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The Acts of the Apostles
XXI. Turning the World Upside Down
Acts 16:16 – 17:9

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Everything had started out so well in Philippi for Paul and his missionary companions. Last week we read of the conversion of Lydia, a wealthy merchant in Philippi, who was to become the backbone of the Philippian church and one of Paul's most faithful supporters.¹ This morning, however, we read of trouble following upon trouble for Paul. It begins with a slave girl with an evil spirit of fortune-telling. She was following Paul around, crying out, "*These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation*" – which was absolutely the truth, of course. But, as with Jesus before him², Paul did not appreciate having this endorsement coming from an evil spirit. So Paul turned to the girl and cast the evil spirit out of her. So far, it sounds like cause for rejoicing.

But here's the catch: without that evil spirit, the girl could no longer tell fortunes. And when her owners saw that she was no longer going to be making money for them, they were furious. They grabbed Paul and Silas, dragging them into the marketplace, shouting to all what Paul had done to their business interests. And then they hauled Paul and Silas before the magistrates, this time making three rather race-oriented complaints against them: one, these people are Jews, they say – meaning not like us Romans; two, they are disturbing our city because they are Jews and not like us; and three, they are advocating for customs not lawful for we Romans to practice. Which basically is enough to start a riot against Paul and Silas. The crowd begins attacking them, the magistrates have them beaten and thrown into jail, and the jailer not only locks the cell door but also puts their feet into stocks so that they cannot move, must less escape. So much for happy beginnings in Philippi.

But, of course, the Lord then intervenes. In a wonderful scene, the Lord brings an earthquake which not only shakes open the cell doors, but even unlocks the stocks. Paul and Silas are free to escape. Now remember, this was before electric light, and lamp oil would not have been wasted on prisoners – meaning it would have been pitch-dark in those jail cells, even the jailer is sleeping there in the dark. Having been awakened by the earthquake, and seeing the open cell doors, the jailer assumes the worst – that everyone has escaped. And so he picks up his sword to do to himself what the magistrates will surely do to him in the morning when they hear about this mass escape. But Paul, somehow seeing this, cries out, "*Stop! We're all still here!*" The jailer grabs a torch, rushes in – and, sure enough, all the prisoners are present and accounted for, something of a miracle in and of itself. Or at least so the jailer believes. Because the next thing you know, he has not only invited Paul and Silas to his own home, but has confessed Christ and with his whole family been baptized.

When day comes, the magistrates send to the jailer to tell him to let Paul and Silas go – apparently not at all aware of what transpired in the night, that actually it was Paul and Silas who had already set the jailer free! But, in response, Paul then lowers the boom on the magistrates: *“They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us in prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No!”* Oh how the magistrates must have had an earthquake of their own when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. Without going into a lot of detail, just know that what this meant was that the magistrates could be in serious, and I do mean serious, trouble with Rome for having done what they have done to Roman citizens. So the magistrates come running to Paul and Silas to apologize profusely (and hopefully save their own necks!) – probably hinting in some way that it would be so nice if Paul and Silas were not to report this teeny, tiny little misunderstanding to anybody important. But even so, the magistrates also make it clear that it would probably be in everybody’s best interest for Paul and Silas to leave town as quickly as possible. So a quick goodbye to Lydia and the other members of the newborn Philippian church, and Paul and Silas head out to the city of Thessalonica.

Which, as it turns out, is a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire. For clearly news about what had happened in Philippi eventually reaches Thessalonica – because it only takes a few short weeks for trouble to find Paul and Silas in Thessalonica. They start out well – many Jews have converted to Christ through Paul’s preaching in the synagogue, and more than a few Gentiles have converted as well. But those Jews who are resistant to Paul’s preaching about Jesus soon begin to grow angry, ugly even. They hire a mob of bad actors to get a riot going against Paul and Silas – and before long, the whole city is enflamed, just like in Philippi. Apparently they can’t find Paul and Silas, so they haul the man they are staying with before the magistrates, a fellow named Jason. And the accusation they bring against Paul and Silas, even though it is actually spoken against Jason, is this: *“These men who have turned the world upside down”* – meaning, *“Have you heard what happened in Philippi?!”* – *“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.”* And this time they up the outrage by accusing Paul and Silas not just of teaching things against Roman customs, as in Philippi, but by stating that they are challenging the authority of great Caesar in Rome himself, by saying that there is another king, someone named Jesus!” And, before you know it, Paul and Silas are being secreted out of town at night by the church to save their lives.

Looking back over what happened in both Philippi and Thessalonica, one really interesting thing which happens in both towns is that the accusations against Paul and Silas are exactly correct. Just not in the way that those who speak them may have intended for them to be. The evil spirit in Philippi cried out, *“These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.”* Well, that is exactly the truth! Just spoken out of the wrong spirit and being spoken more as a warning than as a welcome. And then, in Thessalonica, the accusation is, *“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also”* – which again is precisely the truth, though again, meant as a warning, not as a welcome. I mean that is exactly what Paul and Silas have been doing in Jesus’ name – turning things upside down. In healing the slave girl, they turned the social order upside down – for, by the world’s standards, who is a slave girl to merit such attention from the Most High God? Turning the social order upside down – I like to imagine that when Paul later wrote his letter to the Philippian church, wealthy Lydia and this former slave girl were seated side by side as it was being read.

And then, Paul and Silas had also upset the economic order when they put the slave girl's well-being ahead of her owners' profit margins – much like what Jesus did when He healed the Gerasene demoniac and cast the evil spirits into a nearby herd of pigs. The pigs, now possessed by the evil spirits, rushed off a cliff into the sea and died – throwing the pork belly futures market into complete disarray. Which resulted in the locals asking Jesus to go as far away as possible.³ Turning the world upside down – just imagine putting people before profits!

But the biggest and most important turning upside down of the world Paul and Silas have done is the last one: they have upset the political order by proclaiming that there is a King higher and greater than mighty Caesar in Rome – a King whose name is Jesus. In the world's eyes, how could anyone ever possibly be greater than Caesar, who with his powerful armies ruled the entire known world?! But according to Paul and Silas, Caesar is as nothing before the true King, Jesus. The political order turned upside down.

Actually the claim here is so much more than that. To claim that Jesus is the King of kings, to claim that Jesus is the highest power and the ultimate authority, in heaven and on earth – well that claim, in truth, turns everything, and I do mean everything, upside down. It turns this world and all our thoughts and perceptions of this world upside down. It turns everything we think about life in this world upside down. To claim that Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords turns our very lives upside down!

For example, if Jesus Christ truly is King of kings, it means that He is the One to whom we answer for our lives. He is the One whom we must serve with our lives. It means that we live and breath and work and play all beneath His authority and His alone. The Westminster Shorter Catechism – that great treasure of our Reformed faith – says this in the very first question and answer. Remember how it goes? “*What is the chief end of man?*” the Catechism begins. And the answer: “*Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.*” If Jesus Christ is King of kings then our whole reason and purpose in life is turned upside down. “*Man's chief end is to glorify God*” – meaning God comes first in all our thoughts, plans, and affections. To glorify God – and not ourselves first, foremost, and always, as the world teaches us and as is our natural fallen human tendency – to glorify God first and foremost turns us upside down to the world and to our own human tendencies. God first, and me second!

“*And to enjoy Him forever*” – meaning no longer to forever be putting our own pride and pleasure first before God, but in God first having found what is the true purpose of our existence, then to find our deepest and truest joy in the fulfillment of that purpose. If Jesus truly is King of kings then, as Ricky used to say to Lucy, “We've got some ‘splainin’ to do” – or, at the very least, a whole lot of repenting and rethinking to do.

Because, further, if Jesus really is King of kings, then all our thoughts about what is the shape of a good life, all our definitions of what success really looks like, all our dreams and visions of what we want our lives to be in this world are going to have to be turned upside down. If Jesus is truly King of kings, then what the world has told us about such matters is completely wrong. If Jesus is truly King of kings, then a good life, a successful life, the life much to be desired and worked for can no longer be defined in the worldly terms of money, position, or power. It can no

longer be primarily defined even in terms of such good things as a happy marriage, or raising children who are above average, even family and friendships. It can no longer even be defined in terms of such things as happiness or self-fulfillment or inner peace with a true work-life balance having been attained and maintained. No! It's all turned upside down in Jesus.

Because, as King Jesus defines it, a good life, a successful life, a life much to be sought after and worked for instead begins to look what Micah describes in chapter six of his prophecy:

*He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*⁴

There's our mission statement for life. There's the upside down Jesus definition of what our lives are lives are for.

Or that good life, that successful life, that life to be desired and sought after looks less like the top ten list in any popular magazine, and a whole lot more like the top nine list we find in Paul's letter to the Galatians, fifth chapter: *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."*⁵ That's what a good life looks like, what success in life contains, what we are to seek and to obtain in life under the rule of King Jesus.

Or perhaps most upside down of all is the description King Jesus Himself gives of the good life, the successful life, the life most to be desired and sought after – love, He says. Love is the key, and love is the measure, and love is the way we become what He wants us to become. But not love as we humans define it, not romantic love, not feelings of love in general – but rather a very specific divine definition and ordering of love: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*⁶ Upside down. Let's admit it – it's all upside down. Jesus will turn everything about us and about this world upside down – if we should ever begin to take Him at His Word and at His command.

But maybe, if Jesus truly is King of kings, maybe that which is most turned upside down is our understanding of what's really going on in this world, what is really happening and where this world is really going beneath all the headlines of hatred and horror. If Jesus truly is King of kings, then life in this world is not, as we fear and as we are sometimes told – life in this world is not a purposeless, meaningless slog from the cradle to the grave. If Jesus truly is King of kings, then history itself it not just one bad thing after another – but rather that there is a Will and a Purpose and a Holy Power which underlies and is even now moving history along to its destined end. If Jesus truly is King of kings, that means that one day His Kingdom really is going to come, on earth as it already is in heaven. Which turns upside down all our despair about tomorrow. Which turns upside down all our fears about today. In place of despair, King Jesus gives us hope. In place of our fears, He establishes us in faith. If Jesus truly is King of kings – well then just listen to this and know that it is true, from our Presbyterian *Declaration of Faith*:

All things will be renewed in Christ.

*In Christ God gave us a glimpse of the new creation
he has already begun and will surely finish.*

*We do not know when the final day will come.
In our day we see only broken and scattered signs
that the renewal of all things is under way.
We do not yet see the end of cruelty and suffering
in the world, the church, or our own lives.
But we see Jesus as Lord.
As he stands at the center of our history,
we are confident he will stand at its end.
He will judge all people and nations.
Evil will be condemned
and rooted out of God's good creation.
There will be no more tears or pain.
All things will be made new.
The fellowship of human beings with God and each other
will be perfected.⁷*

“All things will be renewed in Christ.” Truly this world shall be turned upside down.

So, the accusation really was true, and is true still today: *“They are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”* So may King Jesus, indeed, by His great love for us, turn us upside down. Or rather – shall we now say it the way it really should be said – may King Jesus, at last, turn us right-side up. And may He make of us His faithful servants – those who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and just like Paul and Silas, those who participate with Him in the joyful work of turning this world, and all who dwell therein, right-side up in the light of His love, His mercy, His abundant goodness and eternal grace.

¹ Acts 16:11-15.

² Luke 4:31-37.

³ Luke 8:26-39.

⁴ Micah 6:8.

⁵ Galatians 5:22-23.

⁶ Matthew 22:37-39.

⁷ *A Declaration of Faith* (1977), Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1991.