard thing to do, but what would that really look like if we prayed as if we were in prison with them?

Well, I don't know if you've ever been in a really hard situation, and it's just caused you to cry out to God. And it's in those situations, in hardship, in times of trial, that you pray like you don't normally pray.

[11 : 59] Well, if you were in prison, if you were being persecuted for your faith, you'd be praying with a lot of fervency, wouldn't you? So how should we pray for the persecuted church? We should pray as if we're in prison with them.

We should pray with fervency. We should pray with zeal. So that's the first thing we can do, we can pray. The second thing is we can give. There are organizations, Open Doors, Release International, Barnabas Fund, and these organizations they all get money over to the persecuted church.

Our money can go a long way. It can provide Bibles. Often in persecuted nations, Christians have to live without the word of God. And there's a real hunger for the word of God.

Perhaps most of us have three or four Bibles on our shelves. We don't know what it's like not to have the Bible. Richard Wernbrand, again in his book, he talks of examples examples in his own country.

And there are preachers there who've barely read the Bible, who don't have their own Bible. And so, you know, they're preaching the love of Christ, but they don't have the word of God. And there are communist tracts in Romania making fun of the Bible with just a few verses in these tracts from the Bible just for the point of making fun.

[13 : 24] But the church was so hungry for the Bible that they ordered thousands and thousands of these tracts just to have a few verses of the Bible. That's how hungry some Christians are for the word of God.

And so our money can provide Bibles for Christians who can't get a Bible. As we've already seen, some Christians in some countries they're unemployed.

It's illegal to provide jobs for Christians in some nations. It's illegal in Romania it was illegal to even look after, to even give food, to even help the children of Christian martyrs.

That's the pressure that some Christians are under. And so our money can provide physical, for the physical needs of persecuted Christians. It can provide clothing, it can provide food, can provide sustenance.

The final thing is we can send letters of encouragement to those in prison. What an encouragement it is to those in prison just to know that someone is praying for them, to know that someone cares for them.

[14 : 36] Many Christians in the persecuted church, they don't know that there are Christians who love them. They think that they're abandoned. they don't realise that there are Western Christians who are sending money who are praying for them.

And just a small letter of encouragement in a prison cell can provide so much support. So there are some things to think about how can we serve Christians in practical ways.

So the first R was the reality of persecution. We need to realise it's a reality. The second thing I want to look at is what is the response to persecution?

What was Paul's response to persecution? And for me, this was something that surprised me. In verse 25, we read, about midnight, so think about Paul's situation.

He'd just been beaten. He's thrown into the, it says, the innermost cell. So there's probably no light. He probably isn't aware of the time of day. And it says this, at midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.

[15 : 52] And the other prisoners were listening to them. Now that's a challenging verse, isn't it? Think about Paul's situation. He's just been beaten with rods.

He's got wounds. He's just been betrayed. He doesn't know if he's about to die. He doesn't know what the future holds for him. He doesn't know that God's going to release him.

For all he knows, he might be about to be executed. But he's not sat there nursing his wounds, which he'd forgive him for. He's not sat there thinking bitter thoughts about the jailer, about those who've thrown him into prison.

Think, why was he even in Philippi in the first place? It's because God had sent him there in a dream. And you'd forgive him for, you know, being angry at God almost, praying to God, you know, you sent me here and this has happened to me.

But you don't see any of that in Paul. But he actually rejoices. He sings hymns. And what a testimony that must have been to the jailer, who is eventually converted.

[16:57] But I wonder, what is our response to persecution in our own lives? The amazing thing is when you hear testimonies of the persecuted church is that the joy that some of these Christians can have in the most dire situations.

There are stories of Christians singing in their prison cells, dancing in their prison cells. And obviously that's God's grace, isn't it? God can sustain us in times of need. And obviously they undergo immense questioning as well and immense pain.

But in the midst of that, God provides joy. But I think of my own life and do I really rejoice in times of persecution?

And actually looking at the teaching of the New Testament, we're almost commanded to rejoice in these times. How can we do that? Well, two things.

The first thing is that the Bible makes it clear that we are to expect persecution. It shouldn't be a surprise to us. In 2 Timothy 3 verse 12 it says this, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

[18:16] persecuted. And so persecution, actually it's a promise to believers. It's something that we're to expect. Now obviously we're not facing persecution anywhere near the extent of people in North Korea, in Pakistan, in places like that.

But we all face on some level persecution, don't we? Perhaps some of you are in unbelieving families, have unbelieving partners. perhaps you have work colleagues who make fun of you for your faith, perhaps at school.

We all at times are made to feel uncomfortable for our faith. But Paul, he'd made a peace almost with persecution. It says, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Paul, he'd made a peace even with death because he knew that he'd be with God. he knew his suffering wasn't pointless. He was suffering for a purpose. He was suffering for Christ.

He was serving Christ in his suffering. One verse that challenges me is that in the book of Acts, there's an example where the apostles in the early church, they're preaching and they're taken in by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish scribes.

[19:35] They're beaten and they're told not to spread this message anymore. And it says this, the apostles, they went away rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name.

I wonder, is that our response to persecution? Do we rejoice because we're counted worthy of bearing Christ's name? I know for me, there's so many times when I have an opportunity to stand up for my faith and I shy away because of persecution.

because of suffering. But it should be an honour to suffer for Christ's name. That was the attitude of the early church. It says this in the New Testament, if you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed for the spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Then it goes on to say, if you suffer, it shouldn't be as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed but praise God that you bear that name.

I wonder how different would our witness be if we counted it as an honour to suffer for Christ.

[20 : 56] That's been a big challenge to me. The Chinese church today undergoes a lot of persecution.

The majority have to worship underground in secret. But actually, about 50 years ago, there were many American missionaries in the Chinese church. But when communism took hold, all of the missionaries were thrown out of the country.

And the reaction of the missionaries was, what's going to happen? What's going to happen to the church when we leave? There's going to be no teaching. All these churches have been spent years and years building up and now we're thrown out of the country.

But here's the reality. In 1980, there were about 3 million believers in China. Today, there are over 100 million Christians in China undergoing intense persecution.

But in the midst of persecution, the church has grown. And the Chinese church, every believer, apparently, is given five pillars that they're to live by.

[22 : 04] And most of these, we would accept as normal. The things like be in constant prayer, pray with believers. The things like spend a lot of time in the word.

One of them is every believer should be a witness. But the fifth one is, I think, is quite foreign to us. And it's this. Embrace suffering for the glory of God.

Every Chinese believer is told that they must embrace suffering for the glory of God. And I just think in our society, that's so foreign to our thinking, isn't it? But God uses suffering.

And if we're to be witnesses for Christ, if we're to follow Christ's example, the one who died on the cross, the one who suffered for us, it says, for the joy set before him, he suffered, enduring the cross, despising its shame.

But now he's seated at the right hand of God. And our ultimate example is to be Jesus. Jesus suffered so much for us. Are we willing to undergo suffering for our faith, to undergo persecution for the things that we believe in?

[23 : 17] It's a big challenge. Well, the final R that I'm going to look at is the reality beyond persecution. What's the reality behind everything that's going on?

And if we look at this story, Paul, he's in a dark place, isn't he? He's in a prison cell. Perhaps he's about to die. But behind the scenes, we see that God is still moving.

God is working. And whatever we think is going on in our own lives, whatever we think is going on around the world, the fact is this, God is still on the throne and God is still moving.

And so if we look at verse 31, verse 26, sorry, it says, suddenly there was a violent earthquake.

The foundations of the prison were shaken. At once, all the prison doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose. And so we see the jailer, he wakes up and he sees all the prison doors flung open and he's nervous.

[24 : 25] He thinks, oh no, all the prisoners have escaped. And he's about to kill himself because as a Roman jailer, for your prisoners to have escaped, it would mean the death sentence for you.

And so he's about to fall on his own sword. But then we see Paul's reaction. He shouts, don't harm yourself, we are all here. And so Paul, he doesn't have any animosity towards the jailer, but actually he saves the jailer's life.

And through this situation, this jailer and his whole household come to faith. A Roman jailer becomes a Christian. And a church is started in Philippi.

Actually, a great church, if we read the epistles to the Philippians, it's one of the most encouraging epistles you can read. But it's all out of this dark situation. And you go on to read that the magistrates, first thing in the morning, their consciences have been pricked, obviously.

God has been maybe speaking to them in the night. And the first thing they do is they go to the jailer and tell him to set these prisoners free. They realise they've done wrong. But actually, Paul, he doesn't just walk away and thank God for his freedom.

[25 : 41] But we see some of the boldness in Paul. And actually, what does he say in verse 37? He says to the officers, they beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens and threw us into prison.

And now, do they want to get rid of us quietly? No. Let them come themselves and escort us out. So what's Paul doing here? Well, as a Roman citizen, actually, it was illegal to arrest Paul in the same way without a trial.

It was illegal to beat him. And so the magistrates, when they learn this, they're afraid. They realise that they've done a terrible thing. They could be under a lot of trouble from the emperor because of what they've done.

But God actually uses this situation because now, in a sense, Paul has the upper hand, doesn't he? And perhaps, because of the, almost the magistrates owed Paul one, almost they owed the church something, this, you know, a lot of commentaries would say that actually this would have been a great advantage to the church.

Perhaps there would have been peace in the church as a result of this. And you might think, you know, why didn't Paul, why didn't Paul shout this as he was being beaten with rods?

[27 : 07] We don't know Paul's motivation. Maybe he didn't have chance. But God used this situation for good in the church. Now the fact is, Paul's life was spared.

But actually, eventually Paul would go on to die for his faith. Out of the 12 apostles, the only one who wasn't killed was John.

All of the other 11 apostles were killed because of their faith. apart from Judas, obviously. And so, the reality is sometimes it doesn't go how we planned.

Sometimes people die for their faith. People are in jail for years and years. And you might think, you know, what's the point of all this persecution? Is God really at work?

Well, we've seen the example of China, haven't we? That under persecution, the church has actually grown far more than any nation in the world. In the early church, there were martyrs, there were many deaths, but the early church fathers had this phrase, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

[28 : 24] Because the fact is that the more the church was persecuted, the more the church grew. we don't know why God works how he does.

But the fact is God is still at work whatever we think the situation, however dark the situation seems. And actually, in persecuted nations, often the church is more alive than it is over in the West.

So God, he's still on the throne, he's still in control. And what's our ultimate example? Well, it's Jesus on the cross, isn't it? Jesus on the cross, the disciples would have looked at that situation and thought, all is lost.

Perhaps even Satan himself thought that he'd won. The Pharisees, certainly, they thought they'd won. They'd defeated Jesus.

But actually, that was Jesus' greatest victory, wasn't it? That was the time when he overcame death, overcame sin. And through, you know, the darkest night in history, God used that, actually, to bring about the greatest victory, to bring about forgiveness for our sins.

[29 : 40] And so, it's fitting, isn't it, that God uses hard situations, tough situations, for good. That's how God works. Well, I just want to close with this verse from 2 Corinthians 4, verse 16.

And it says this, Therefore, we do not lose heart, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. Since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. And so Paul, who's beaten, who's undergone far more persecution than any of us has gone through, he's able to say this, our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory.

And that's the hope we have, isn't it? As Christians, even death is not the end. We know that one day we'll rise with Christ and there'll be eternal life with him.

There'll be eternal joy. So just to recap, what are the three points? The first thing is the reality, the reality of persecution. It's a reality and we need, as Christians, to respond to it.

[31 : 08] Paul's response, what is our response to personal suffering? Do we see it as an honor? Do we see it as the apostles did? You know, they're rejoicing, they're counted worthy to suffer for Christ.

Are we willing to undergo suffering for Christ? And the final thing is the reality beyond suffering. God is still on the throne, God is in control and God is working all things together for good.

I'll just close in prayer. Thank you. Thank you.