

Acts – Chapter 16

We find ourselves here in Chapter 16 early in the Apostle Paul's second missionary journey. We learned last week that there was unfortunate friction in the relationship between the dynamic duo – Paul and Barnabas. This was over Barnabas' nephew, John Mark, who had left the two during the first missionary journey. Barnabas wanted John Mark to join them, but Paul didn't trust he would stick it out. The disagreement could not be resolved, so Paul enlisted Silas and headed out on the second missionary journey first going through Syria and Cilicia.

The map behind me represents the geography of Paul's missionary journeys. The second one is marked with a purple line – beginning in Jerusalem and you can see it heading north through Syria past Antioch and following the coastline into Cilicia. Chapter 16 finds them arriving first in Derbe which was probably a welcome break point for Paul as it was one of the few places Paul had a peaceful ministry.

From Derbe they go to Lystra. Now Lystra was not as kind to Paul as Derbe. During his first journey there – approximately 5 years earlier while Paul was establishing the church there, he was stoned and carried off out of town and thought to be dead. Apparently he got better. He must have been encouraged, though, as the church he started was still in existence. We're then introduced to a key figure in the New Testament – Timothy. Let's take a moment to find out what we know about Timothy.

- We learn in 2 Timothy 1:5 that his mother and grandmother prepared the way for his decision to come to Christ – they were the first in the family to come to Christ - this probably happened during Paul's first journey.
- His mother is Jewish and his father is a Greek

- He probably witnessed Paul's sufferings as a boy or a young man during Paul's first visit – this is indicated in 2 Timothy 3:10-11
- Philippians 2:19-23 tells us he was someone Paul looked upon as a son. He often called him his son in the faith.
- Verse 2 of today's reading states that the believers in Lystra and Iconium – a neighboring city just north of Lystra – spoke highly of him

First with John Mark and now with Timothy, we learn something about Paul's heart – he wanted to invest in young believers to grow them up in the Lord – so that they'll carry on as he's carried off. I personally believe this is a critical responsibility of the elder believers in the church. Our flesh tells us we want to do the work or maybe we get a little protective of our ministry fearing some young hotshot may actually be more gifted than we are to do what we're doing. It takes a real maturity in the church leadership to focus on growing the next generation of leaders.

Verse 3 then tells us that he has Timothy circumcised which is interesting since we learned just last week that the church leadership issued a decree mandating circumcision was **not** required as an act of obedience and condition of salvation post-confession of Christ. As I mentioned last week, this is a critical point in the early church – not necessarily the act of circumcision – it's the issue of being saved by grace through faith. The church leaders are acknowledging the burdens of the law and are attempting to make things simple for the new believers.

The topic of circumcision has always been a sensitive issue – especially for the men. When first instituted by God and Abraham back in Genesis – it was a symbolic act of obedience demonstrating the forsaking of one's flesh for entering into a covenant with God. With the arrival of Jesus, the accountability of our hearts came into focus. You recall adultery went from only being a sin with the

physical act in the Old Testament to it becoming a sin if it just entered your mind in the New Testament. Jesus, as God, recognized that certain obedience had become ritualistic and producing no change in the peoples' heart towards the Lord.

Therefore, through the Spirit, the church leaders acknowledged what the emphasis of a believer should be – *a change of the heart*. Paul provided the following verses that clearly redefined what circumcision was really about.

Romans 2:29: and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.

Galatians 5:6: For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is *faith* expressing itself through *love*.

Colossians 2:11: In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self-ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ,

So after hearing all this, what *gives* with Timothy being circumcised? Kind of sounds contradictory, doesn't it? As always, Scripture explains Scripture, so let's look at what Paul says in:

1 Corinthians 9:19-22: ¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the

law.²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

We remember that Timothy's mother was a Jew, so Paul knew there would be Jewish believers still stuck on the issue of circumcision as a required action of a male Jew. Paul had a choice to make - dig his heals in and cram new non-essential doctrine down the throats of people who are already contentious by nature, or he could have Timothy circumcised to prevent him from being a stumbling block to the bigger issue – to bring people to faith in Christ. He wanted to keep the peace, to open the door for the Prince of Peace. So Paul didn't see this as a big deal.

Some of you might recall the same issue came up about Titus, but Paul **did** dig his heals in on circumcising ***him***. What was the difference? Titus was a Gentile – there would be no stumbling of the Gentiles with the subject of circumcision.

The bigger issue on this topic has to do with priority. We need to pick our battles. Sadly, church bodies have split over non-essential doctrine such as whether or not there is going to be a Rapture or, if there is going to be one, when is it going to happen – before, in the middle, or at the end of the seven year tribulation. We need to check our own hearts when there is disagreement over doctrine – if it's a matter of principal or conviction, then you stand your ground. On other things where Scripture isn't specific, we need to back off and demonstrate the grace we've been given. We need to keep our eyes on the prize – that is Jesus and His desire to save all.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy proceed out to the towns delivering the message of freedom from the ritualistic law requirements. Interestingly, as this message is delivered, the church is growing. This is what happens when the Holy Spirit is guiding the way – not a bunch of man-made programs. Paul exhorted the Galatians in chapter 3:3, “O foolish Galatians! Having ***begun*** in the ***Spirit***, are you now being made perfect by the ***flesh***?” A real challenge for church leaders is to forgo

the temptation to pursue the fleshly mind and hire specialists who claim full-proof methods of generating membership growth or improving fundraising. Scripture is very clear – it is **God** who grows the church.

Getting back to the map, we see the desires of Paul to go north into Asia – places like Galatia, Bithynia, and Mysia – but the Spirit prevented them from going to these regions. It is interesting to think how world history may have been changed had Paul and his team gone north to Asia as opposed to westward into Europe. We need to thank God for this leading and Paul’s obedience as the Gospel pushed into Europe it ultimately landed in North America. Verse 8 indicates they passed by Mysia and went to Troas.

A fair question to ask is, ‘What was meant by the Holy Spirit keeping or preventing them from going a certain direction?’ Did they see something like this on the way? What is more likely is Paul became very sick. Paul was a very stubborn person – most of the time, this was a good thing as he pressed in when most would back off. However, when God needs to deal with hard-headed people like Paul and me, He’s not above taking extreme measures to accomplish His plan – even severe sickness. This doesn’t mean all illness is from God, but it is a method He’s not above using.

The argument that the method the Holy Spirit used to prevent Paul from going north being an illness is supported in the next two verses.

Acts 16:9-10: “⁹During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

There are many commentators who suggest that Luke, the author of Acts, was the man seen in Paul's vision. Notably, Luke was a doctor, and verse 10 is where we see a change in the narration of the story – we see for the first time personal pronouns such as “we” and “us”. It appears that Luke was called to come to the aid of Paul, and he would become another of Paul's traveling companions. So Luke joins, Paul, Silas, and Timothy and head to Macedonia in Europe. Back to the map - they set sail and pass by Samothrace and arrive in Philippi. It appears it only took them 2 days to get to Philippi – this is very fast in those times.

Some might use this as an example that if you follow God's direction, things will go easy and fast. It's great when this happens and buoys are emotions. However, it is not Scriptural that being in God's will means things are going to go perfectly well. Our faith really isn't much until it is tested, so if things are always going easy, that doesn't say much about our faith. It has been wisely said that we should be more desirous to be in God's will in the middle of a raging storm than be out of God's will with things going easy. When we focus on the promises of Scripture, not the back and forth of our emotions, we can find the peace that passes understanding amidst the most difficult of times. That is Scriptural.

So Paul and his band of holy men are now in Philippi – a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. It was also the place where Brutus defeated Marc Antony. In verse 13 we learn that the team went to go look for a place of prayer by the river– or a synagogue – but they didn't find one. In these times, whenever a community had 10 Jewish men or more, a synagogue could be established. Therefore, it appears that since the team didn't find one, the Jewish male population in Philippi is comparatively small. Even though there wasn't a building for them to find God-seeking people, we'll learn we can find God-seeking people outside of a building – even a church.

The team sits down and begins to talk to the women who gathered there.

This is an important point as women, during this period of history, were given little or no value by the men. Jesus was a revolutionary on so many fronts, but one of the more significant ones was His open acceptance and appreciation for women.

Clearly, Paul and the team followed Jesus' lead and saw all people – men **AND** women – as important to the Kingdom of God. One particular woman is noted – Lydia – she was a dealer in purple cloth – she was a businesswoman. The Scripture also tells us she was a worshiper of God. Please note what it says in verse 14b, “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.” Again, it’s not some slick program, majestic sermon, or academic teaching series that brought Lydia to faith – the Lord did. I think it’s also worth noting what she was doing prior to coming to faith – she was worshipping. It’s unclear what God she was worshipping, but a worshipful heart is often a precursor to a willingness to accept the truth of who God is.

So Lydia along with other members of her household come to faith, and they all get baptized. She then convinces Paul and the team to come stay at her house. The last four words of verse 15 are “And she persuaded us”. The Greek word for persuaded is parabiazomai (pr. parabeadsomi), and when you read further descriptions you find words/phrases like “force contrary to nature”, “compel”, and “constrain”. My guess is Lydia was a very successful businesswoman as she clearly does not take “no” for an answer – she really put the screws to Paul. Whatever reservations Paul and his men might have had in staying in her house were no match for Lydia’s “persuasion”.

In verse 16, the team is going to a synagogue and they run across a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. Let me ask you something, do you think it was an accident or a happenstance of fate that this woman came across the paths of Paul and his brothers? Of course not – we need to

pay attention to the nuances of the stories presented in the Bible. There is typically a main point to each of the stories, but what makes the Bible so rich is even the sub-points of the stories carry significant meaning. How many times in your lives has something or someone seemingly randomly come across your path that God ended up doing something special with you, the other individual, or both? Scripture even mentions someone you might meet might even be an angel in disguise. This is why we need to pay attention, folks. God is always looking for opportunities for us to bless others and for others to bless us.

We also learn that because of this woman's evil spirit-driven ability as a fortune-teller, she's making her owners a lot of money. In those days, people had a strange reverence for the insane. This possessed lady was such a person – but she was declaring the truth of Paul and his crew. For days, she keeps shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." It's interesting that this demon-possessed woman is proclaiming the truth. This is a reminder that Satan and his minions are no strangers to Scripture – that's why Bible studies such as this are so important in our ongoing spiritual battles. The devil will twist and turn around God's word, so if we're not grounded in it, we can become deceived and believe the twists and turns.

So we learn Paul is annoyed by her shoutings of the truth and finally calls upon the name of Jesus Christ (a critical point whenever we're going to confront the enemy – **ALWAYS** begin by invoking where your power is coming from – Jesus) and commands the spirit to come out of her. Now why would Paul try to shut up someone who is proclaiming the truth? He doesn't want Satan running his advertising campaign. Is that what churches are doing today? Many are hiring outside professionals to promote church growth and fundraising programs, but they may have no relationship with God whatsoever – their sole motivation is to make money. The message of the Gospel presented by true followers of Christ is more

powerful than any fancy program that can be cooked up. You would be stunned to learn how much of the hard-earned tithings go to pay for these consultants. I personally believe God will abundantly bless those churches that sincerely and relentlessly preach the Gospel, teach the Word, and worship Him. He doesn't need any help from these alleged promotion experts.

Now the guys who own this lady have just seen their source of income be exercised and eliminated, and they're none-too-happy. They seize Paul and Silas and drag them before the authorities. Note the lies that are made about them. They first call them Jews – not true – their Christians. They next claim that their teachings are “throwing our city into an uproar” – there’s no evidence of this in what we read. It ***is true*** that when people come to Christ, things are going to change – the problem is that for those who don’t come to Christ, they’re not comfortable with this change. What you end up with is one of the great lies of the non-believer that exists to this very day. They claim the damage of the “intolerance” of followers of Christ is causing great problems and division in society. Christianity does proclaim that there is only one way to God, but EVERYONE is invited and EVERYONE has been given the mechanism to get to God through Christ crucified. That’s not intolerance – that is acceptance by grace. Their arguments of intolerance are a joke as the ***real*** intolerance is their unwillingness to allow for others to believe in something other than what they believe in.

Sadly typical, the crowd, or sheep mentality join in on the attacks, and Paul and Silas were ordered to be stripped and beaten with rods. After the floggings, they’re thrown into prison – into the inner cell – and the jailer fastens their feet in the stocks. What happens next, in my opinion, is only possible with people who have Christ indwelling in them. It’s midnight and what are Paul and Silas doing? Lamenting over their unfair treatment? Crying in agony over the pain? Watching

Leno? No, they're praying and singing hymns. It's possible they were drawing on these verses: Job 35:10 says, But no one says, 'Where *is* God my Maker, Who gives songs in the night.' Psalm 42:8 states, "The LORD will command His loving-kindness in the daytime, and in the night His song *shall be* with me—a prayer to the God of my life." Charles Spurgeon said, "Songs in the night come only from God; they are not in the power of men."

These beatings were clearly persecutions, but they were also tests. Tests and trials will tell us where our faith is—God doesn't allow them for the purpose to make us feel guilty or ashamed of our responses if they lack faith—that's what the devil tries to make of them. Their true purpose is they're allowed to remind us how much more we need God to strengthen us and prepare us for the works He has in mind for us. Jesus said in Mark 4:17, "When trouble or persecution comes because of the word..." The key word is "When"—it's not a matter of "if", it is "when" trouble and persecution comes because of our faith in the Word. Troubles and persecution are a fact of life for the diligent follower of Jesus Christ. Our responses to them reveal where we are in our faith.

The other prisoners are probably not crazy about having to hear these guys sing at midnight, but what a witness—verse 25 tells us they were listening to them. Apparently, so was God, because a violent earthquake hits, and it shakes the foundations of the prison. Moreover, the doors to the prisons and the prisoners' chains came loose all at once. This scene is a cool metaphor for coming to faith in Jesus. Prior to our salvation, we were prisoners and slaves in chains to our sin—separated from God by the bars of our disobedience and non-belief. The moment we express our faith in Jesus through prayer and worship, an earthquake hits our lives—shakes our foundations—the Holy Spirit enters us and our chains are broken and we're set free from the prison of unforgiven sin. We then spend the rest of our days on earth building up our faith in Christ and gradually and more deeply

understanding and applying what it means to be truly free in Christ and delivered from the chains we were wearing and prisons we were living in.

The penalty for Roman soldiers when they would lose a prisoner they were accountable to was death. When this jailer woke up and realized what had happened, he figured all the prisoners had left and, therefore, went to go spare himself what was likely to be a more painful death by his superiors and just kill himself. The fact that Paul indicated to him that he and Silas had not left is something I can accept given they had Christ in them – they had a purpose for staying. What is stunning in Paul's statement, "We are all here", is that **ALL** of the prisoners stayed. This is extraordinary as you would think they would try to escape the moment the doors were opened and the chains loosed. They didn't – they ALL stayed. I think it's a fair assumption that the other prisoners realized something more powerful than they ever experienced just happened, and they needed to understand the cause of this. We also need to realize the heart of Paul and Silas here – they're prepared to go to jail to reach people.

The jailer calls for the lights to come up, sees all the prisoners are still there, and then falls before Paul and Silas and asks the question every human being should ask himself/herself during his/her lifetime, "What must I do to be saved." What's that response today? Join a church, join a growth/community group, pay your tithes? I know I'm repeating myself through these lectures, but look at the simplicity of their response, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household." No works are required – just believe and you will be saved. That's all? Yes, that's all – it's that simple.

Some parts of the church have taken the last words of this verse – you and your household – that when we come to faith in Christ, all the members of our household are thereby saved. Salvation is for the purpose of relationship with each person – each person gets healed by God – not through a relative. So why would

Paul and Silas include the words “and your household”. Personally, I believe this was a prophetic moment – the Spirit was telling them that upon the jailer’s household hearing the Gospel, they would each believe as well. Verse 32 confirms they did preach the Gospel to the jailer’s household and they would all be baptized. We see immediate fruit in the jailer’s conversion – he stays up all night washing Paul’s and Silas’ wounds from their floggings and then feeds them. A real testimony to coming to Christ is the desire to serve other believers.

Interestingly, the next morning, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order to “Release those men” – meaning Paul and Silas. So what must have happened is after the jailer had washed their wounds and fed them, they must have gone back to the jail. Paul and Silas had compassion on the jailer knowing what his penalty would be if they weren’t there. The fact that the jailer is still being addressed instead of getting executed implies, in my mind, the rest of the prisoners stayed as well.

The jailer communicates the message from the officers that Paul and Silas are free to go and to go in peace. What happens next is one of the reasons I love the Bible, and I love Paul. We see his humanness when instead of just being happy he can leave and take off, he wants to needle the officers with the fact that he and Silas were unjustly thrown into prison because they were Roman citizens. Being citizens, they were entitled to certain procedures of law, and that clearly didn’t happen this time. He tells the jailer that if the officers want them to leave, then they can come escort them out. I love it.

The best part is that is exactly what happened. The magistrates themselves come to appease them and escort them out and tell them to leave the city. Can’t you just see the smirks on Paul’s and Silas’ faces as they’re being led out. I can also see the smirk on God’s face as this is happening. God must take joy when especially those who initially didn’t treat His people justly end up doing just that.

The chapter ends with Paul and Silas going to Lydia's house and encouraging them – no doubt in what just happened.

As I prayed and thought about how to conclude this lesson, the word "prison" came to my mind. I mentioned earlier about the metaphorical scene where Paul and Silas are in jail, they're praying and singing to God, an earthquake shakes the foundations of the prison, and the doors to their cells are opened and their chains come off – all of this being symbolic of coming to Christ.

What saddens me is I believe the majority of Christians, myself included, have not embraced the fullness of God's provision of freedom from our former state of imprisonment. We allow the enemy to remind us to the point of non-belief that we are not truly forgiven, that we are not really heirs of the immense protective and privileged benefits of being adopted sons and daughters of God, and, most importantly, that God's love for us is not sufficient. He accomplishes this through doubt, fear, confusion, anger, bitterness, resentment, lack of contentment, and countless other methods – **none of which**, when we step back and reflect on the character of God as outlined in the Scriptures – appropriately apply to God. They apply to the devil.

As I think about a jail, I picture the image of a prison door whose access is only available by a key. In this image, the person who holds the key to the jail – the one who opens the door to either put the person in jail or let him/her out – is a "key" figure. The other key figure is the one who has the ***authority*** to give the holder of the key the orders to put someone into prison, or let him/her out. Let's take a look at a couple of verses – both of which are direct quotes from the Lord Jesus Christ. The first one is from Matthew 16:9, "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." If Jesus is saying He can give the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, what does that mean? He is in

possession of the keys – He can't give something that He doesn't have. Jesus made this statement immediately following Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ – the Messiah – the Savior. Jesus, as our Savior, holds the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, and He gives them to those who call upon Him as the Christ.

The second verse from the Lord is in Revelation 1:18, “I *am* He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.” Here, Jesus is announcing to the apostle John who He is and that He holds the keys to Hades and Death – the ultimate prison.

So we see in these verses that **Jesus** holds the keys to **both** the Kingdom of Heaven **and** to Hades and Death. That's one of the roles of the key people when thinking of a prison. Jesus confirms that He is also the One in **authority** when He says in Matthew 28:18: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”

Due to the sin of our original parents – Adam and Eve – each of us was born with a sinful nature – separated from God – in effect, we were born in prison. The only way out of that prison is to go to the One who has the authority to let us out **and** has the keys to open the door. That One is Jesus. He makes it as simple and clear as He can about the freedom from the prison of our unforgiven sin we receive when we confess Him as Lord in John 8:36, “Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”

The fact that most of us are still walking around at times in our lives as if we're still in prison points, initially, to a lack of belief or understanding of the deepest truths of the power of the Savior's blood that was shed on the cross for the forgiveness of sins – past, present, and future and His absolute sufficiency to provide everything we'll ever need because of His passionate love for us. We find ourselves allowing the devil to rob us from the fullness of our freedom from prison and trying to throw us back into prison. We need to remember two things when he

does this: 1) he doesn't have the authority to put us in prison; and, 2) the door is open (remember Jesus has the keys), so if we find ourselves feeling as if we're still in prison despite our salvation, then *we have put ourselves* back into prison because we haven't truly taken to heart the truth of our freedom in Christ.

Jesus was so intent to get us out of our prisons that He gave up His life to make it happen. That's how He earned the keys. We need to dwell on the fact that His nail-pierced hand is extended out to us to guide us out of our prisons and to experience complete deliverance from our now broken bondage and experience a new and abundant life led by the Spirit. The same hands that opened the door and leads us out are the ones He promises will never let us go.

The gift of free will is the point. We made a great choice when we chose to accept the gift of salvation. However, our choices don't stop there – now we must make the choice to get out of our prison. That decision is just about as important as the one we made when we chose Christ. That decision resulted in permanent forgiveness and the promise of eternal peace with God. That's what I call a pretty good result. Imagine what the result will be if you reach out and grab onto Jesus' hand and let Him lead you out of your prison. That's where the promise of abundant life is – that is the hope we all have – but it is our choice to grab His outstretched hand.

I want to challenge each of you to examine and reflect on just one burden you carry – whether it is painful memories of a tough childhood, unforgiveness from those who have hurt you, anger from betrayal – anything that causes you pain. As you think of this thing, ask Jesus to join you at the time this happened and then ask Him for help – for healing, for the power to forgive, or for Him to just take it from you once and for all. Jesus is a God of restoration, and He wants to restore you and heal you from **EVERY** hurt and pain you've ever experienced. If you let Him do this, I promise you you'll find yourself delivered from whatever

prison you're still struggling with, and your life will never be the same again. That is the hope of the Gospel, my friends.

I'll conclude with this wonderful verse from Paul in Romans 15:13: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has the keys and the authority to release you from every prison – He is your hope. Let's give Him thanks.