

Knowing God in the Spiritual Realm

Text: Acts 16:16-34

June 2019

Acts 16:16-34 NRSV

¹⁶One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' ¹⁸She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. ²⁰When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' ³¹They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Message

Knowing God in the Spiritual
Realm

Introduction:

Once again I am going to speak about engaging the reality of God. This is the last in a sequence of talks that began back in Lent asking how Abraham might have got to know God without much previous example and go on to become the 'Father of faith'? If you want to hear that message its on the church website for 17 March entitled 'Abraham Meets The Lord'.¹

Today on the Sunday before Pentecost I want to pick up this theme and lead us deeper into the space of encountering God in a real spiritual way. I will be walking through the story we heard told by Luke in Acts 16 of Paul and Silas in Philippi where they had seen Lydia come to faith in Christ as her lord and saviour.

That is a happy clean story and represents a breakthrough in the mission of Paul into Europe. Now follows a much more complicated story.

Interpretation:



Understanding our lenses

Before we step into the story I want to consider the issue of interpretation. I wear glasses. Without these glasses I cannot read. I wear them all the time I am awake. I see the world through them. They shape my perception. This is often referred to as the 'lens' of our perception

My glasses represent what I bring to what I see. They filter according to my cultural framework and the world we are part of at this time. They sit on my nose and in front of my eyes. I see everything through them, including what I read in the Bible.

That is the awareness I have about what is involved in our reading and interpretation of the Bible. It comes through what we have experienced and what we have already come to believe, both intentionally and passively. Our experience acts as the lens through which we read and interpret the Bible and everything else for that matter. If our experience relates to what we read, then it is easy to read and accept. The daily news reads like that. It's about our world today so we get it.

That is partly why people in the last few centuries have struggled with the Bible. As technology and scientific understanding increased many people found it difficult to place what they read in the Bible because much of it does not match their experience.

There is much in the Bible I have not experienced. I have never seen someone walk on water. I have never seen someone raised from the dead. However, I have seen instant healings. I have experienced the power of the God in wind and noise inside a building as people prayed. I have heard the voice of God in critical circumstances so I am partially primed to read the Bible but not all the way.

So before I pick up the passage about Paul, Silas with the slave girl in Philippi and what happens next I'll share a few experiences through which I read this passage. These set up my reading and interpretation. These incidents all happened in Eindhoven in the last 17 years.

Experience #1.

Soon after arriving here I walked into the central shopping district from the Catharina on Rechtstraat on a busy day. As I walked into the city I became aware of the expressions on the many faces. The expressions were somehow odd. It's as if people were walking away from something they were not happy with. I wondered what that might be. It felt spiritually acidic and troubled. Something was up!

As I walked towards a crossroad where V&D used to be I heard it. There was a man with a strong voice on a mobility scooter preaching about Jesus.

Eindhoven knows this man as Arnol Kox.² As soon as I saw him I recognized what was happening. His preaching was setting off a spiritual commotion and causing a spiritual disturbance. People walking away from him did not smile and began to resemble a light version of the Zombie Apocalypse! It was if he had set off a light dose of nerve gas.



In the years since Arnol has been prosecuted and some businesses have brought complaints about him because they say he is bad for business. So various restrictions have been laid on him as to how long he maybe in a specific area and sometimes he has been banned altogether. He has been fined and given what we might term 'suspended' prison sentences conditional on basis of two years without convictions. He has also been convicted for feeding pigeons and leaving rubbish in a public space!

Experience #2.

About 10 years ago a church member named Tony Adamson got passionate about playing worship music in public. So on a Saturday morning along with a few others, including myself, Tony set up to play guitar and praise God in the market in central Eindhoven. For some reason he chose to set up not far from a stall that was selling Buddha busts. For some reason I stood some distance away. After a while the man running the Buddha stall walked across to me, not to Tony, and said that the singing was keeping people away from his stall. He then began explaining that you need a license from the Gemeente to be singing like this in public. Tony was about to move on and soon did.

² https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnol_Kox

Experience #3.



One Monday morning on my run along the Dommel I came across a group of people who set up in the park to pass time and drink through the day. As I approached their park bench, one of them, a tall thin man with long hair began to jump up and down as if on a pogo-stick. He pointed at me and began to shout over and over: “*Kijk, kijk - Jezus!*” (“Look, look - Jesus.”). I was suddenly no longer an anonymous Christian on Monday morning!

These are simply accounts of things that I have experienced this century here in Eindhoven which inform my lens of interpretation. So when I read the story of Paul and the slave girl in the classical world I am not at all surprised.

¹⁶ One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’ ¹⁸ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour.



I only had a man shouting and pointing at me for a few moments but if he had followed me around for a few days I too would have been annoyed and Paul’s example would have been my inspiration. This man in the park was like the girl in Philippi with spiritual gifting to reveal things about people that are spiritually recognised. People love being told about their spiritual condition so her owners profited by charging people to hear their spiritual revelations revealed.

That is the first part of the story about the slave girl being delivered connecting with my experience.

The Law.

So Paul had engaged the spiritual powers at work in that place. He had intruded and disarmed them. The reaction to this was prosecution under the civil law.

¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.’



This reminds me of Arno Kox. Few people recognize or understand the spiritual dynamics at work when the name of Jesus is preached or promoted in a city. The dark demonic presence in that place will go to work in people who fight the light through application of the civil law and public ferment. If you throw enough legal accusation at someone something must stick! If enough people complain it must be stopped. This is about removing the Jesus promoter from the situation. It’s about reclaiming the grey darkness to snuff out the awkward and disturbing light. Law and order may be called upon to restore the spiritual state even if it is bad.

In the news today I read the charges brought against Christian pastors in Iran, Kazakhstan and Pakistan where the charges brought are incredible - anything to shut active Christians up behind bars and promote their early death. When people bring a spiritual disturbance by representing Jesus, there may well be attempts to silence them by throwing the law books at them. From my experience, this can even happen in churches allergic to Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

In Paul's day there was Roman law but because legal practices were poorly developed the mob soon took over just as happened with Jesus after his show trials for treason and blasphemy. This is still what happens in Pakistan where mobs force the police and courts to allow them to punish Christians suspected or accused of some unforgivable crime.

²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely.



²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.



The point I am making is that after having made a spiritual impact, Saul and Silas were attacked with the civil law and then just set upon with violence. This is a pattern I recognize.

They were then thrown in the inner most part of the prison. I have had it explained that the inner most part of a Roman prison was the toilet area or bottom of the sewer drain. So Paul and Silas ended up with their feet bound in some form of restraint amidst or close to the sewer head for the prison. They may literally have been made to sit in the poo.

Now what?

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.



²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.



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- God works as only God can!
- The legal machinations are totally thwarted.
- There is a victory for the Gospel

Application



We live in a spiritual economy. There is a spiritual contest raging all around us and at times within us.

One way to know really God in all this is to promote his name and his Kingdom.

- Jesus did it.
- Paul did it.
- I have done it: sometimes intentionally and sometimes not.

Promoting Jesus sets off a dynamic process.

The first things that happen are often negative. It is the spirits in rebellion against God that first react badly. This first reaction may be at cost.

Then the human spirits not submitted to God also begin to agitate, pretending to be legally honest or concerned for some form of best practice. In our day political correctness sometimes operates like this with concern for equality or offended human rights that are really a smoke screen to shut down any promotion of God and his Kingdom. I said ‘sometimes’ so discernment is required.

But the battle is the Lord’s and we see this again and again.³

The well known Asia Bibi case is an example.⁴ After years on death row in Pakistan the legal system eventually did the right thing and dismissed the charges of blasphemy as unsubstantiated and allowed her to go to Canada but it was not an easy thing.

The Big Take Away:

The opportunity for those who want to know the reality of God is this: Promote the Lord Jesus and you will find yourself in the battle. This will take you to the front line where the action reveals reality.

In that battle we will encounter the 3 types of spirit: human, evil and holy. Sit on the fence and you may wonder where God is amidst the grey tapestry of Humanity found as saints, sinners and fools. Step up for God and it will soon become clear.

It will be in the place of difficulty we get to know God and his saving power as never before. That is also where we may find our true brothers and sisters.

³ ref. 1 Samuel 17:47

⁴ See detailed summary: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asia_Bibi_blasphemy_case