

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Reach: Gospel Transformation”

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Acts 16:26-40 & Isaiah 29:5a-6

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Before today’s New Testament reading of Acts 16, let’s set some Biblical and historical context. After Jesus Christ died on a cross to forgive humanity, trampling down death by His death, Jesus came back from the dead! At his resurrection, there was: a great earthquake, the tomb opened, and many people were changed forever because of what God had done.

We learn about these origins in the book of Acts. In it, we discover so many other dynamic ways the Holy Spirit breathes life into people. As you know, two main characters are Peter and Paul. Early in Acts (4:3, 5:17-21, & 12:3-11), there are three midnight scenes where Peter and the apostles are imprisoned but divine intervention occurs: an earthquake opens prison doors and loosens chains. This is only the first series of doors opening and chains falling off.

Later, in Acts 15, we learn Paul was used by God to open the hearts of the Gentiles, which was novel and shocking. God also opened up the heart of Paul’s companion, young Timothy. He felt so passionate about God’s work that he was circumcised as an adult. He did this in order to have more rapport with others. He hoped it would help convince many others that Jesus was the Messiah.

In Acts 16, this opening theme continues. We learn of the transformation of Lydia, who was well to do. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul and his companions. When she and her whole family had been baptized, immediately she serves them with kindness. She becomes the model for hospitality- an indication of her true discipleship.

The text gives this example of a named woman who had means. Now, we come to an unnamed man who is a simple, humble jailer. He demonstrates the genuineness of his discipleship. He extends hospitality [as Lydia had done] and gives sure proof of the Spirit’s presence by “rejoicing” with his household. In mighty ways, the power of the gospel reaches: the named and unnamed, the rich and poor, those in the church and those not in the church.

Since Acts 16:26-40 is a little longer text, I encourage you to use a Bible app (or the pew Bible) to study along as I read the Word of the Lord:

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. 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. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he

brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He 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.

When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, "The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace." But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison, and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves." The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home, and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

THIS is what I want to lift up: The transforming power of the gospel has no boundaries. The good news of Jesus Christ reaches far and deep to change lives for the good of others! From the conversion of the jailer, we're reminded that God doesn't wait for those who are anxious or fretful, to come to him. God found the jailer in the inner cell. There, when he was in a dark place. He obviously was frightened for his life when he thought he had not done a good job. In those days, if your prisoners got out you had to rectify it by being killed. Did you notice the tense interchange in the middle of the passage? The jailer "drew his sword and was about to kill himself," but Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself, for we are all here [still in prison]."

The jailer didn't have to wait for God. God initiated action and came to his distress! God reached into his world, into his inner soul, into his darkness, into his insecurities- and God transformed him. God sought and found the one who was frightened and stressed. Psalm 139 puts it reassuringly that there's no place we can go where God's love can't reach us. "If I go to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there."

With the jailer's conversion, his response to God was to fall in humility and beg to be saved. He and his household were *all* saved.

Like others we've learned about who had been changed by God, they immediately offered up hospitality. The jailer took them, washed their wounds, was baptized, and brought the prisoners to his house and fed them.

See, by God's grace, how everyone was unfastened from the chains that bound them? Paul, Silas, and their companions were in physical shackles, but God unbound them- like it's God's favorite thing to do. The jailer, too, in a different kind of emotional bondage, became unshackled.

As we celebrate the gospel transforming, let me address the growing problem of anxiety in our society today. It's no surprise our country, and many like ours, suffer from a huge increase in anxiousness. I feel it. You feel it. Expressions of it are everywhere and in all age ranges. For example, there's a **children's** movie coming out called *Inside Out 2*, which is a sequel, and this one addresses anxiety head on. I even heard this week that 1 in 4 teenagers wrestle with so much anxiety that they have contemplated taking their life. 1 in 4!

As many of you sadly know, suicide has plagued our church and community way too much. It has so many ripple effects of pain and loss. If you ever experience those thoughts or tendencies, don't suffer in silence. Reach out. There is help!

Rev. Curtis Chang is a consulting professor at Duke Divinity School and bridges the worlds of secular institutions and theology. Last May, Chang wrote a religious book entitled The Anxiety Opportunity: How Worry Is the Doorway to Your Best Self. In an interview, I heard him summarize that he believes in *prayer* and *prescriptions*, as needed and followed as prescribed, but he also thinks we can do a better job as the *community of faith* helping anxious people cope. More support would strengthen the body of Christ.

Together we can discover the presence of underlying idolatry because idols rely on anxiety. Think about it. Critically analyze most ads to realize they tempt us to bow to a god {small "g"} of fear of missing out. We can equip and empower one another with vulnerable, conversations, useful resources, and Bible studies, so that the transforming power of the Holy Spirit can best be mobilized in and through us and professionals. This helps us collectively support one another in more meaningful ways.

We've added a new link to the homepage of our church website, It's for **HelpGuide.org**. It is highly recommended by one of our church counselors and covers more than coping with anxiety. Our Pastors are ramping up training in some of these fields. Our Deacons have been trained and will continue to get further training. All of this helps us do a better job of pastoral care.

By the work of the Spirit, we hope to show God's goodness in others' dark places and pointing to **open** doors and ways of unshackling. In addition to our leadership doing their part, I invite us all to bring light to those longing for conversion to a better place. This kind of ministry can be scary, maybe, but worth it. It's crossing over into an unknown area that we might feel nervous about, but just like Jesus came for the sick, we, too, are to be vessels of help for those in need.

Surely goodness and mercy has come our way, if we think about it, and now we have an opportunity to show God's love and hospitality. Be a part of the 100%, in our capital campaign, if you haven't already, and help deepen our mission partnership. Join Karen and me in trying out some of the Restoration House volunteer opportunities. Keep being a powerful change-maker for GOD! Stay open to the ways that you might free someone else.

I close with an inspirational testimony of the gospel changing a life in our community. Daniel Watson, Executive Director of Restoration House, is our missional partner in our capital campaign. He tells a story about a single mother who has her children at the Olive Tree Early Learning Academy afterschool program. Monique is 35 years old. She has two boys: Jermiah and Josiah. She has overcome a lot with them. God has powerfully provided for them all. She shares how when she came to Restoration House, she was hoping to finish college, but she was homeschooling both boys- out of fear and out of stress. She found RESTORATION- in her words, "going from chaos to- okay, we're safe." She discovered there: community, support, advocacy, goal-setting accountability, counseling, kindness, and stability. After settling in at RH, God has helped her feel rooted enough to enroll her boys at Cedar Bluff Elementary, finish her undergraduate degree in sign language, and dream of getting a Master's degree someday. Today, she's able to go back to church since she feels secure and protected.

She poignantly says, “You can either stay in this poverty mindset, or go after really big goals. I have been transformed. I am aiming higher... using my: education, brains, hands!”

Do you think she testifies to **open** doors and an unshackled life? We get to support her and many others like her. Let’s help restore single mothers and their children back to God’s good intent for their lives. Through us and in us, the power of the gospel of Jesus can change us for good, for the greater good!