**God’s set up for salvation - Acts 16:16-40**

**Introduction**

I want you to imagine three scenarios:

1. You fail one of your subjects this semester and have to repeat your final year of uni.
2. You order a new jacket online only to find that it’s too small.
3. You lose your job in Melbourne and are required to relocate to rural Victoria in order to take another (much lower paid) job.

Now, on the surface all three of those scenarios seem like quite disappointing setbacks in life right? But what if I told you that:

1. In repeating your final year of uni, you meet the love of your life in the class you are re-doing.
2. The too-small jacket makes a great emergency present for your siblings birthday you only just remembered.
3. In moving to a lower paid job in the country, you become friends with a Christian local and there yourself hear the gospel and are saved.

What at first seems like a **setback**, now suddenly feels like a **setup** for something great.

And that’s what we see happening in tonight’s passage. What at first appears to be a horrible setback for the advancement of the message of Jesus, ends up being God’s setup for a wonderful act of salvation in the life of a no-name jailer.

Acts 16:16-40 teaches us to have a bigger and more optimistic view of God’s capacity to bring good from bad for the sake of gospel. So what we’ll do is look at the apparent setback that happens in Paul and Silas’ ministry in Philippi. Then we’ll look at how God uses it as a great set up for salvation.

1. **An apparent set back (vv.16-25)**

First, *an apparent set back.*

Paul and Silas’ ministry in Philippi [which we heard about last week] *appears* to come to a grinding halt through the unjust actions of a corrupt slave owner, angry mob and cowardly city officials.

So how does this *apparent* set back come about? Well verses 16-18 tell us that it all begins when Paul and Silas encounter a slave girl who is possessed by a spirit who could predict the future (v.16). The Greek text literally reads that “she had python spirit.” This tells us the spirit is evil as Luke clearly associates it with the pagan occult of the day.

Now Luke doesn’t gives us much more info on his girl other than the fact she was a real money-maker for her owners. And you can’t help but feel sorry for her right? Possessed by an evil spirit. Used for financial gain by her owners.

Well verse 17 tells us what happens when this possessed girl comes across the path of the missionaries.

***17****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.”*

Were told this shouting goes on for many days (v.18) and that Paul becomes very annoyed by it. Now although what she says is technically true the reason Paul gets sick of it is probably two-fold.

1. He’s doesn’t like the message of Jesus being associated and connected in any way with an evil spirit. And…
2. It was probably just really hard to have a conversation about Jesus when a girl is shouting right beside you. Trust me on this, I have three young children.

And so Paul says, “right, I’ve had enough!” Verse 18:

*“In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” At that moment the spirit left her.*

Even before we get to transformation of the Philippian jailer we get a picture of how the name of Jesus transforms a person’s life - in this case a spiritually oppressed slave girl – was freed from her spiritual oppression by the authority and power of Jesus.

But what was good news for the girl quickly *appears* to become bad news – a setback for Paul and Silas.

I wonder if you’ve ever been the victim of an injustice. Perhaps you were given a serve by the boss for something you didn’t do. Perhaps you received a traffic fine in the mail that you were convinced was inaccurate. Now it’s bad enough to feel the injustice of an incorrect traffic fine, but think about the levels of injustice that some of our brothers and sisters go through in other parts of the world.

Last month I read of such an injustice in an article on the Barnabas fund website (an organisation that advocates for the persecuted church). It told of a Christian Father and son in India who were arrested for supposedly breaking Covid19 restrictions by keeping their mobile phone shop open. This is an excerpt from the article:

“*The pair were savagely beaten by police and Hindu extremists and were covered in blood when they were taken to the magistrate on the* [the] *20th June. Ignoring their injuries, he* [the magistrate] *remanded them back into police custody. Emmanuel* [the son] *died on the 21st June. His father* [Jeyaraj] *died the next morning.”*

It’s believed these men were targeted because of their Christian faith and low position on the Indian Caste system. After the story became public 5 police officers were arrested.

Now, I don’t know about you, but that kind injustice on two brothers just devastates me.

But that’s that kind of hatred, violence and injustice towards a couple of Christian men that we see in our passage. Look at how the owners of the slave girls responds to Paul and Silas in verse 19-21:

***19****When her 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.****20****They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews,*[notice the prejudice against Jews they try and capitalise on] *and are throwing our city into an uproar****21****by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.”*

Wouldn’t it be nice if the next line read: “When the matter was brought before the magistrates, they investigated the matter, found Paul and Silas to have committed no wrong doing and ordered an AVO be put out against the slave girl’s owners.” But that’s not what it says is it.” Instead we read of their cowardice, complicity with an angry mob. Look at verse 22-24

***22****The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas,* ***and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods****.****23****After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.****24****When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

Stripped. Flogged. Jailed.

This is evil stuff. First, there were the lies of the owners who covered up the real reason they hated Paul and Silas. Second, there was the racism they used to whip up an angry mob against these men who *Jewish* believers (v.20). Third was the rank injustice committed by those entrusted to uphold law and order. The magistrates were the ones who ordered this unwarranted violence. Lies, racism, unjust punishment. This looks like the set back to end all set backs in Philippi.

Now, I suspect there are some of you who have felt the pain of unjust treatment because you are Christian. Maybe you’ve experienced workplace bullying or discrimination because of your faith in Jesus. Or maybe you simply get dismayed when you read stories of unjust treatment done to your brothers and sisters overseas. Well, before I move on, I just want to note two helpful ways we can respond to unjust treatment based off the example of Paul and Silas.

*Pray don’t plot.*

First, Paul and Silas respond to their unjust mistreatment by praying to God *not* plotting their revenge in prison. You see it there in verse 25?

***25****About midnight Paul and Silas were* ***praying***[and not just praying but] ***singing*** *hymns to God…*

They took all the injustice of that day and brought it before God in prayer – joyfully singing to Him because they know He cares, listens, and acts.

No wonder the other prisoners were listening to them. This is not a usual occurrence in prison.

When we’ve been mistreated, sinned against, persecuted, often the first thing we want is revenge. We want them to feel what we did.

* “They slandered my name, I can slander theirs!”

But the message of Jesus changes things. It teaches us, Romans 12 to:

***12****Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer…*

***14****Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse…*

It says to us:

***19****Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.*

***21****Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Doesn’t this describe Paul and Silas in this moment? And you see, they could be like that because they had been transformed by the gospel message – They didn’t need to seek revenge because they were convinced that God will ultimately deal with sin at the cross (in the repentance of their attackers) or on the last day when Jesus’ returns. And they could continue to love and I suspect pray for that angry mob because they were convinced that they too were sinners who had been saved by a gracious God. They could continue to sing praise to God because they were convinced that no matter what others did to them God still loved them, cared about them, and would one day bring them safely into His presence for ever.

*Speak up don’t shut up.*

But the second thing we learn is to speak up don’t shut up. Turning the other cheek does not mean Christians ignore rank acts of injustice done against us. Where possible, we speak out against it.

Isaiah 1:17 says:

*learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression;* (ESV)

This is what we see Paul doing with the unjust magistrates who ordered their beating.

We see this if we briefly jump to the end of the passage in verses 35**-**36. The next day the magistrates give orders to have Paul and Silas released. You can guess what they’re thinking, “alright they’ve learnt their lesson and now want them to leave quietly. But look at Paul’s response in verse 37:

***37****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 they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.”*

Paul and Silas were Jews, who had become Christians but they were also Roman citizens. And according to Roman law they had certain rights that could not be violated. No Roman citizen could be beaten or bound in any circumstance let alone untried and uncondemned.

And so Paul calls out this injustice. One commentator suggests Paul may be responsible for the first recorded “sit in.” He doesn’t move an inch until they come and fess up to what they’ve done.

And it works. In verses 38ff we read that the magistrates, alarmed at what they had gone along with, *own* their sin. This is actually an encouraging thing to see. They own it, they humble themselves, apologise and escort the men from prison. But notice in verse 40 that Paul doesn’t leave straight away as the would like. He takes his own time, first encouraging the believers in Philippi and then leaving.

This reminds us that where we have a voice, it is right to speak out against injustice. In fact it’s loving to help a person/people to see their sin and turn from it (like we see here). As a Roman citizen Paul had a voice to speak out against the injustice taking place in this Roman colony.

Now maybe this means going to a higher authority in our workplace when we’ve suffered workplace bullying or discrimination. Maybe as western’s who live in the free world – we use our freedom and finance to help those who are unjustly treated in their own country. One of the roles of the Barnabas fund is to speak on behalf of such believers and contest injustice when it occurs. Maybe it is worth backing an organisation like that.

Bonhoeffer, who spoke out against a government who was committing grave injustices wrote:

*"You have only one master now...But with this 'yes' to God belongs just as clear a 'no.' Your 'yes' to God requires your 'no' to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies.*

In the face of injustice it is right to speak out.

Though they respond rightly, the fact remains that Paul and Silas went through a horrible experience. And I suspect that if you received a prayer email from their team at this point you would be tempted to see this as a major set back. But what’s wonderful about this passage is the way God uses this supposed “setback” as a setup for a rich and wonderful act of salvation. It brings to mind Joseph’s words to his brothers in Egypt.

***19****But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God?****20****You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

The slave owner and magistrates had intended to harm Paul and Silas, but God intended it for God – to accomplish what is now about to be done – the saving of a Philippian Jailer.

1. **God’s great set-up (vv.26-34)**

So let’s think about the second point: God’s great setup.

Now maybe you’re listening tonight and you’re not yet a Christian. I would encourage you to look at the way Jesus’ saves and changes this man. Because the new life he finds through faith in Jesus can be yours too if you likewise trust in and follow Him. And if you’re a Christian, I pray that you might be reminded from this jailer’s testimony how good it is to know God has brought salvation to your life and how capable He is to use even the biggest “setbacks” as set ups for salvation among your friends and family.

Now there are three ways this Jailer is transformed by the salvation of Jesus. His hope is transformed, his love is transformed, and his joy is transformed. So let’s take them one at a time.

*A transformed hope.*

First, a transformed hope.

Hope is one of the big things many seem to be searching for at the moment. People are longing for a ray of hope to shine through the isolation and economic uncertainty of Covid.

I read a report a couple of days ago that said Victoria’s mental health groups have been swamped with a 20 percent jump in pleas for help since Melbourne went into stage 3 and 4 restrictions. People are struggling. They are longing for the hope of better days ahead.

Through an act of God that shook the foundations of the prison, this jailer found *himself* in a moment of crisis and hopelessness.

Read with me from verse 25:

***25****About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.****26****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.****27****The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he* ***drew his sword and was about to kill himself*** *because he thought the prisoners had escaped.*

When the jailer sees the open prison doors the hopelessness sets in. All he can feel in this moment is the shame and impending punishment coming to him for losing prisoners on his watch. In his mind his life is basically over at this point anyway – “what’s the point of going on?”

And maybe you’ve been in a similar place to that – Why bother living anymore?

But look at how God brings the ray of hope to him in this moment. Verse 28:

***28****But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”*

Imagine what he’s thinking now. “All is not lost. These men have stayed put… I owe them my life… Who does this – particularly for the one who has jailed them!?” Now perhaps the jailer had remember the reports of the slave girl who called these men “servants of the Most High God telling people of the way to be saved.”

I’m sure he knows this is no ordinary moment. He’s got to be thinking: “That Most High God obviously wants my attention. And if it’s salvation He’s offering I’m all in.”

Look at his reaction in verse 29ff:

***29****The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.****30****He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”*

I wonder if you’ve asked that question before – I like the idea of being saved for eternity by God – what must I do? Give to charity? Be a better person? Look at the answer.

***31****They replied, “****Believe in the Lord Jesus****, and you will be saved—you and your household.”****32****Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.*

To believe in Jesus is to accept what the apostles say about him – that he is the Son of God and saviour of the world. That He came to die for your sin and rebellion against God at the cross. That He rose again as Lord of all and gives life to all who trust and follow Him. That was the word the Jailer heard, believed and was saved by. That is the word that can save you.

Just moments earlier, this man had been on the brink of death, now he had come to know the hope of life through believing in Jesus. Thought Paul and Silas were the ones who shackles fell off, the jailer was the one who went home free that night. Through believing in Jesus he was freed from the dominion of darkness, he was freed from the penalty of his sin, he was freed from the fear of condemnation and death. Now he had the **hope** of new and eternal life with God – he and his whole household (v.24).

My sister sent through this pic on our family WhatsApp a few days ago. It’s a sign that was hung on the door of her local coffee shop:

It read “Not everything is cancelled”

* Sun is not cancelled,
* Spring is not cancelled, reading kindness coffee etc. “Not cancelled.”

And at the bottom in big capital letters: “HOPE IS NOT CANCELLED.”

When I saw that I thought, “I wonder if they know just how true that is.” You see I think our world understands hope in a fuzzy kind of way. To the world “hope” means there’s always the *possibility* things *might* improve.

But you see the hope that Jesus offers isn’t a possibility but a certainty. Christian hope says “because my saviour died and rose gain I have the certain hope that He is with me in this moment, that he will help me persevere, that He will hear my pleas for help and that He will one day take raise me up in glory. Paul speaks of that hope in his future letter to the Philippian:

**20**But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, **21**who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

That’s the hope the jailer came to know in this moment. That’s the kind of hope that a follower of Jesus can say is not cancelled.

*Transformed love.*

Second, a transformed love.

When someone comes to believe in Jesus and the weight of God’s love for them transforms their love for others. They think, God sent His Son to die for me even though I had ingorned and rebelled against him. That’s amazing love. As John says:

*“We love because He first loved us.”* (1 John 4:19)

And this is what happens to the jailer. His love is transformed by the message of Jesus. This was a man used to dealing out punishment to prisoners. But here he is, in verse 33, now washing the wounds of Paul and Silas and inviting them into his house – it’s a beautiful picture of Christ-like love.

***33****At that hour of the night the jailer took them and* ***washed their wounds****; then immediately he and all his household were baptized.****34****The jailer brought them into his house and* ***set a meal before them.***

The jailer washes their wounds. Paul and Silas wash the jailer in the water of baptism. The sign given to those who have been washed clean of their sin through faith in Jesus.

That gospel of Jesus transforms our love. Christians don’t try and love others to earn brownie points with God, we love out of thanks to God. The Christian says, “Because my saviour loved me enough to die for me, I want to thank him by loving others in his name.”

That’s why I think we saw so much food donated to the La Trobe international students in need recently. Because Bundy is full of people who have been transformed by Jesus’ love. Transformed to love others (who we don’t know) in practical ways. La Trobe was shocked by how much had been donated. I received an email from them thanking us in which they said:

*“With your generosity, we have been able to impact the lives of 450 domestic and international students, ensuring they are able to have their basic needs met.”*

And, the good news is that we have a opportunity every fortnight to keep shocking them with a love that has been transformed by the gospel.

*Transformed Joy*

Third, a transformed joy.

The jailer didn’t just have his hope and love transformed, he received a new found joy that night. You see it there in verse 34:

*“…he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.”*

The reasons for this man’s joy is not simply that he was able to keep his job with all the prisoners accounted for. It’s because he had come to know and believe in the living **God**. He had spent his whole life separated from God, living in ignorance and rebellion to him. Now he had been introduced to Him and welcomed by him. That’s why he can’t wipe the smile from his face.

One of the little good news stories that was going around a few weeks back was about Captain Tom. You may have seen it. A 100 year-old WWII vetran, managed to fund raise 32.7 million pounds to support the national health service in Briton (100 laps around his garden on his walker). In recognition of his efforts, the Queen made a rare public appearance during this pandemic to personally knight him. Sir Tom was clearly joyful following this moment and said to reporters:

*"To meet the Queen was more than anyone could expect, never ever did I imagine I would get so close to the Queen and have such a kind message from her, that was really outstanding, it was truly outstanding."*

See why he was joyful? Because he had the privilege of being close to the Queen and receiving kindness from her.

Imagine that was you standing there. It would be amazing right. But imagine that instead of the Queen, it was the living God welcoming you and showing kindness to you.

The message of the gospel says to the believer in Jesus that they have experienced a welcome from someone greater than the queen. In Jesus, we have been brought near to the living God – not just for a moment but for eternity. What an honour! He has made you part of His family! And you know that God has shown you remarkable kindness because He choose to forgive your sins through the sacrificial death of his own son. This is what the jailer and his whole household came to rejoice over that night.

Even in a depressing time like ours, the follower of Jesus has a reason to rejoice and to tune in Sunday after Sunday to keep singing praise to our God.

To believe in Jesus is to experience a salvation as great as this jailer. The message of Jesus truly is the source of ultimate hope, love and joy.

In God’s great plan what looked like a setback turned out to be a great set up for Him to bring salvation in the life of this man.

**Conclusion**

We are living through a moment in time that feels like a giant set back. Our ministries were thriving prior to covid. People were able to free come and invite friends to church and GG. But now it all seems to have changed.

But this passage has taught us to have a bigger and much more optimistic view of how God can take an apparent set back and make it a set up for salvation. I think I’ve had a glimpse of that with the amount of interest in our CE course at this time. But I think I’ve also seen it in the community I live in.

I walked down to get a coffee on a few days ago and when I came into the café our coffee lady said to me, “I feel like you bring a calming and peaceful presence every time you come in.”

I didn’t really know how to respond, so I just said “Oh, that’s nice.”

Then she said, “I think I know why, it’s your three beautiful daughters, they give you peace.”

And at that moment I thought… “Na, I need to say something more here. This moment of Covid might feel like a giant set back in my ministry, but right here right now, God seems to have turned this set back into a gospel set up… I don’t want to waste that.”

So I said, “actually, it’s not really my kids that give me a sense of peace at this time, in fact, sometimes they drive me crazy. The real reason I do have peace in my life is because my hope is bound up in Jesus. I know he’s in control right now and that I’m safe with him. And to me, that was just the beginning of an ongoing conversation that I pray God might use to bring salvation from this moment.

As we go into this week, let’s pray that we would take heart in the salvation we know, and be thankful that God turns apparent set backs into set ups for salvation.

Let’s pray.