

EVERY OPPORTUNITY

Acts 16:11-15,29-40

Paul and Silas visited several places: They started in Syria, passed through Cilicia on their way to the territory of Galatia where they visited the towns of Derbe and Lystra. It was in Lystra that they added Timothy to their team. They then proceeded toward the Phrygia region and moved into the province of Asia. They received specific instructions from the Holy Spirit to not preach the word in that province. So, they attempted to go north to Bithynia but this too was not permitted. So, they continued going west to the port city Troas. It was there that God gave Paul a vision of where they were to go. There was a need in Macedonia and since the group was sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit they left immediately for that area of Europe. It is generally thought that it was in Troas that they were joined by Luke who accompanied them during the rest of their trip. The evidence that Luke (the author of Acts) joined Paul, Silas, and Timothy is in the use of “they and them” in the narrative prior to verse 16:9 and the use of “we and us” after that verse.

Witness at the River – 16:11-15

¹¹ So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. ¹⁴ One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us. Acts 16:11–15 (ESV)

Paul and Silas had walked more than seven hundred miles from Antioch of Syria to Troas at the western edge of the province of Asia. They then traveled by ship to Neapolis on the eastern coast of Macedonia and then walked to Philippi which was a Roman colony. About 400 towns are known to have been designated as colonies which were showcases of Roman culture and examples of the Roman way of life. Each was governed by a town council, led by elected magistrates. They were responsible for settling local disputes and collecting taxes from the population in the extensive surrounding territory, and passing them to the state (Rome).

According to some commentaries, there was not a synagogue in the main city of Philippi which would suggest that there were less than ten Jewish males living there. There were some worshipers of God and they met outside of the town and down by the river for prayer. Paul found a group of women and shared the gospel with them.

Among that group was a woman named Lydia who was not European but had come from a city named Thyatira in the province of Asia. That entire province referred to as Asia (as well as the area of Bithynia) was also known as Lydia. It is unknown if she was Jewish or perhaps a proselyte, however, she was aware of and worshiped the One True God. She was a business person who sold goods (probably cloth) that was dyed purple. Some commentaries suggest that the other women who were with her at the prayer gathering at the river worked either for or with Lydia.

A key piece of information of what happened when Paul began to speak with those women was that God intervened by causing Lydia to pay attention to what Paul was saying. How many times have we been in places and we hear someone talking and we just go about our business and pay little or no attention to what is actually being said? Since Lydia was familiar with the God of Israel, she could relate to what Paul was saying and the message of what God

had been doing for centuries through the descendants of Abraham had culminated in the life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

We are not told to what depth of conversation she had with Paul, but it is likely that she had questions and an in-depth discussion followed. As was the common practice, she gave evidence of her newfound belief by being baptized. Apparently, enough time and conversations had followed that members of her household (which may have been the women who were with her at the prayer meeting) could also give a witness of their belief in the gospel message by being baptized.

She then provided her home as a base of operation for the missionary team while they were in the Philippi area. Evidently, she was financially successful in her business endeavors and had a residence with adequate rooms for guests.

Luke did not provide a lot of details of how long the team was in Philippi before others besides Lydia and her acquaintances became aware that Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke were in that area. Apparently, some words had gotten out either before or because of an incident involving a demon-possessed girl who was being used by some men in Philippi as a fortune-teller. Most of us are familiar with the account of how this girl followed the missionary team shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for several days. Finally, Paul turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

This was an example of a spiritual need in which a person was controlled by a demon or an evil spirit. Paul recognized the condition for what it was and addressed the need for deliverance by speaking directly to the spirit that was controlling the girl. We see confirmation that Paul knew what he was talking about since the spirit came out of the girl as evidenced by the fact that she no longer had the ability to tell fortunes.

Notice that the spirit that was in control of the girl recognized the team for who they were and what they were doing. It was not enough for this spirit of divination to just know that there is the true God and to be able to recognize His servants. If one does not surrender and come under the Lordship of God as we know Him in Jesus, then all that knowledge does not matter.

Paul and Silas were then arrested because they had ruined the business of some men in Philippi by giving deliverance to this young woman. The accusation against them was that "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans."

There was price to be paid for responding to the needs of others. This was not the first time Paul had encountered riots from protesters to stop him from proclaiming the truth of the Gospel. When the missionary teams were in areas of "eastern thought" such as Antioch or Lystra the motivation for the protest was religious or ideological. Now that they had come to Europe and were encountering "western thought," the protests against them were mercenary or financially driven. In other words, they were hurting business. In both cases (eastern or western) the protesters made false accusations and then engaged in actions that were like what they were accusing Paul of doing.

Notice the similarity of what happened in Philippi with what goes on today when a speaker comes to a college campus to give a lecture on something that is contrary to the prevailing "approved ideology." Protests breakout and people make false accusations and then use unlawful and fascist methods to prevent someone from expressing ideas that the protesters claimed are fascist.

The city officials had them beaten and put into prison and at midnight they were praying

and praising God and the other prisoners were listening to them. At that point, God intervened with an earthquake that opened the prison doors and unfastened the chains on the prisoners. Most people would not have had any reason to associate the earthquake with what was happening to Paul and Silas; however, Paul and Silas knew.

What happened that night is somewhat of a picture of salvation in that when we are saved, we find that the prison doors of our lives are opened and we are set free of things that bind us. There can be problems in that some find comfort or pleasure in the chains or the stocks and they may lock themselves up again with the old habits and problems from which God has delivered them.

The jailer was asleep and the shaking and noise of the earthquake awakened him. He saw that the doors were open to the cells and was sure that everyone had escaped. He was faced with a choice. He realized that those in authority would hold him responsible for the prisoners being gone for which he would pay with his life. His only choice, as he saw it, was whether he would kill himself or let someone else do it. Apparently, he chose to take his own life.

This account is an excellent illustration of the importance of getting all the facts before making decisions. The jailer's decision was based on superficial appearances rather than on the actual situation that was prompting a decision. The "appearance" was that all the prisoners had escaped, but the truth was that all were still there and no one had left.

The earthquake and all the doors in the prison opening and all the chains on everyone being unfastened were certainly notable miracles. The fact that all those who were imprisoned did not immediately leave (when given the opportunity to escape) seems miraculous in itself.

Paul could apparently see the jailer and realized that he was about to take his own life. That prompted Paul to intervene and give the jailer a message of the truth of the situation he was facing so that he could avoid physical death.

Sometimes we think that our only choice is which way we will die and do not even realize that we have a choice that leads to life. This is why the gospel message is truly good news. We can choose life and do so by believing God and putting ourselves under His Lordship.

Witness in Jail – 16:29-34

²⁹ And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ 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. ³⁴ 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. Acts 16:29–34 (ESV)

The spiritual lessons for all of humanity seem to leap out of the texts in these verses. A significant need that the jailer had in order to know the truth was to shine some light on the situation. Much of the world is still in spiritual darkness because they will not allow the light of the truth of God's word to destroy the darkness in which they have deliberately immersed themselves.

There are people who have committed themselves to the "politically correct" religious ideas of secular humanism and think that because of this commitment that they are not permitted to even listen to the truth that God has given to all mankind. This is somewhat like the statement that the accusers of Paul and Silas had made asserting that since they were Romans, they were not permitted (it was unlawful) for them to accept or believe what Paul was teaching.

Another spiritual lesson for us is seen in the account that the jailer "rushed in" once he had been given a glimpse of the truth that resulted from what the light allowed him to see. The

jailer recognized that he was in a life and death situation and that urgency was needed because of the significance of what was happening right then.

A third lesson in the jailer's actions is seen in his falling down before Paul and Silas in fear and trembling. That is the ultimate physical expression of humility. We are to approach God in humility rather than in pride. There are at least twenty-two verses in the Scriptures that reference God's reaction to pride.

Considering the circumstances, the question the jailer asked seems just a bit strange. Why would he be asking these two Jews who had been beaten and thrown into prison about being saved? Skeptics of the account think that the question is highly improbable. However, if we briefly review those events that lead to their arrest, beating and imprisonment, we discover that the girl who was possessed by a spirit of divination had given testimony that Paul and Silas had come to "declare the way of salvation." Combine this information with their out-of-the-ordinary response of singing and praising God while in prison, and toss in the supernatural occurrence of the prison doors being opened and the chains being removed and we can conclude that his question was logical.

Notice that the jailer's question of what he needed to do to be saved was asked in a way that exposed the erroneous thinking of most people that we have to "DO" something for our salvation. I suppose that we could argue that "believing" is "doing" something. Paul said "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ."

It is in crisis situations that most adults come to accept the claims of Jesus as Lord of all. This was certainly a crisis for the jailer. He was listening to the words of Paul and Silas as they explained God's plan of salvation. The simple message that "all have sinned and need to have forgiveness and that God has provided a way for that forgiveness to be given in the person of Jesus (God's Son) who died to pay the penalty for sin and rose from the dead to validate His claim" was given to the jailer and to his household.

One of the evidences of a changed life is compassion and love for others. The jailer started showing Christian concern for Paul and Silas. He was taking care of their wounds from the beating. Another irony was that the jailer had his prisoners as guests in his home and fed them a meal while Paul and Silas had opened up a whole world of spiritual food for the jailer and his household.

Before the events of this night took place, the jailer had probably wondered what could explain the seemingly crazy behavior of Paul and Silas as they sang praises to God while in prison. Before it was morning, the jailer was praising God and rejoicing in his salvation. The morning was sure to come and Paul and Silas with the jailer returned to the prison to see what the day would bring.

Witness Upon Release – 16:35-40

³⁵ But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." ³⁶ And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace." ³⁷ But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." ³⁸ The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. ³⁹ So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed. Acts 16:35-40 (ESV)

The new day brought about a reversal of the decisions of the previous day. After sleeping on the matter, the magistrates likely realized that they had been manipulated by the men who had lost their business. They really had no reason to have arrested, beaten or jailed Paul and

Silas. They did what so many people do who find that they are wrong: they sent someone else to try to cover up the mess. The sergeants were sent to tell them that they could leave. Paul and Silas sought to make a point and instill some fear of the civil authority of Rome in these men who had broken their own laws. Both Paul and Silas were Roman citizens and the treatment that they received was a violation of their civil rights as Roman citizens. Their accusers had said that Paul and Silas had done something “unlawful”; however, it was the city council who actually broke the law. Since Paul and Silas were publicly humiliated, they wanted a public apology. I don't think that they were just being contrary but wanted to make these magistrates more careful about how they would treat other Christians who would be living in the area. The apology helped to restore the reputations that the unjust punishment had hurt. We should do all we can to maintain our good name as Christians since our actions reflect either negatively or positively on the body of Christ.