

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Key Events in the Acts: Conversions in Europe – Acts 16

Usually when the Apostle Paul was travelling and preaching, it seems he just decided and went. How much prayer preceded these decisions we do not know. Doubtless, he was a man of prayer; how else could he have been so uniquely used by God for the evangelising of quite large areas, the establishment of churches and the setting out of so many of the vital truths of God for the Church? But the fact remains that the God-inspired narrative in the Book of Acts does not generally tell us how Paul's decisions were reached.

The entry of the Gospel into Europe was an exception. It resulted from a series of false starts. Paul was on his second missionary journey from Antioch. He and Silas had visited churches which Paul had established on his first journey through today's Turkey and Timothy had joined them at a city called Lystra. We read in Acts 16 that they tried to go to other places to preach but the Holy Spirit forbade them. The Bible does not tell us how they knew but, whatever the means the Holy Spirit used, they knew they were not to go.

Then they came to Troas, a port on the Aegean Sea near the site of the ancient city of Troy. It was there that Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia in northern Greece, who stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." The Bible does not tell us how Paul recognised the man as a Macedonian and we don't need to speculate. The fact remains that Paul did know where the man was from.

Paul and his party concluded that this dream was the Lord's method of calling them to preach the Gospel in Macedonia and they immediately went there, sailing from Troas to Neapolis (today's Kavalla), a port on the coast of Macedonia. It is at this point that there is a significant change in the way the account is written. Before they arrived at Troas, Paul's party is referred to as "they," but from then until Paul leaves Philippi the party is referred to as "we." This shows that Luke, the author of Acts, had joined the party for a while and was an actual eyewitness of much of what we read in this chapter. There are several other "we" passages in Acts. Their presence adds to the reliability of the Bible. The events in it are true; they are not myths, legends, or fiction. The places and people the Bible mentions existed as described. Not all the places have yet been identified by the archaeologists nor have the names of all the people been found on monuments and other ancient remains but what can be checked shows that the Bible is reliable and accurate. So we can believe what we read and, very important, learn from that and act upon it.

Anyway, they arrived at Neapolis and from there travelled the 10 miles or so to Philippi. This was the foremost city in the area. We don't know what they did until the Sabbath (our Saturday) but when that day came, they went out to the riverbank to a place where people prayed. Paul's usual practice when he first came to a city was to go the synagogue and preach there to the local Jews. It would seem that at Philippi there were not enough men to form a synagogue (10 is the required number apparently) and so instead there was a group of women to whom the apostle and his companions came and spoke. I understand that it was not the usual practice in those days for men to speak to women in public. It would seem there was much more separation between men and women then than we are used to now. You'll remember we read in John 4:27 that the Lord's disciples were amazed that He was speaking to the woman of Sychar. So we can see that Paul and his companions had learnt their Master's lesson well and were following His example. They had the same spirit of grace, and the same concern for people's spiritual welfare as He had, and this caused them to go outside the normal social bounds of the day.

There are at least three lessons here for us. The first is whether we have the same grace and concern for others that they had, especially those who are still unsaved. The second is whether we have the same desire to make known the Name and saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ and, thirdly, whether people benefit spiritually when we speak to them. Or, to put it another way, when was the last time we spoke to someone else of the Lord and they were saved? When was the last time we spoke along these lines at all? How often do we talk about the Lord and His things even with other believers? Well, Paul and the others were effective in their private, personal witness as well as in their public preaching.

The results were not startling. The apostle had not run a well-publicised and elaborately-organised campaign. He had not hired the local stadium to preach to large crowds. Instead, he just spoke to some women who gathered to pray. It was not human efforts and planning he relied on but rather the power of God.

We read of only one person who responded, although there were doubtless others. She was Lydia, from the city of Thyatira in the province of Asia. She sold purple, a very expensive dye made from shellfish, so she was probably a woman of means and very likely independent, the head of a house. Of her we read the wonderful expression, “The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.” Are our hearts open to pay attention to the words recorded in these Scriptures? The change that had occurred in her was immediately apparent as she begged the party to stay in her house. How much of a change for the better has becoming a Christian made to us? If there is no improvement in our behaviour, consistent with what is set out in the Bible, how real is our conversion?

The next incident we read of is that when they (actually “we” in the Bible so the writer was an eyewitness of what happened next) ... when they were going to pray, a slave girl with a spirit of divination met them and called out, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation.” The word “divination” is rather interesting because it is actually “python.” Fortune tellers were thought to be possessed by the Greek god Apollo, who was regarded as being embodied in a snake, the Python, at Delphi in Greece, a place which was also called Pytho. People could ask the priestess of the site at Delphi to give advice or prophesy the future, and she would sit in a cave over a fissure in the rock from which gas issued. The priestess would become intoxicated by the gas and was allegedly inspired by Apollo. She would then make utterances with her mouth closed. Not surprisingly, these were difficult to understand and had to be interpreted by attendants. It has been discovered relatively recently that this gas produced violent hallucinations. The site fell into decay for a variety of reasons, one of which was the unreliability of the prophecies. This just about sums up fortune telling – of no value and from a very dubious source!

The fortune-teller in our chapter made her very public utterances easily understood and what she said was correct. But Paul did not agree with the modern motto, “All publicity is good publicity.” The source could only be evil and, after many days of this unwelcome attention, Paul, greatly annoyed, commanded the spirit in the Name of Jesus Christ to come out of the slave girl. This command was completely successful and the spirit left her immediately. Her owners had made a lot of profit out of her and now saw that this had gone. Rather than accepting it as one of the misfortunes of life one has to bear with, they seized Paul and Silas, dragged them into the market place and put them before the magistrates.

We can just pause here for a moment to say that a feature of the Book of Acts is that Luke, its author, is very accurate in his use of names and terms for the officials that Paul came into contact with. Philippi was a Roman city, populated by veterans of the Roman army and their descendants. They were Roman citizens with all the rights and privileges, and the way of doing things that Rome itself enjoyed. So Luke gives what our translations call “the magistrates” the correct name for such officials in a Roman city, thus demonstrating yet again the complete accuracy and reliability of the Bible.

The slave girl's owners then made wild and inaccurate accusations against Paul and Silas: troubling the city and teaching customs which were not lawful for them, as Romans, to receive or observe. But there was something else which they said; Paul and Silas were Jews. It is one of the unfortunate facts of history that Jews down the ages have not been popular, so much so that they frequently have been the target of persecution and general dislike. It is rare that there has ever been any justification for such an attitude but people bent on wickedness and violence rarely need any justification for their evil. The fact that this persecution is inspired by Satan in his hatred against Jews only makes it worse. And so it was on this occasion that the mention that Paul and Silas were Jews doubtless aroused the antagonism of both the crowd and the magistrates. Without their being able to say any word in their defence or to say that they were Roman citizens, their clothes were torn off and they were flogged. This was a very serious miscarriage of justice because Roman citizens could not be flogged, not even if found guilty and certainly not without a proper trial.

Paul and Silas found themselves thrown into prison with their feet fastened in stocks. These had a number of holes in them and could be made exceedingly uncomfortable by forcing the legs far apart, and this is probably what happened. However, the reaction of Paul and Silas to this appalling and agonizing situation was, at midnight, to pray and sing hymns. When you think how negatively we react to the slightest insult, real or imagined, the smallest mishap or accident, or minor ill-treatment, the way Paul and Silas dealt with the situation is truly extraordinary. There was no brooding over the gross unfairness of their treatment, no grumbling about what should have happened, and no looking forward to the come-uppance the Philippian magistrates would receive when they discovered they had flogged Roman citizens. Instead they turned to God, but we do not read of impassioned appeals to get them out of their dire position, nor to demand revenge on the authorities – fire called down from heaven after the style of Elijah might have seemed quite adequate in this instance. No, none of these; they sang hymns to God. Now it is not easy to sing hymns when you are well and truly miserable and in great distress, and it is virtually impossible to praise, yet that is what they were doing. That is surely a great lesson and example to us of how we should react in trouble but we have to admit it is easier said than done. We cannot just switch on this sort of response. Surely it can only come from the kind of close walk with the Lord that Paul and Silas had, coupled with a humble appreciation of their own position, not filled with a sense of their own importance and injured pride.

Then the totally unexpected happened. There was an earthquake. I have never been in an earthquake but I understand from those who have that even a minor tremor can be quite unnerving. For the gaoler, it was worse than this. There was not only the damage to the prison, there was also the reasonable supposition that the prisoners had all escaped through the opened doors. This was potentially extremely awkward. I don't know what happens to prison warders in this country when prisoners escape but I do know they are not executed for being careless. However, in the Roman Empire, the authorities sought to ensure that gaolers and soldiers took their duties seriously by imposing on them the penalty that any escaped prisoners in their care were due. Not surprisingly, the gaoler in Philippi thought he'd had it. People then were unfortunately far more likely to commit suicide than we are today. In publicly embarrassing situations where an official had failed or earned the displeasure of the Emperor, it was felt that taking your own life was the decent thing to do, and was certainly the expected thing.

Their view of the next life was hopelessly inaccurate and there was really no hope of anything other than a shadowy underworld with three places: one for the blessed, one for the damned and one for the rest. A small coin would be placed under the corpse's tongue to pay the ferryman who took the soul across the river separating the underworld from this one. There was, of course, no proof for any of these false pagan beliefs. How very much better our own position, through God's grace, of having the future spelt out for us in the Bible and the knowledge that the Lord Jesus has entered into death, risen again and ascended into heaven. We have the promise that we shall be raised from death too. In fact, we can look forward to the rapture, being caught up to meet the Lord Jesus on the clouds when He comes for His own.

But the gaoler had none of this sure and certain hope. He knew only his culture's pathetic myths, and he thought that a miserable fate was close at hand. He had actually drawn his sword to kill himself, but Paul called out loudly to him to do himself no harm because all the prisoners were there. The gaoler obviously knew of the reputation of Paul and Silas and probably knew something of their message because he fell down on his knees in front of them and asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

This surely is the most important question anyone can ask. Have you asked it? Has there ever been a time in your life when you realised that you needed salvation, even if you weren't too sure at the time what from? People are actually seeking some kind of salvation from their present situation in all manner of ways; we tend to be dissatisfied with where we are and what we are. We seek escape or happiness through money, various New Age beliefs and techniques, entertainment, alcohol, drugs, or better government or careers, but there is still the gap in our lives and, in any case, none of these will put us right with God. If we are not right with God, then there is only God's wrath to look forward to, and that means an eternity in hell.

So the answer Paul and Silas gave the gaoler that night so many centuries ago in Philippi "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" holds true for us all today where we are. Jesus Christ is the universal answer to all the deepest needs of every one of us. Note that the gaoler did not ask to be saved from any particular problem nor did Paul say what the gaoler would be saved from, because the salvation Jesus brings us encompasses all our requirements. The gaoler needed to be saved from the intention of killing himself, from facing a dire punishment from his superiors if his prisoners escaped, from God's righteous judgment and from the pagan way of life with all its wrong and harmful beliefs and practices and its utter hopelessness in the face of death. Not only could the gaoler be saved by faith in Christ, but also his family if they believed too.

Next we read, "Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house." So the invitation, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household," was not left by itself in mid-air, so to speak, but was filled out by Paul and Silas. For ourselves the lessons are that there is no true salvation for anybody except through our Lord Jesus Christ. If we preach anything different from this, it will be less than the truth, and people are just not going to be saved. If they do not hear that Jesus Himself said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me," and Peter's words, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved," then they have no way of experiencing God's salvation. Do we not read the expression "God our Saviour" in the Scriptures? Do we not read that God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance? But people can't believe if they don't hear the right message preached to them. Of course, that message about salvation can come to us by a whole variety of means; it does not have to be someone in a pulpit. So we have to make sure that our message to the lost is consistent with the centrality which the Bible gives our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the centrality of the Cross; that is, the sinfulness of humanity, the fact that God will judge us for our sins, and that we can be saved from God's judgment if we repent of our sins, and trust in Jesus Christ to save us. That way our sins are forgiven, we become God's children, we experience His love and there is the promise of heaven and not the threat of hell for the future.

The effect on the gaoler was both radical and immediate. Earlier, he had made life for Paul and Silas even more difficult and painful by putting their feet in the stocks, but now he washed the wounds on their backs and put food before them. He had been a pagan, but now he and his household were believers in Christ and, as proof of that, were baptised and rejoicing. These, and those converted earlier, formed the nucleus of the church in Philippi. Afterwards,

these believers had a very happy and close relationship with Paul, even when he was far away in prison in Rome. His epistle to the Philippians is perhaps the most joyful in the New Testament and is a very positive example both of how a Christian can react to very difficult conditions and how a happy relationship with other Christians can be maintained.

It would seem that the earthquake had damaged no more than the prison, and then only to the extent of opening the doors and breaking the prisoners' shackles. None of the prisoners had escaped, the thing the gaoler had feared the most. The gaoler had therefore a lot less to have been worried about than he had first thought. In the morning, the city's magistrates sent along the lectors, their officials, to let Paul and Silas go but it proved to be less straightforward than they had expected. They had wrongly assumed that Paul and Silas were just two wandering trouble-making Jews who could be flogged without bothering too much about the details of what they were supposed to have done in order to ensure they knew to keep away from Philippi in future. They were of no importance; there would be no comebacks. But the magistrates were completely wrong. They had just flogged and thrown into prison uncondemned two Roman citizens without any trial or, indeed, any legal procedure at all. They had allowed and, in fact, had supported mob rule. They were probably in as much potential trouble as the gaoler had thought he had been in. It was an awkward moment. Paul refused to do as he had been asked. He was not going to leave Philippi on the quiet after the way he and Silas had been treated and he demanded that the magistrates come themselves and not just their flunkies. And they did. They came to the prison and personally brought out the apostle and his companion, and then the magistrates pleaded with them to leave the city. So Paul and Silas did leave Philippi, after they had gone to Lydia's house and seen and encouraged the Christians.

We might ask why Paul and Silas had not said they were Roman citizens when they were arrested. Perhaps they did but was anybody in the mood for listening? Could they have been heard above the uproar? At any rate, Paul waited for a calmer and less hysterical moment. In this way, Paul was anxious that the citizens of Philippi would be able to see that the Christian church there was not just a collection of lawbreakers and trouble makers.

What do we learn from Acts 16 and the entry of Christianity into Europe?

1. We see that God gave unmistakable guidance to go into Macedonia; it was definitely not Paul's choice.
2. We need to use our conversations to better effect in winning souls.
3. From a small, inauspicious and dangerous beginning great things occurred.
4. To be consistent with the teaching of the Bible, we may have to go outside traditional behaviour.
5. Because someone says what appears to be the correct thing it does not necessarily mean it is acceptable – the source matters.
6. There can be opposition to the Gospel for reasons other than religious ones, especially if money or prestige are involved.
7. God is still in control, even in the worst of situations.
8. The paramount importance of witnessing to Christ as Saviour.
9. The need for a person to be baptised once they are saved.
10. A concern that the law of the land should be upheld properly.

We cannot overstate the importance of this entry of Christianity into Europe. Because of what happened at Philippi, the good news of the Gospel eventually found its way to our land with all the blessings that flow from it. Without the entry of the Gospel, the history of Europe would have been totally different and considerably poorer. This morning, let us thank God that we live in the light of the Gospel.

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