

Acts chapter 16

Acts chapter 16 is about the apostle Paul's second missionary journey. After arguing with Barnabas who went to Cyprus instead, he and Silas have set off again for Asia Minor, present day southern Turkey, to revisit the places he had visited before. I'm not going to draw out something astonishing out of this chapter, but I think that it reminds us of the suffering Paul endured to bring the Good News and how bad things done by bad people to Paul ended up with good consequences.

After having been stoned and left for dead (Acts 14) in Lystra, then going on to Derby and back again to Lystra, Paul is back for a third time in Lystra. Why? To see how things are going and he picks up Timothy and they travel on deeper into the countryside until they hit a barrier.

Something strange happens. The Holy Spirit doesn't let them go into certain places to preach the Gospel. In verse 6, they can't go into Asia. In verse 7, they can't go into Bythinia. Why would God not want the Asians and the Bythinians to hear about Jesus? Asia and Bithynia are present day north west Turkey. In Romans 15 Paul mentions his journeys from Jerusalem to Illyricum (present day Croatia) Romans 15: 20-21 says "It has always been my ambition to preach the Gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.²¹ Rather as it is written: "Those who were not told about Him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.""

The Holy Spirit probably wasn't letting Paul into those areas because somebody else may already have been ministering there. We don't really know, but what we do know is that God wanted Paul to go to Europe.

So Paul and his friends, Silas, Timothy and now Luke, are at Troas, which is on the coast of the Aegean Sea, opposite Philippi, trying to decide what to do and where to go next. Luke, who wrote the book of the Acts of the Apostles, joins them in Troas. Up to verse 8, when they got to Troas, Luke wrote "**they** went, **they** came to". In verse 10, he writes, "**we** got ready at once to leave for Macedonia," so now Luke was one of them.

They sailed to Macedonia, which is in northern Greece, in response to a dream Paul had. He saw a man from Macedonia telling him, "Come over into Macedonia, and help us." Paul heard the call, and away they went, leaving the continent of Asia and taking the Gospel into Europe for the first time.

Philippi wasn't like the other cities Paul had visited before. It wasn't an Asian city. It was founded by Greeks, and very heavily influenced by the Romans. When Paul entered a city for the first time, where did he always go first? The local synagogue. But where did he go first in Philippi? Down by the river, looking for a place of prayer. Apparently, Philippi didn't even have a synagogue to go to on the Sabbath and probably had few Jews. So Paul was in new territory – no community of Jews who knew about God and the Messiah to talk to first.

The first convert in Macedonia is a woman named Lydia. The Bible says she was a seller of purple and a worshipper of God. Many of you will know the story, but what struck me was her receptiveness to Paul's message. When Paul told her and other women by the river about Jesus, she accepted Him and was baptised, along with members of her household. Luke says in verse 14 that the Lord opened her heart to respond to His message.

How encouraging is that! We know the Lord goes on ahead us to open the hearts of those who are seeking Him. And she invited Paul to her house. That house was probably the first church in Europe.

Lydia was the good news for Paul.

Now came the bad news, and it was another woman! A slave girl possessed by a demon. She was owned by some people who used an evil spirit to tell people's fortunes. Owned by men, AND possessed by Satan, she was completely controlled by outsiders. In today's world we tend to think demon possession is something misdiagnosed as schizophrenia or some kind of mental illness, but I don't think so. Clairvoyants and mediums ply their trade as much today as in Roman times and use the same means to reveal what is often humanly impossible to deduce from just reading body language and asking leading questions.

She saw Paul and his friends walking around the city and shouted out, "These men are the servants of the most high God, who are telling you the way to be saved" Why did she do this? Why would Satan use one of his people as an advertisement for God and God's people? Someone who is possessed often has no choice in the things he or she does. Possession means that another has taken control of your mind and body and if this demon was like other demons in the Gospel stories, it probably had no option but to obey the Holy Spirit and speak out truth. When Jesus walked the earth, evil spirits would cry out and call Him the holy one of God, and He wouldn't allow them to speak for His time had not yet come. Even the father of lies has to tell the truth when he's confronted by the power of God. A strong man who's in great pain will have to admit, "It hurts." So Satan and his forces, when they're face to face with God or with one of His faithful servants, have to admit, "It's God." This girl wasn't testifying to God's love, grace and mercy. The spirit in her was screaming out in pain and anger because it was unable to cry out other than the truth in the presence of holiness. It says in verse 17 that she followed Paul around shouting. She probably made it hard for Paul to talk to anyone else. This went on for a few days until he couldn't stand the slave girl's shouting any longer, he turned and spoke, and at the name of Jesus, that evil spirit took off and didn't come back.

Suddenly the whole situation has changed. Suddenly this slave girl is a worthless little teenager instead of a money earning asset. Suddenly Paul isn't just an oddly-dressed traveller; he's taken away these men's future earnings without any consideration of the effect on the slave owners. They grabbed Paul and Silas; why they didn't grab Luke and Timothy is anyone's guess. And they dragged them into the marketplace where the magistrates were. And that was also the best place to get a mob together.

The magistrates held a hearing. To do things legally, if you're going to punish someone, you need charges, you need a trial, you need a verdict, and you need a sentence. How did these magistrates do?

First, the charges. In verses 20 and 21, Paul and Silas are charged with throwing the city into uproar, causing trouble in the city, and teaching unlawful customs. They just troubled the Roman owners of one slave, that's all. As for teaching unlawful customs? They knew Paul and Silas were Jews, so they assumed they were teaching the Jewish law as against Roman law. They had no idea what they were teaching.

Those were the charges. Next, the trial. There was none. Next, a verdict. There was none. The magistrates went straight from the charges to the sentencing. We know the multitude was rising up together against Paul and Silas; maybe the magistrates were more worried about the xenophobic crowd than they were about the truth.

So now we come to the sentence. "Rip their clothes off them, and beat them!" In 2 Corinthians 11:25, Paul said he had been beaten with rods three times, and this was probably one of those occasions. Luke couldn't even count how many times Paul and Silas got hit. He just says they were severely beaten (in other translations they laid many stripes on them).

Then the magistrates send them to jail. They tell the jailer to guard them well. That's all they tell him. Roman jails were not nice places. They didn't have bars in the windows, because they didn't have windows. No ventilation, no light except the lanterns or torches carried by the guards. Sanitation was non-existent. The inner cell, where they put Paul and Silas, would have been the darkest and the jailer locks their feet in the stocks, so they can't roll over, can't bend their knees or move anywhere. That was Paul and Silas' reward for casting a demon out of a girl, and they had no idea how long they were going to be there.

Now we get to the part that most of us know about the miraculous earthquake. That certainly was a miracle, wasn't it? Actually, there are seven miracles in a row.

The first miracle is in verse 25:

And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang hymns to God: and the prisoners heard them. That phrase "heard them" means they were listening to them. It's no miracle that Paul and Silas were awake at midnight -- they'd been beaten severely, they were in a very uncomfortable place, they couldn't move because they were in the stocks... it would have been a miracle if they had fallen asleep! But they were wide awake. It would have been almost pitch black. All they could do was talk. And they couldn't talk about football, because it hadn't been invented yet. They had a choice between complaining about their situation, or being thankful in spite of their situation, so they prayed and sang praises to God. One can wonder what kind of songs they sang and what tunes were used.

The miracle is that a jail full of hardened criminals wasn't yelling at them to shut up, or cursing them, or threatening to kill them in the morning. They were listening. The magistrates wanted to stop Paul from preaching, and all they did was give him a captive audience!

Miracle 2 is the one we all know about, the earthquake at midnight. It was definitely a supernatural earthquake. The foundations were shaken and instead of all the stones in the building being cracked, dislodged and come tumbling down, all the doors sprang open, and all the stocks and manacles and handcuffs popped open. Earthquakes make the walls wobble, ripple and shake too and fro. They just don't make the doors pop open without most of the rest of the building falling to pieces. Unless they're guided by the hand of God, that is.

What was the point of this earthquake? Was it to set Paul and Silas free? No, because they didn't budge. This earthquake was a sign to someone. Someone very nearby. Someone who was ripe for the Gospel.

In verse 27, the jailer wakes up (I'm sure it was the earthquake that woke him). He sees the open jail doors, and thinks all his prisoners have escaped. Roman law said that, if you were responsible for guarding someone and that someone escaped, it was your life for his life. The jailer thinks it's all over for him, and he draws his sword and is about to fall on it.

Verse 28 has **miracles 3 and 4**:

"But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Don't harm yourself for we are all here."

Miracle 3 is that none of the prisoners ran for it. They were all still there, in a jail with open doors. Why didn't they run? Scripture doesn't say, but we can make a really good guess. If they had escaped, the jailer would have killed himself, and his soul would have gone to Hell, when he was just a heartbeat away from getting saved. I think God must have kept those prisoners in jail.

Miracle 4 is that Paul yelled to the jailer. How did Paul know that the jailer was about to kill himself? Paul was in the inner cell, no windows, no lights. Paul couldn't see him. Paul couldn't hear him. How did Paul know? The only rational explanation is that the Holy Spirit told Paul what was about to happen outside, and why. Paul let out a yell to save a life, and he wound up saving some souls as well.

Miracle 5 happens in verse 29:

Then he called for lights, and rushed in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas.

This poor jailer has just had the scare of his life. He's been awakened by an earthquake, he sees all his jail doors standing wide open, he's almost committed suicide, and now he's realising that there's something very strange going on. What does he do? He does something extraordinary.. somehow he knew exactly who was responsible for all this, and he knew that, out of a jail full of men, these two prisoners were somehow involved. Insterad of treating them like convicts, he fell terembling before them out of respect. And that brings us to **miracle 6**, in verse 30:

He brought them out out of the cell, and asks, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

We have no record of what the jailer knew about Paul and Silas. They had no official prison record, because they were never convicted for anything. All the jailer knew was that they'd been in court, that they'd been beaten with rods, and that he'd been ordered to keep them safely. If you were a prison guard, what would you think? You'd probably think these chaps were dangerous criminals. You wouldn't give them much respect and call them Sir. Why doesn't he lock them and the other prisoners up again? No the one thought uppermost in his mind is that he needs to be saved, and that those two dangerous criminals know how, and that they're willing to tell him.

Where did the idea of salvation come from? The jailer didn't hear Paul and Silas praying and praising God; it says in verse 27 that he was asleep. This was the miracle -- that the jailer saw the sign God sent him, the open jail still full of prisoners, and he recognized the hand of God when he saw it, and he came under conviction right then and there.

So he asks Paul and Silas the most important question anyone can ever ask. "What must I do to be saved?" They give him a straight answer, the Gospel in one verse: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, you and your household. Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him, and to all the others that were in his house." Apparently the earthquake and the shouting had awakened the entire household, however many that was. And Paul and Silas had themselves an evangelistic meeting right there in front of the jail in the dead of night.

And that was **miracle 7**, the greatest miracle of all -- that a sinner can cry out to God for mercy in the name of Jesus, and receive mercy for everything s/he has done wrong. That wonderful message hasn't changed; it's the same for us as it was for that jailer and his family. Verse 33 says they were all baptised, and verse 34 says they all believed. No one else can believe for you. Baptism is still something that you should do after you've put your trust in Christ. And, then as now, becoming a Christian should cause a change in your life. We see this in the jailer, who was ordered to guard Paul and Silas safely. Before he

was saved, that meant feet in the stocks in the inner cell. How is he guarding them now? He bathes their wounds, invites them into his house, and feeds them at his own table. That's a change. And why did it happen? Because that jailer had something to rejoice about. Paul and Silas got out of jail, but it's the jailer and his family and his servants who really got set free.

In the morning, the court officers come with a message from the magistrates: "Release these men." Do you think the magistrates had a change of heart? No. They never knew the facts, so they never cared one way or the other. They'd had their fun, they'd sent Paul and Silas a clear message, and now it was time to get those troublemakers out of town with as little fuss as possible.

Paul had other ideas. He lodged a formal complaint. "They beat us publicly without a trial even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now they want to get rid of us quietly? No, let them come themselves and escort us out." Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, and that counted for a lot back then. The Roman government protected its citizens especially in conquered territories of the Empire. Paul's civil rights had been violated, and he had every right to complain. And that complaint scared the magistrates to death. They'd ignored the law, they hadn't even tried to find out if Paul was a Roman citizen or not. They could go to jail for what they'd done. All of a sudden, Paul had power over them. What would he do to them?

Paul could have demanded restitution, he could have taken the magistrates to court, he had all kinds of options. All he wanted was that the magistrates admit they were wrong. He wanted them to escort him and his friends out of the city. Instead of rubbing their noses in their mistake, they just let it go at that. Paul doesn't pay them back and lets them off the hook.

So Paul and his friends return to Lydia's house, comfort the brothers (presumably Luke and Timothy and any other believers), and move on to the next city. That brings this chapter to the Bible to a close.

So what was the outcome of it all? Let's look at each of the people in this chapter.

Paul and Silas got a beating and a sleepless night, and they got the satisfaction of knowing that it wasn't pointless, that it was all part of God's perfect plan, and they got a church started in spite of it all.

The slave girl was set free from spirit possession, but we don't know what else happened to her. You'd think she would have turned to God, but we just don't know.

The slave girl's owners never cared a bit for the Gospel, so their encounter with the apostles did them no good at all. They rejected the Good News and the revelation of the slave girl. The magistrates were in the same position. They were probably a lot more cautious after that when an accused person was brought before them, but they never even tried to find out what kind of men they had met in the marketplace that day. So far as we know they also rejected the Good News as Luke says no more about them.

The jailer and his family, and Lydia and her family, were the real winners. They had no idea what God had in store for them as they went about their business in Philippi. And their time with Paul, learning more about their new faith, was very brief. But even though the apostles couldn't spend much time with those new believers, their foundations went down to the solid rock, and they became the core of one of the Godliest churches there ever was. The proof of this is Paul's epistle to the Philippians. Of all the churches Paul wrote to, Philippi is one of the very few that he didn't have to rebuke or correct. All he had for them was praise.

So what's this chapter tell us? What does God want to do with what you've heard today? If He's telling you to make some change in your life, don't be like the slave owners, who worried more about their material well-being and their comfort than obeying God. Be like the jailer, who had one moment to make a very important decision, and make the right choice.

We're going to spend some time in prayer and if anyone here wants to know "what must I do to be saved?"- I want you to put your hand up now so we can together ask the Lord Jesus to do what His Word promises, as you pray with me:

I'm sorry, Lord Jesus, for all the wrong things that I have done and ask you to forgive me. Lord Jesus, I know that You love me and that you know all about me. You made me in your image and you want me to know you and love you. Thank you for dying on the cross to take the punishment for all the things that I have done wrong. I open the door of my life to you and ask you to come in as my Saviour and Lord. Thank you for forgiving my sins and giving me the gift eternal life. Please make me the kind of person you want me to be. I know that Your Holy Spirit can help me and live in me. I invite You in, Lord Jesus. Amen