

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Good News that Changed Cities: Philippi - Acts 16:9-40

Today's talk is the third in a series called; "Good News that Changed Cities". There are six cities we are studying and they are all found in the Acts of the Apostles. They were exciting times in the world as the Gospel of the Grace of God began to spread out from Israel to Asia and to Europe through men like Paul and Silas. As the followers of Jesus Christ preached the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, many people turned to Christ and because of this many were baptised and committed their lives to Christ. It is also very interesting and amazing to see the way God instructed and directed His servants to carry out His will. The city we are thinking about today is Philippi and you can find the story in Acts 16:9-40.

Philippi was an important city in eastern Macedonia during Roman times. It was situated between the Strymon and Nestos rivers and was valued in antiquity for its nearby gold mines. It was the site of the famous battle of Philippi at the end of the Roman republic. The city prospered in the Roman era and, after a visit from Paul, became an important centre of early Christianity. Today the archaeological site has substantial remains including a theatre and four basilicas. The ruins of the ancient city can be seen today in the region of East Macedonia and Thrace in Greece. The city was named by and after Philip II of Macedon in 356 BC.

The first Christian church in Europe was founded in Philippi following the visit by Paul the Apostle in AD 49. Lydia was notable as the first European to be converted to Christianity and was also baptised (Acts 16:14-15). In Acts 9:1-9, we read of the remarkable conversion of Paul as the Lord brought him literally to his knees as he travelled on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, where he intended to torture and kill Christians. The Lord turned his life around completely.

Later in the same chapter, the Lord tells His servant, Ananias, that Paul was a chosen vessel of His (Acts 9:15). Ephesians 1:4 tells us that "*we have been chosen in Christ*" just like Paul. Are you ready, available and willing to serve as Paul was? The Lord also makes clear to Paul that he was to suffer great things for the name of Christ. Paul was instrumental in bringing the good news of the Gospel to Europe, as well as having the privilege to speak to kings and many in authority. But he most certainly suffered whilst serving the Lord in this way.

I don't know about you, but most of the time I hear Acts 16 preached, the preacher goes straight to the verses that tell the story of the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:25-40). This story is a remarkable one and very good for preaching the Gospel; but on studying the chapter, there is so much more in it.

The first thing I noticed is how many people are mentioned: Timothy, Timothy's mother and father, the man from Macedonia, Paul, Silas, Luke, the women praying, Lydia, the slave girl, the slave girl's paymasters, the magistrates, the jailor and his family, the other prisoners, policemen and the residents of the city. Every person mentioned was either used by God for the blessing of Philippi or they heard the good news of the Gospel for the first time and had to respond in some way to what they had heard.

As we look at the Gospel coming to Philippi, we will see the responses of some of these people. It is amazing to see how God moved the scenes, using many people to carry out His will. If you look back in your own experience, do you see the Lord's hand in it?

If you have not already done so, please turn in your Bibles to Acts 16:9-40. The initial work of God for the blessing of Philippi begins in Troas, where God speaks to Paul in a night vision (Acts 16:9). A man from Macedonia appeared before Paul and stood pleading with him, saying, "*Come over to Macedonia and help us!*" (Acts 16:9). This must have put various questions in Paul's mind. But Paul immediately discussed his vision with his fellow workers, even although it was night time.

Without too much discussion, it seems that they all agreed that God was clearly directing and calling them to Macedonia to preach the Gospel. Do you look for clear leading and guiding from God? To be aware of God's direction you need to be walking with Him every day! It seems that Luke, the writer of the Acts of the Apostles, goes with Paul and Silas to Philippi because he writes, in Acts 16:10, "*We at once...*" and in Acts 16:12, "*We came.*" Paul and his

fellow workers acted with unity, no fear, just blind faith. Something to remember when you are working as a team with fellow believers!

Immediately Paul and his fellow workers answered God's call and set sail from Troas, eventually arriving at Philippi. They stayed for a few days in Philippi. On the Sabbath day, they went outside the city's walls and down to the river, where they found certain faithful women praying (see Acts 16:13). Why did they pray at the river you might ask? It was because there was no synagogue at Philippi and this was the legal meeting-place for Jews to gather. I wonder if they had been praying for someone to come and preach the Gospel? And God was now answering their prayers!

What did Paul say I wonder? We are not told but Paul must have preached the Gospel because there was a response from one woman at least (Acts 16:14). Lydia was that woman, she was from Thyatira, an ancient Greek city in Asia Minor, which is now Turkey. She was a business woman who was a dealer in fabrics dyed in purple and obviously travelled around.

Lydia, who was (already a worshipper of God, see Acts 16:14) was listening to Paul and God opened her heart as she listened to what he was saying. Lydia's heart was prepared by God, so when the message was preached there was a genuine response from her heart. God prepares hearts to receive the message so, unless a heart is ready to receive the word of God, there will be no blessing. Paul whilst speaking must have explained the meaning and need for salvation as well as baptism! Lydia and her family were baptised immediately after salvation (Acts 16:15). Please be very clear that baptism does not save you! Salvation is only found through repentance of your sins and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Lydia was sincere, but asks Paul, if he thought she was faithful to the Lord, to stay to her house (Acts 16:15). This he does. No doubt Lydia told many on her subsequent travels of her faith in Christ.

As Paul and Silas went to pray, they were followed by a slave girl who was possessed by a spirit of divination (Acts 16:16). She claimed to tell the future and brought her owners a lot of money because of this (Acts 16:16). Throughout history, there have been people who make use of the name of Jesus and of the word of God to misguide and deceive people. They will try to captivate people with their mysticism and false doctrines just to gain attention for themselves, satisfying their egos, or for some financial gain. Something in what they say will catch one's attention and will seem like a truth but, when one sees and hears the whole situation, hopefully, the deception will be avoided. The slave girl here was telling the truth because Paul and Silas really were proclaiming the way of salvation from the Most High God (Acts 16:17). Why should Paul be so upset with her "good intention" to help? Wouldn't this slave girl be helping to spread the Gospel with her proclamations?

The girl was telling "a" truth, but it was only through the evil spirit within her. That is why Acts 16:18 says Paul spoke "to the spirit". And after many days, Paul was grieved with continually hearing this girl shouting. He casts the spirit out of her so that it would no longer control her. Paul used the power of the real Spirit of God and the powerful name of Jesus Christ to cast out the evil spirit and the spirit left the girl immediately (Acts 16:18). Even though this slave girl was speaking "a truth", her proclamation would validate her "spirit of divination" and make out as if fortunetelling was approved by the almighty God. Throughout all scripture, God condemns fortunetelling. Because this slave girl was possessed by a spirit, she was obeying her real lord, who was a demon. The Lord God Almighty does not want His word preached by evil spirits, who will mislead people into superstitions, mysticism, and false doctrines of all sorts.

The slave girl's owners were very angry with what Paul had done because their way of making money had gone (Acts 16:19). They physically got hold of Paul and Silas and beat them up, dragging them before the authorities to the forum, which was the market place where trials were held (Acts 16:19). The men told the judges that Paul and Silas were Jews and that they were encouraging the practice of customs which were unlawful for Romans to accept or observe (Acts 16:20-21). The crowd joined in with the rulers and attacked them more, punching and kicking them and tearing the clothes from their bodies (Acts 16:22-23). They were beaten with rods and then they were thrown into the prison (Acts 16:24). Paul and Silas must have taken a severe beating! Imagine being attacked by a mob like this when you had done nothing wrong!

In Roman prisons the jailer was responsible for the prisoners and, on pain of death, should not let them escape. The rulers had made the jailor aware of the importance of these prisoners. So, the jailer put them in the inner prison, probably better known as a dungeon! He even took the precaution of fastening their feet in stocks (Acts 16:24). Here we have one of the great midnight scenes in the Bible (see also Exodus 11:4; Matthew 25:6; (Acts 16:25) Acts 20:7). Paul and Silas, prayed and sang hymns of praise to God, whilst the other prisoners listened to them! (Acts 16:25) It always amazes me that Paul and Silas even after being beaten, probably to an inch of their lives, gave thanks to God. There was no sign of self-pity with Paul and Silas! This is a lesson for us Christians today; we moan about even the smallest of things!

It, does not say that the jailer was listening to them praying and singing but God had prepared his heart. He obviously knew what their preaching was all about because he asks a very clear and concise question, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). The earthquake that occurred at Philippi that night (Acts 16:26) was no normal earthquake; it

shook the very foundations of the prison! The doors were all opened at once and every one's shackles were unfastened. Normally an earthquake would seal doors and tighten shackles but this was an earthquake which God prepared for a specific purpose. God works in wonderful ways. Two men were beaten and thrust into prison for a family to be gloriously saved and baptised and the wonder of this story taught for over two thousand years and still bringing blessing to many!

The jailer had been sleeping when the earthquake suddenly wakened him up (Acts 16:27). You could imagine his terror as he saw the prison doors open. He knew he would be killed if the prisoners had escaped so he drew his sword to kill himself. Paul cried *"Do not harm yourself; we are all here"* (Acts 16:28). How did Paul know that everyone was still in their cell? It was as if Paul knew the whole story! I have no doubt at all that he was working under the direction of the Lord. There was no electricity in those days so the jailer called for some lights, probably oil lamps and rushed to the dungeon to where Paul and Silas were (Acts 16:29). The jailer was physically trembling as he fell down before Paul and Silas. He took them out of the dungeon and said to them, *"[Men], what must I do to be saved?"* (Acts 16:30)

Paul and Silas with no thought of injustice or bad feeling toward the jailer, but rather acting on their desire to bring this man into blessing, answered, *"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house"* (Acts 16:31). In Acts 16:32, we read that they spoke the Word of the Lord to everyone in the house. The whole family seem to have put their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus as Saviour (Acts 16:32).

When the Gospel is sincerely accepted, there will be a change in heart as the Holy Spirit enters in. The jailer shows a remarkable change of heart as he takes Paul and Silas and attends to their wounds (Acts 16:33). The jailer was saved now and had great joy in his heart. He loved these men as he carefully and gently washes the bloody wounds caused by so much hatred because of their preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I have no doubt he was sorry for what they had gone through.

The jailer and his family were all baptised after they had accepted the Gospel (Acts 16:33). Baptism is an outward showing of salvation in Christ. Baptism shows to others the transformation God performs within in the heart. The jailer continued to care for the physical needs of Paul and Silas as he took them to his house and fed them. The jailer's house must have had a different feel to it than before because they all believed in God. The whole family gave thanks and exalted the name of Jesus. The Bible tells us that there is *"joy in heaven over one sinner that repents"* (Luke 15:7). There was indescribable joy in this house at Philippi (Acts 16:34). This was why Paul and Silas and the others were sent to Philippi in the first place. God had in mind the salvation of this family as well as probably many others who are not mentioned in the text.

This all happened during the night. What a night! A night to be remembered forever, yes forever, because we are speaking about it today. Paul and Silas after the visit to the jailer's house must have been taken back to the prison. I don't think they would have been put in the dungeon this time! In the morning, the magistrates sent policemen to the jail with the news that Paul and Silas were to be released (Acts 16:35). The jailer told Paul the news that they were to be released and that they were to go in peace (Acts 16:36).

Paul was quite clever in the way he handled the situation as he calmly told the policeman that, because they were beaten publicly, without a trial, they were uncondemned men (Acts 16:37). In fact, they were Roman citizens! (Acts 16:38). Paul refused to leave! I don't think Paul did this to justify himself. I believe he did it for the furtherance of the Gospel (see Philippians 1:12). The policemen reported this back to the magistrates and, when they heard that they were Roman citizens, they were frightened (Acts 16:38). So, the magistrates came themselves to try and appease them and apologised. The magistrates brought them out in full view of the city; then they politely asked them to leave Philippi (Acts 16:39). All would see that there was no criminal stain on these men nor on the Gospel they preached.

Paul and Silas's work in the city was done. So before they left, they went to Lydia's house where they found the local believers gathered there. Paul and Silas spent some time with these new believers because they needed to be comforted. Philippians 2:1-2, part of Paul letter, gives us the details of the type of encouragement they would be given. There are many things that new believers, and older ones too, need encouragement with and the believers in Philippi were no exception. Paul and Silas then left Philippi and it was left to the local believers to be faithful and to continue the Gospel witness in the city.

There are many lessons for us today in the way that God brought the Gospel to Philippi for the first time. In our local area, we have, been praying for more children to come to our children's club. We prayed and we prayed and there seemed to be no answer to our prayers. So we decided to act and distributed leaflets to every child in the local school. We never got one child from the local school because of the leaflets, but remarkably God has provided us with about six other children in other ways. This has been a real lesson to me that sometimes along with our prayers we need faith in action. It is amazing how God works!

You may feel the Lord is speaking to you today about the need to act with something you have been praying about. Paul and his friends responded immediately to the call of the Lord.

Have you got the faith to believe that the blessing in Philippi could be seen in your village or city today? It's the same great God we serve, with the same power; maybe it's our faith that's somewhat small!

Let us be like Paul who, at the end of his life, had no regrets in his service for the Lord. In 2008, Barack Obama's slogan was, "Yes, we can", in 2017, it was "Yes, we did".

Are you committed to the work the Lord has given you to do? Paul was! In 2 Timothy 4:7 he said, "*I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.*"

May God bless His word to you today and make you a blessing in His service.

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