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Living in HisStory: Revealing the True Wonder of Who God Is
Relentless Pursuit
Acts 16:16-40
Jeff Germo, October 21, 2018

Last week we looked at the conversion of Saul, who was a fierce enemy of Jesus followers and Jesus' church. Saul met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus while he was on his way to persecute the church. Jesus spoke to him from a blinding light asking why he was so intent on persecuting him. Saul was left blind with his companions who led him by the hand to Damascus where he remained blind for three days.

Immediately following this, the Lord also spoke to a man named Ananias in a vision, telling him what happened to Saul. He instructed him to find Saul and pray for his healing and tell him the good news of Jesus.

Ananias was, for good reason, afraid to go to Saul because of his reputation of being a persecutor of the church. Jesus then emboldened Ananias by telling him that he had chosen Saul to take his message of hope to the Gentiles and to kings and to the people of Israel. And then he said these words:

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Acts 9:16 (NLT)

16 And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake."

That was an understatement. God relentlessly pursued Saul and totally changed his life. He gave him a new purpose. Before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus Saul was full of hatred for Jesus and his followers. All his energy and time and thoughts were about destroying the church and the testimony of Jesus in the life of his followers. He travelled all over the place to squash the work of God.

After he met Jesus, Saul had a complete 180 degree turn around. Every moment of every day from that time forward he lived for one purpose, to spread the Good News of freedom in Jesus Christ. He travelled extensively teaching and preaching the life changing message of Jesus.

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Take a look at these two maps of Paul's travels. When you read through the book of Acts it seems like things happen so quickly, but actually there is a lot of time between many of the events. Saul was about 27 years old when he approved of the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem in about the year 32 or 33 AD. He then continued his vicious rampage against the church. Two years later, on his way to Damascus to continue beating down the Christians, he met the risen Jesus and started following him.

It wasn't until about thirteen years later, at the age of about 42, when Barnabas came looking for him, that he began to teach and preach. From the age of 42 to his death, Paul would have travelled over 16,000 kilometres in the course of his ministry, preaching and teaching about Jesus. And during his twenty year career as a missionary he suffered more than you or I could imagine, until he was martyred for his faith in Jesus at the hands of Emperor Nero when he was about 61 or 62 years old.

In 2 Corinthians 11 Paul told the church there about some of the things he had to suffer for Christ.

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2 Corinthians 11:23-28 (NLT)

23 I have... been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. 24 Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. 25 Three

times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea.

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26 I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not.

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27 I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. 28 Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches.

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I have heard some well meaning Christians say things that make it sound like if you are suffering you aren't in the will of God. I don't see that anywhere in the Bible. The Apostle Paul was in the centre of God's will and suffered enough for several life times. God used his suffering for vast amounts of good and for his glory.

In chapter 12 of 2 Corinthians, in a display of humanity, Paul pleaded for God to take away some sort of suffering he had been experiencing.

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2 Corinthians 12:8–10 (NLT)

8 Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. 9 Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. 10 That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

These have been my life verses for many many years. What was Paul saying here?

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If you want to see the glory and the power of God in your life, you have to give up control to Jesus. You have to own and be okay with your weaknesses. That goes against everything in me. I so want to control my own life. I want to be strong. I want to avoid hardship. And yet, Paul says, if you want to see the power of God in your life you need to be okay with your weaknesses.

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Last week I had Ciara come to the front and help me with an illustration on trust where she fell back into my arms knowing that I was strong enough and trustworthy enough to catch her. It took a few times of practicing when we did it at her place, but she finally came to believe that she could safely fall back into my arms and I would catch her.

That is the main lesson Jesus wants to teach us as we walk with him. He is relentlessly pursuing us with his love. The passage we are going to look at this morning is about God using Paul (formerly Saul) to bring the love of Jesus to a man and his family who were supposed to be his enemies.

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The place where this situation occurred was in the city of Philippi, in present day Greece, which was part of the Roman Empire, across the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas from Israel. Paul was about forty six years old at that time, about 17 years after he had met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. He had already been through a whole bunch of suffering for the message of Christ. At one point he had been stoned and left for dead. Now, he and Silas go into the city and hang out there for several days.

One Sabbath day they went outside the city to a riverbank to look for a Jewish house of prayer. Apparently, there wasn't a large enough Jewish population in Philippi to warrant a synagogue, but there was a prayer house. These were typically built near a source of water.

So Paul and Silas and the others with him found a Gentile, God worshipping business woman, who had not yet been introduced to Jesus. Paul and the others told her about freedom in Christ. The Lord opened her heart. She and everyone in her home received Christ and were subsequently baptized. So, Lydia and her family were the first members of the church in Philippi.

That takes us to our passage for this morning where we will meet the next members of the church in Philippi.

[13]

Acts 16:16–40 (NLT)

16 One day as we were going down to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit that enabled her to tell the future.

So, they were going to the house of prayer again and on the way they met a slave girl who was possessed by a demon. The Greek word used here for "spirit" is *pneuma pythōna*. The "Python spirit." The Python spirit was said to give powers to the person they possessed so they could tell the future.

She earned a lot of money for her masters by telling fortunes.

So, she was a slave girl who was being exploited by her masters. They *needed* her to be in bondage to Satan. They saw her as their property and had no concern for her physical, emotional, or spiritual wellbeing whatsoever. Their only concern was that they would make a healthy profit from her fortune telling abilities given to her by the demon that kept her bound up.

17 She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved."

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18 This went on day after day until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and said to the demon within her, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And instantly it left her.

I used to wonder why Paul got so mad about this girl who seemed to be helping them out by gathering a crowd for them. After all, she was shouting out to the crowds that Paul and his team were there to point them to God and tell them how to be saved. What could be wrong with that? It seems like a good thing, but the motive was not good. The motive of the demon was actually to distract the crowd so they wouldn't pay attention to Paul's message.

The girl followed them wherever they went, shouting. As a matter of fact, the Greek word for shouting here is to shriek, or wail, or babble. She wasn't following them in order to help the cause of Christ. She was a nuisance, day after day, until Paul had finally had enough. He wasn't mad at the girl. He knew there was something bigger going on than what the girl was doing.

He spoke directly to the demon in her and commanded it, in the authority of Jesus, to come out. It instantly left her and she was free, probably for the first time in her life. The text doesn't say this, but she was likely added to the membership of the first church in Philippi.

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19 Her masters' hopes of wealth were now shattered, so they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities at the marketplace.

So, now we have a wee bit of a problem because when Paul drove the demon out of the girl, along with the demon went her owners' source of income. They were very obviously ticked off. And another beating ensued for Paul and his buddy Silas.

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20 "The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews!" they shouted to the city officials.

21 "They are teaching customs that are illegal for us Romans to practice."

Rome did not think very highly of the Jewish religion, or the Christian faith, for that matter. The Jewish and Christian belief in one God was antithetical to Rome's pluralistic theology. Rome did, however, tolerate foreign religions as long as they didn't promote a political agenda against the Emperor. The slave masters didn't tell the officials the true reason for their anger, which was their loss of income. They stirred up the officials and the crowd in the market place with false accusations.

22 A mob quickly formed against Paul and Silas, and the city officials ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden rods.

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23 They were severely beaten, and then they were thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to make sure they didn't escape. 24 So the jailer put them into the inner dungeon and clamped their feet in the stocks.

According to Roman law, if a prisoner escaped, the guards who were on duty at the time would be subject to the same penalty as the prisoner, which often meant death. So this jailer went to extra lengths to ensure Paul and Silas couldn't escape. He put them in an inner dungeon and locked their feet together in stocks.

This unnamed jailer would be the next person God would relentlessly pursue through Paul and his colleagues. This was another divine appointment. Paul knew that there was a bigger story unfolding than the events he could see. God was up to something. He was building his church.

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25 Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening.

The other prisoners listening in must have thought they were nuts. They had just been stripped naked and severely beaten. They likely had welts and bruises and cuts all over their bodies. They were locked up in a dark, dingy, cold, damp dungeon. They were in the worst possible circumstances — and they were singing. That sounds crazy. But it's not.

If you read the Old Testament, in Kings and Chronicles you see that many of the kings hired worship leaders, singers and instrumentalists to go ahead of the army singing praises to God. Frequently, the battles would be won without the Hebrew armies lifting a weapon, because the real battle is in the heavenlies. That's why we sing worship songs lifting up the name of Jesus Sunday mornings. We are doing battle in the heavenlies because that is where the battle is being fought.

That's what Paul said to the Ephesian church.

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Ephesians 6:12 (NLT)

12 For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

What is your temptation when you are faced with some kind of difficulty or opposition? It's very natural, to, on one hand, to work really hard and claw and clamour and grasp and try to save ourselves without

God in a way that doesn't honour him, or, on the other hand, to get despondent and depressed and think we are all alone and imagine God doesn't care about us, and give up.

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We can easily forget that God is working behind the scenes. He *is* at work. He's relentlessly pursuing us. We are in a spiritual battle. Satan is at work overtime trying to thwart God's plans, and we mostly naturally move away from God.

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When you are going through some kind of difficulty, practice looking up. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Recognize that there is a bigger picture than what you can see. There is a bigger story unfolding than the scene that you are currently in.

Sing a worship song, or play one on whatever electronic device you play music on. Or read a Psalm of praise from the Old Testament. Or just say, "Thank you, Jesus!" Lift your eyes to him. That is the most unnatural thing for us to do when we are facing difficulty, but it is also the most effective way to lift yourself out of the pit of self-pity and remind yourself that God has not forgotten you.

Many times after you do that, you will either see that the problem you thought was a mountain, was not really that big after all. Or you receive some sort of answer from the Lord. And sometimes he may simply give you the grace you need to walk through the fires of adversity without changing the circumstances.

So, Paul and Silas are sitting in their prison cell. They are likely in a lot of pain, and very cold from the dampness of the dungeon, and they are singing hymns, praising God, and praying.

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26 Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! 27 The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself.

The jailer was expecting that all the prisoners were going to escape and he knew his fate at the hands of the Roman authorities would be far worse than death at his own hands.

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28 But Paul shouted to him, "Stop! Don't kill yourself! We are all here!" 29 The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.

He had obviously connected the dots. Paul and Silas were different than the other prisoners in the prison. He had never experienced anyone like these two.

30 Then he brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

This is kind of interesting. Why did he ask how to be saved? What did he mean by that? He knew Roman law. He knew how tenuous his situation was. If the prisoners had overpowered him he would be a dead man, either at their hands or at the hands of his superiors. But, that's not the kind of salvation he was talking about.

The jailer had just witnessed three miracles. One was the earthquake that broke the shackles of the prisoners and opened the prison doors. Another was that the prisoners didn't escape. But a third was the testimony of Paul and Silas as they were praying and singing about Jesus in the middle of what should have been a terrible time for them. This jailer saw Jesus through Paul and Silas. Their attitudes and their words in their prayers and songs pointed directly to Jesus. They must have clearly presented the good news of freedom in Christ in what they said and did, and the songs they sang.

31 They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household.”

Some people misunderstand this. It sounds like if the jailer believed in Jesus his entire family would be saved through him. It doesn't say that. What Paul and Silas said was if he and everyone in his household believed, they would all be saved. They wouldn't be saved through the jailer's faith. Salvation comes through a personal belief in Jesus' finished work on the cross. That is why we don't baptize infants at CRBC. We only baptize people who have trusted that Jesus has paid the penalty for their sins.

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32 And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. 33 Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. 34 He brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God.

This is such a beautiful scene. The jailer who had previously been potentially their enemy, and one who held power over them, had a complete shift in mind and heart. He took them into his home, fed and cared for them and washed their wounds. Paul and Silas's enemy became their friend. And not only that, but his entire family believed in Jesus and was saved and immediately baptized.

This is such a cool story. Remember back when Jesus told Ananias to go and find Saul to pray for him that he would be healed from his blindness? Jesus told Ananias that he was going to use Saul, who was an enemy of Jesus, to bring the good news of freedom in Jesus to Gentiles, and kings, and to the people of Israel.

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Acts 9:16 (NLT)

16 And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake.”

That is what is happening here. Jesus was building his church. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 16:18 that he would build his church and the gates of hell would not be able to hold the church back. That is what was happening in this story. Jesus was building his church. He was pushing back the gates of hell.

God's story was being woven through the stories of Paul and Silas. All the difficult things they went through were only subplots in the middle of God's greater story that was unfolding before their eyes as Jesus was building his church. First, Lydia and her family and friends, then the demon possessed slave girl, and now the jailer and his family were newly added to the family of God and to the church in Philippi.

Had Paul and Silas looked at their situation and thought that they were the main characters in their story, or that the scene they were in the middle of was the main scene, they would have missed out on what God wanted to do through them. So many would have missed out on the blessings of God.

Let's finish off the rest of this story and then bring it home for us.

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35 The next morning the city officials sent the police to tell the jailer, “Let those men go!” 36 So the jailer told Paul, “The city officials have said you and Silas are free to leave. Go in peace.” 37 But Paul replied, “They have publicly beaten us without a trial and put us in prison—and we are Roman citizens. So now they want us to leave secretly? Certainly not! Let them come themselves to release us!”

According to the text of the *lex Julia* or Roman law, a Roman citizen was not to be beaten or bound by a magistrate or by any other person in any circumstances, let alone untried and uncharged. The citizen had only to say “*civis Romanus sum*,” or “I am a Roman citizen,” and he would be immune from punishment. There were heavy penalties for those who violated these privileges of citizenship.

So, needless to say, when Paul and Silas said those words the city officials were more than apologetic.

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38 When the police reported this, the city officials were alarmed to learn that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. 39 So they came to the jail and apologized to them. Then they brought them out and begged them to leave the city. 40 When Paul and Silas left the prison, they returned to the home of Lydia. There they met with the believers and encouraged them once more. Then they left town.

That is such a great story. Paul was living out the things he taught.

[28]

Romans 8:28 (NLT)

28 And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

Paul was living his life on purpose for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In every decision, every move he made, every conversation he had, he had one goal and that was that the good news of Jesus would be spread through him. That meant that anything he experienced, no matter how bad it seemed in the moment, God would use for good and for his glory if Paul let him.

Some of you are going through some difficult circumstances right now. You have struggles in your home, problems with your relationships, difficulties at work, fears that plague you, shame that follows you, financial problems that keep you wondering if you will ever get ahead, or insecurities that keep you from being the person you know God created you to be.

Some of you are tempted to throw in the towel. Here's the deal. Satan, your accuser, the enemy of your soul wants you to give up. He wants you to focus on the problem and magnify it in your mind. When we give in to the lies of Satan like that, what happens to our view of God? He becomes smaller in our minds.

We have a God who is all powerful, all knowing, completely holy and just, and who loves us unconditionally. He has our best in mind, and he wants to use every difficult thing we experience for so much more good than we can possibly imagine, and for his glory.

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He wants to build the church through you. That is pretty crazy. Remember what happened through Paul and Silas when they responded in faith to each of the circumstances they faced, no matter how hard. God was glorified and his church was advanced. Lydia and her family and friends, the slave girl, and the jailer and his whole family saw Jesus because Paul and Silas saw that there was a bigger story unfolding than just their own.

Everyone in this auditorium, God wants to use to build his church. And sometimes he will use the most ridiculous circumstances to advance his kingdom. We see what looks like impossible relationship problems. Jesus gives us an opportunity to advance his kingdom. We see what looks like an insurmountable financial battle. Jesus gives us an opportunity to practice trusting him and not acting unwisely out of desperation. We look at our weaknesses and feel like failures. Jesus gives us a chance to let him take those same weaknesses and let his power reign in us.

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2 Corinthians 12:9–10 (NLT)

⁹“My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. ¹⁰ That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

I want to make sure that nobody leaves here thinking they need to always respond perfectly to the bad stuff that happens in our lives. That’s not what we should leave here with. That only leaves us feeling a heavy weight of guilt and shame when we don’t measure up. The walk of faith with Jesus is not about measuring up at all.

What God is doing as we go through the crucible of life is transforming us into the likeness of his Son. He is not looking for perfection in our character now. He is bringing about a movement from immaturity to maturity as we respond to the Holy Spirit. He is transforming us over time. And when others see the evidence of change in us it will point them to Jesus. That is why we can boast about our weaknesses and insults, and hardships and persecutions.

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I want to repeat what I often say. **Trust God and do the next right thing. Do the next right thing and then trust God. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author who is perfecting your faith.** Watch for divine opportunities in the middle of whatever it is you are going through. More good than you could ever imagine will result if you do that. God will use you to build his church.



***Living in HisStory: Revealing the True Wonder of Who God Is
Nobody Beyond His Reach***

Acts 16:16-40

Week of October 21, 2018

Objective of this study: To see more clearly that there is a bigger story unfolding than just our own and to allow Jesus to transform us through our circumstances.

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us.]

Welcome (5 minutes)

What's your all time favourite movie or novel and why?

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.
2. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
3. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read **Psalm 40:1-5** meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you. **Did anything "jump out at you"?**

[It's really important when doing this study that we each think about ourselves specifically and ways we need to grow, not how Christians in general need to grow. Do the hard work of letting the Holy Spirit speak to *your* heart.]

Word (30-45 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
 1. Read Acts 9:15-17; 2 Corinthians 11:23-28; 2 Corinthians 12:8-10; Ephesians 6:12; Romans 8:28. Then read Acts 16:11-40.
 1. What was Paul like based on these passages? Remember the Acts 16 account is about 17 years after his Damascus Road experience. What was he like before Christ? What was he like after Christ?
 2. Look at each of the characters in the Acts 9 and Acts 16 narratives. What was it like for each of them to trust God and do the next right thing? (Saul; Ananias; Lydia, the slave girl; the jailer; Paul & Silas)

Work (30-45 minutes)

1. Is there something in your life right now that the Lord is speaking to about through this sermon?
2. What is your temptation when you are faced with some kind of difficulty? Fight? or Flight?
3. What would it look like in your situation to trust God and do the next right thing?

Sermon Quote: "When you are going through some kind of difficulty, practice looking up. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Recognize that there is a bigger picture than what you can see. There is a bigger story unfolding than the scene that you are currently in."

Sermon Quote: "Had Paul and Silas looked at their situation and thought that they were the main characters in their story, or that the scene they were in the middle of was the main scene, they would have missed out on what God wanted to do through them. So many would have missed out on the blessings of God."

4. Paul was living his life on purpose for the Gospel of Jesus. What are some things you can change to live your life more on purpose for the Gospel of Jesus?

Prayer

1. Spend the rest of the time praying for each other. **Praise God together for how he works, and how he allows us to partner with him to accomplish things in his kingdom.**
2. Here are some things you can pray about for the church:
 - A. That, as a church, we would actively and purposefully engage in the mission of Jesus in Campbell River.
 - B. Our church board and staff as they lead us to live out the mission of Jesus
 - C. River Kids ministry as they reach out to kids in our community.
 - D. **Our missionary of the week:** Luc and Denise Tetreault in Pakistan
 - E. **Local CR church:** Radiant Life Outreach - Pastor Adrian