

## **“Expect the unexpected!” Acts 16:16-34**

“As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most-High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today we will have our congregational meetings and in a way our meditation on the Word of God could serve as an introduction to that meeting. I propose that we reflect on these three questions – **why are we here? How to go about it? What to expect?**

**Why are we here? How to go about it? And, what to expect?**

**Why are we here?** This should be the simplest one to answer. In a way this is as clear as it can get. We all have heard the answer numerous times. We all have read it. We all kind of know it. But it is always good to be reminded as this is so important for us.

This is what the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, to whom all authority has been given, in heaven and on earth, this is how He instructs us: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Mt 28:19) “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.” (Mark 16:15) “Repentance for

the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in Jesus' name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke 24:47) "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." (John 20:21-23) "And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8) That's it. We don't need to invent anything new.

The Great Commission. To whom is it given? To the Church. Yes! And who is the Church? Yes, you are, each one of you. You can say: "I am a member of Christ's Church, I am the Church, this is my mission, entrusted to me by the Triune God Himself." Yes, to you...

How do you feel about this Great Commission, entrusted to you by your Risen Lord Jesus? Do you feel the gravity of this Commission? Do you feel the sense of urgency? Remember Jesus' words from the end of Revelation: "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done." (Rev 22:12)

He is coming soon. Which means we don't know how much time we have. And when I said "urgency" I didn't mean running around and panicking. I meant urgency in the sense of absolute importance, of the highest priority.

So, do you feel this urgency? Is this mission your priority? Do you even want to participate in this great venture? Remember, the last time we reflected on how our old Adam reacts toward God's commands. With that natural resistance and rejecting.

"I don't want anyone to command me anything! I want to do what I choose!" Thus, we often see God's commands as burdens, as something unpleasant, as restrictions on our freedom. We struggle to see them for what they are – wonderful gifts of our loving God.

These gifts are so great, that we struggle to comprehend it, we struggle to believe that that may even be true, that such marvellous, divine privileges can be entrusted to us. I pray that the Holy Spirit assures you that this is true, this is how things are. How?

That the Triune God has chosen you before the foundation of the world, yes, in the very beginning, that He has arranged the flow of history in such a way that you could hear the Gospel, He Himself has worked to bring you into His Kingdom, into His family.

Now He has entrusted to you this incredible authority, this incredible power. What authority and what power? He has sent you with His message, the most wonderful message. And we are not sent to go on our own, wherever you are, wherever He sends us, whatever the situation, whatever the people, fear not! Jesus Christ is the Lord in that place, and His Spirit goes with you.

More, when you speak as Jesus' witnesses, when you deliver His message, proclaiming what He has done, the Holy Spirit of God takes those words from your lips and uses them to renew the hearts of those who are willing to listen.

See, you have been entrusted the words of life, the words which can create a new life, just think about this! As you speak, by your speaking someone else may receive a new heart, a new life, eternal life, you can speak them into God's Kingdom.

As you speak as Jesus' messengers, when you declare Jesus' forgiveness – "I forgive you all your sin in the name of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit!" – they are forgiven. You speak, and someone is made a child of God.

You speak and Jesus' words from your lips, in the power of the Holy Spirit, bring someone into New Heavens and New Earth. For you are sent by Jesus Christ Himself, and you have the Spirit of God dwelling in you.

This is true and amen to the glory of our God! Of course, we struggle to grasp the magnitude of this divine reality. But this is who you are and this is what your mission is like. Incredible mission. Humbling privilege.

Now our next question was – **how do we go about it?** Do you know the answer? As Jesus Christ gave Himself fully to us, so we are to give ourselves fully to Him. We are to devote our entire lives to Him and the work of His Kingdom.

What does this mean? Does this mean that we need to abandon all the other activities in our lives – marriage, family, work or business, hobbies, friendships, etc. – and focus only on ... some missionary stuff? By no means!

What it does mean is this – that we need to be deliberate about using our time and God given opportunities wisely. Considering how to support one another in marriage, helping one another to grow in faith. How to teach the way of the Lord to our children, both with our examples, and also explaining them the beauty and depth of the Gospel.

It is about every aspect of our lives being shaped so that it would serve this great commission. When in everything we do, in all our relationships, in all the settings and situations where our God has placed us – family, workplace, friendships – we would continually call to our Lord Jesus: "Please, teach me and show me how to proclaim the Gospel in this situation, to these people!"

So that in every aspect of your lives you would let "your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Mt 5:16) So that seeing God's presence and peace and glory and joy in us, everyone would be attracted and drawn to find out more about this God and about this Jesus.

Isn't this beautiful? Sure, it is... but the old Adam in us turns this wonderful gift into burdensome chore: "Do I really need to do this? Shouldn't pastors do this? We pay them. Why me?" But it is like asking:

"Do I really need to spend time with the most beautiful, most attractive, the wisest, the most powerful, the most gracious and welcoming person that exists, who also loves me more than anyone else, and who desires to bless me beyond comprehension?"

When we respond to this true God and true man who devoted His life to us, He fills us and our lives with divine joy of the Gospel, with the joy of being chosen and privileged to share in His mission. May this joy fill every aspect of your lives, every relationship, every day and every effort. For there is nothing better. This is God's gift to you.

The same is true for individuals and for congregations. This is where we need to focus our efforts, to be deliberate, to pray, consider, meditate, converse, brainstorm and plan how to use all God given resources, gifts, reason, skills, etc. to carry out this mission.

But, and now we get to the last part, perhaps to the most insightful one, and I have to confess, probably, to the most difficult, at least for me. As we strive to do our best sharing in Jesus' great mission, **what are we to expect?**

**What are we to expect?** You may not like the answer. I don't like the answer. Expect the unexpected. Expect messiness. Expect obstacles. Expect trials and challenges. Resistance from the outside and resistance from the inside. Why would I say that?

Our reading from Acts gives us a glimpse on how our God goes about making disciples. Paul the apostle was well prepared. He had planned his itinerary; to go to Asia, but the Holy Spirit forbid them. He wanted to go to Bithynia, again, the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. What is going on?! Then he is sent to Macedonia, to Philippi.

Why? There were not even a dozen God fearing people, they didn't even have a synagogue there. So, Paul goes to a place at the riverside, outside the city, where there supposedly was a place of prayer and ... surprise! there was Lydia, a businesswoman who rejoiced in the Gospel, wanted to become Jesus' disciple and invited Paul and his companions to use everything she had to advance Jesus' mission.

But then, as Paul continued to proclaim the Gospel, he got this unwelcomed company. A demon possessed slave girl, hanging around, following them and crying out: "These men are servants of the Most-High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."

Imagine if you went somewhere hoping to engage in faith conversations, and a person like that would be following you and shouting out. What an annoyance! They just couldn't get rid of her... until finally in the power of Jesus' name Paul was able to drive the unclean spirit from the girl. If only he had known what will follow...

The whole hell broke loose, they are captured, there is chaos in the city, they are accused by angry mob... no court, no hearing, not a glimpse of famous Roman justice, straight into beating, public beating and once that was done – to the prison, in the stocks.

What thoughts would be running through Paul's head?! We don't know... "Dear Lord, what is going on, why? Why did you bring this upon us?!" Exhausted, in pain, bleeding, there was not much left for them except crying out to God, perhaps singing Psalms.

But then, the earthquake and everything changed. The jailer wants to kill himself, for if he had lost his prisoners, he would be executed anyway. His strange prisoner, Paul,

stops him: “Don’t harm yourself! Don’t take your life! There is someone who already has taken your place, who already has given His life for you, who has taken all your shame and guilt upon Himself! He wants you to life! He wants you to live forever!”

We only get bits and pieces of what happened. The jailer and his whole household rejoice in the Gospel, are baptized and become Jesus disciples. Then, whatever strange it may seem, Paul’s mission in Philippi is over and he and his companions leave.

What about that?! Do you like when things go according to the plan? Your plan? I do. Did they go according to Paul’s plan? Unlikely. But hadn’t Paul come to Philippi, he would not have met Lydia and her household. Had not the demon possessed girl stalked Paul, he would not have found himself in that prison with that jailer and his household.

But now, one day, perhaps in a near future, we will see Lydia and we will meet the jailer and the people of their households, and countless others whom our all-wise God has brought into His Kingdom. We may not understand His way, but we know His heart, He didn’t hesitate to give Himself for us, that is how much He wants us to be with Him.

Our God desires everyone to come to the knowledge of truth and to be saved. He has been working as the Lord over history creating those situations where people are willing to hear the Gospel and respond to His invitation. He is sending us to be His mouthpieces in those situations, and they may not look like what we imagine.

What should we take away? We know what our mission is, as brothers and sisters of Jesus, and as His Church. There is urgency to this mission, for our glorious Lord is coming soon. Finally, we should be ready to face the unexpected.

If the Holy Spirit prepares us, if He enables us to trust our good Lord Jesus, if He helps us to see every situation as God given opportunity, we may be blessed to witness different people – business women and prison guards and everyone in between to be brought into God’s family. This is why we are still here.

Our Lord is not done yet, there are more rooms in His Father’s house. There are still seats to be filled at His eternal feast, perhaps reserved for your loved ones, and we are so blessed that we may be able to play our little part.

Make us humble to listen to you, give us attentive hearts to follow you, make us courageous not to value our comfort over your mission, and help us to give ourselves wholly into your service. As you gave yourself for us.

Amen.