

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 10 August 2003

No. T0278

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Acts 15 and 16 - From Jerusalem to Europe

Today we commence Part 3 of our survey of the Acts of the Apostles, which we have called "The first page of Christian history". In Part 1, programmes 135-140, we studied Acts 1-5. In Part 2, programmes 185-190, we studied Acts 6-14. In Part 3 we'll study Acts 15-28, which will take us from Jerusalem, the centre from which the Gospel originated, to Rome, the capital of the then known world. As we follow the advance of the Gospel, we'll notice the prominence that the writer, Luke, gives to the various cities that Paul visited. These are important to Christians because most of the churches set up in them later received letters from him. These have been included in the New Testament.

Today's talk is entitled "*From Jerusalem to Europe*". It's a study of Acts 15-16. At that time the Roman Empire was extending itself eastward. But God was expanding His kingdom westward! We know from Romans 15:24 that the apostle Paul even had Spain in his sights. However, we start our study of Acts 15-16 at Antioch, the base for Paul and Barnabas' missionary journeys.

At first all was well within the Gentile churches formed as a result of these missionary efforts. That was until some Jewish believers arrived at Antioch and insisted that the rite of circumcision was a necessary part of belief in Christ for salvation. Although Paul and Barnabas vigorously contested this doctrine, these Jews wanted the matter referred to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. A delegation therefore went up from Antioch to Jerusalem.

On their arrival, Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the church at Jerusalem. At first they were able to speak freely of their Gospel activities, but the sect of believing Pharisees persisted with their vocal demands that Gentile believers must practise the Law of Moses. After much arguing at the convened conference, the apostle Peter clearly presented the fundamental truth of the Gospel to the council with the words, "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved" (Acts 15:11). He also emphatically stated that no Jew had ever been able to find righteousness by the law. Rather it had been too heavy a burden for them to bear. The apostle James then brought the deliberations to a conclusion. He explained that it had always been in God's plan to bless the Gentiles, and directed that a letter should be written outlining their verdict. It read, "...The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law" – to whom we gave no such commandment - it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell" (Acts 15:23-29).

This important letter emphasised the "by grace...not of works" aspect of Gospel truth that later Paul had to explain in his letter to the churches in Galatia, when Judaising teachers again became active with their doctrines of circumcision and law. We may feel today that this is not such a problem for us, but let's notice the very practical exhortations to live holy lives contained in this letter from Jerusalem. Idolatry, evil and immorality are very prevalent in our world. Only a holy life style is consistent with the teaching of "faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation"!

Accompanied by Judas and Silas, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with the letter from Jerusalem. It provided much encouragement for the Syrian brethren. The ministry of the two visiting prophets also strengthened the church at Antioch. Silas stayed on after the letter business was completed. He became one of the teachers in the church, along with the apostles and others.

Next Paul became concerned for the believers in Asia and suggested to Barnabas that they re-visit them. However, a dispute arose between the two missionaries over the suitability of John Mark as a helper. Paul argued that John Mark had left them very early into the first missionary campaign. However, Barnabas was determined that he should still go with them and this caused a complete rift. So Barnabas set off with Mark in one direction, going west to Cyprus. Paul chose Silas as a replacement companion and headed north.

There are no further mentions of Barnabas in Acts after this break-up. However, God seems to have over-ruled the disagreement for good, and so there were two missions commenced instead of one. There was no lasting ill feeling. Later in life, Paul wrote from prison that the church at Colossae were to welcome Mark the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10). Then in 2 Timothy 4:11 he wrote, "...Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry."

Paul journeyed north through Syria and into Cilicia, through the Amarus mountains, "...strengthening the churches" (Acts 15:41), and through the Cilician Gates, a pass in the Taurus Mountains, westward to Derbe and Lystra. Here he engaged the help of Timothy, whom he circumcised because his father was a Greek. This may appear to contradict the ruling given at the Jerusalem church conference, but it was a necessary expediency so that the Jews in that region would not be put off the Gospel, see Acts 16:1-3. He explained his motives in 1 Corinthians 9:20-23, "...to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law...I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake." From then on, Timothy was a trustworthy friend of Paul. "...Timothy...I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state ...you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the Gospel" (Philippians 2:19-22).

The team delivered the Jerusalem letter to the churches of the cities in the region and brought to them a fresh sense of the liberty that is in Christ. "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily" (Acts 16:5). They went north through Phrygia and Galatia, then northwest to Mysia, intending to turn east into Bithynia. In a special way the Holy Spirit Himself controlled their movements. "...they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia" and "they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit [of Jesus] did not permit them. So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas" (Acts 16:6-8). Troas was a Roman colony on the Aegean coast, at the western terminal of a caravan route from the east. At Troas Luke joined the group - "they" in verse 8 becomes "we" in verse 10.

The reason that they were directed west, rather than east, comes out in the sequel of the narrative. Paul received a clear vision during that night at Troas. On the other side of the sea in Macedonia a man appeared to him and pleaded for help. The missionary group knew immediately that this was the Lord calling them to take the Gospel into Europe. Many Bible commentators have noticed the importance of this calling. It was the beginning of the spread into Western Europe of the Gospel that eventually reached our lands and continues to the present day, by the grace of God.

The sea voyage over the Straits of Dardanelles, which connects the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara with Aegean Sea, was completed in two days. After an overnight stop at Samothrace, they landed at Neapolis and made for Philippi. It was the most important Roman colony in the region of Macedonia being located on the Egnatian Way. It's well known as a historical battle site. It's now famous to Christians for the much-loved Gospel story of this chapter of Acts and for the very warm letter its church received from Paul.

The remainder of our talk today is about the first preaching activities in Philippi as recorded in verses 13-40. In it, all areas of life are encountered – commerce, home, religion and government. God was at work through the apostles. There were conversions, wonders and miracles, which resulted in the formation of a vibrant Christian community.

There wasn't a synagogue in Philippi for Paul to visit. Presumably there were insufficient Jewish men in this city. He was also expecting to meet the man from Macedonia whom he had seen in his dream. Instead, the missionaries found only women attending an open air prayer meeting that was outside the city, on the riverside. They took the opportunity to speak to these devout women. In customary manner Luke records, "now a certain woman named Lydia heard us" (verse 14). Her business in selling purple-dyed fabrics had brought her from Thyatira. When we remember that Paul and his companions had been expressly told not to preach there, we can appreciate that God was at work rewarding "those who diligently seek Him". Lydia readily received the Gospel spoken by Paul. She and her household were baptised, and she started living as a Christian as was shown by her provision of hospitality for the missionary team.

At my local church Bible study recently it was stated that preachers always identify three "opened" things about Lydia from this story. So I'll do so now!

1. First of all, "the Lord opened her heart", reminding us that everyone must be born from above by the sovereign operation of God. Even faith is a gift from Him, see Ephesians 2:8. As we thought just a minute ago, she was found in the right place, at the right time to hear God's servant. Her "opened heart" shows that God had prepared her to believe the Gospel.
2. Secondly, her understanding was "opened". She was in the right attitude of mind to apply the words of Paul to herself as he explained "...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

3. Thirdly, she “opened” her house to the missionaries, saying “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” There was sufficient evidence of her conversion to persuade the apostles to take up her offer of hospitality. What a privilege it is to provide for the Lord’s servants in this practical way. And how good it is to receive such service when one is visiting an area to do the Lord’s work!

God is still at work in these ways. It could be that He will open your heart today to receive His word and to respond to it by faith, as Lydia did so long ago.

The next part of the story of Paul’s work in Philippi concerns not a military, but a spiritual, battle. Evidently the riverside prayer meeting place continued to be a good venue for Gospel activities. As the work of God progressed, there was opposition from a girl who was possessed by a demon spirit, Python. It caused her to follow after the group of preachers and to cry out, day after day, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation” (verse 17). Whilst the authority of God as the Most High is always recognised by demons, it was a distraction to have the Lord’s servants identified in this loud, uncontrolled way. The matter greatly distressed Paul, and after many days he exorcised the spirit in the name of Jesus Christ.

When he wrote to the church at Ephesus, Paul advised, “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:10-12). The incident in Philippi adequately illustrates the practical meaning of this exhortation.

However, it is necessary to ask about this story: which side of the battle are you on? If you are opposed to the Gospel, there’s still power in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to change you!

The spiritual battle at Philippi appeared to be won, but the hostility of the slave girl’s owners was aroused because they had used her for fortune-telling purposes. With their source of profit gone forever, they made a citizen’s arrest, dragging Paul and Silas off to the marketplace. They presented them, and accused them of unlawful behaviour, before the magistrates, who ordered that they should be beaten with rods. Verses 23-24 graphically describes the punishment meted out. “And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailor to keep them securely. Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.”

When Paul was converted, he was shown by the risen Christ “...how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:16). Paul listed these things in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, amongst which he mentions “in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently...three times...beaten with rods”. Perhaps we will never be called upon to suffer in this way, but we are encouraged to “share with [Paul] in the sufferings for the Gospel according to the power of God”, see 2 Timothy 1:8.

The power of God enabled Paul and Silas, although badly injured, to pray and praise in the inner part of the Philippian dungeon. This brings us in this talk to the famous story of the Philippian jailor, a story that is a favourite with Gospel preachers. It was at midnight that the prisoners heard Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns. God was again at work – He gave the pair a captive audience! Verse 25 states that the prisoners were listening. But the jailor was asleep. He required an earthquake to arouse his spiritual senses as well as to wake him up! The earthquake was a miracle – the prison doors flung open rather than being trapped closed by the collapse of the building. All the prisoners’ chains were loosed, but they didn’t attempt to escape! The quake certainly woke the jailor, who, when he saw the opened doors, supposed that the prisoners had fled. He was about to kill himself, until Paul deterred him by calling out. But how did Paul see what was happening from the inner part of the dark prison and at the dead of night? It was another part of the miracle in this amazing incident!

The result was that the jailor was both physically and spiritually shaken. “Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” So they said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household”” (verses 29-31). He was concerned about the way out of his crisis that night, but they replied with an answer that provided him with eternal security! They then explained the Gospel to him, as verse 32 shows: “Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.” His conversion was followed by the baptism of all in his household. He dramatically changed. There and then he became a Christian gentleman. He treated Paul and Silas’ injuries and gave them a meal in his home. And he rejoiced in his newfound salvation, with all his house.

Many people need a crisis in their lives to awaken them to spiritual realities. It most probably won’t be an earthquake, but it will be God allowing events to take place to generate a sense of need of Christ as Saviour. How wonderful are these words of life, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved”! They have been used many, many

times to give a clear, concise Gospel message, which has resulted in people being saved. They still have power today. Have you heard and believed this message? Or do you require an earthquake to wake you up?

The next morning, the city officials arrived at the prison with a message from the magistrates to release Paul and Silas. Paul replied that their rights as Roman citizens had been violated, which quickly brought the magistrates to the prison to personally plead with them to quietly leave Philippi. However, Paul and Silas wouldn't do this until they had first encouraged the believers, whom they met in Lydia's house. Then they left with a sense of the true bonds of love and fellowship which the Gospel brings to believers. This is reflected in Paul's letter to them, "...my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown" (Philippians 4:1). From this letter, we learn that they had advanced in the faith and had become a model Christian church. Was that due to Luke's pastoral care, for he seems to have stayed behind with them?

Now as we finish the story of Acts 16, that tells of the establishment of the first Christian church in Europe, we can conclude that:

1. The Gospel brings liberty from the law, as well as salvation from our sins.
2. The Gospel meets the spiritual needs of all kinds of people, from the God-fearing upright Lydia to the rough jailor. God desires to bless whole households. He wants to bless all of your family today!
3. The Gospel frees people from the power and practice of sin. It changes their lives!
4. The Gospel causes believers to rejoice in the Lord, whatever the circumstances.

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