

Acts 16

Lesson 2 Series 2

The letter sent from the Jerusalem church seems to act as a catalyst to spur the church on in its mission to “witness to the ends of the earth.” Chapter 16 picks up with this already having been launched in chapter 15. This narrative section actually begins at 15:36 with the dispute between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark. The beginning of this chapter 16:1-5 introduces the readers to Timothy, while 16:6-10 narrates the Macedonian call; and then 16:11-40 recounts Paul’s Philippian ministry.¹

Paul travels to Derbe and to Lystra where there was a disciple who was the son of a Jewish woman, but whose father was Greek. He evidently had a good reputation there and Paul wanted to take him with him on his travels. At this point Paul does an extraordinary thing, he has him circumcised. The text indicates that this was done because of the Jews who were in the places that Paul intended to

¹ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2007), p. 275.

travel to, that knew Timothy's father was Greek. To see Paul have someone circumcised after the events so carefully laid out in chapters 14-15 is startling indeed. Some have tried to argue that Timothy is a Jew while others have argued that he is not. Either way Luke has control of his narrative and it seems we must conclude that he saw no conflict in the action that Paul takes here.²

In that case, the reader is expected to conclude that Paul's action is motivated by expediency. If Timothy were a Gentile then Paul performed this action for reasons other than salvation (15:1-2). If Timothy were Jewish (which is most likely what Luke wants us to think is correct here), then his circumcision is not a condition for discipleship (he is already called that), but rather a means of insuring Timothy's acceptability with the Jews that Paul will be working among. The last part of the sentence makes the final clause the reason for Paul's actions: **“for (γὰρ) they knew that his father was a Greek.”**³

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 5 (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 284.

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 284.

It appears that both Paul and Luke give evidence of a flexibility in such matters that should not in any way be dismissed as inconsistent or unhistorical. From a narrative perspective, this story serves three primary functions. First, this story clarifies that what was decided at the Jerusalem council allowing Gentile freedom does not close the door for Jewish Christians to practice their traditions as long as they are doing this for the sake of tradition and not for salvation. Secondly, Luke's concern with the fact that Paul is on a mission to the Gentiles does not mean that he has in any way abandoned his commitment to the Jews. Third, Luke is preparing the stage in advance to make it absolutely clear that there is no basis whatever for the charge that Paul insisted that Jews forsake Moses (21:21), in particular that they not circumcise their children.⁴

In verse 4, the mission of the church and the proclamation of the decision of the Jerusalem council continue to be spread by Paul and his travelling

⁴ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), p. 451.

companions. As they continue to do this, the churches grow both in their faith and in their numbers. It should be noted that there appears to be no tension or questioning among these churches with regard to the situation with Timothy. It appears to be the case that they understood Timothy to be a Jew and Jews could continue to be circumcised, though this was not required for salvation.

Verse 6 begins this section with a very difficult sentence in Greek with the implication that the “they” spoken of here is a reference to Paul and his companions. There are a number of textual variants in this verse that demonstrate the confusion that the geographical-political relationships designated by the terms “Phrygia” and “Galatia” generate. Since it is the case that these terms were themselves changeable, there is no way to totally eliminate confusion. Although there has been virtually endless discussion regarding Paul’s exact route, this is in fact a puzzle that is unsolvable, but this does not affect the

relevance of Luke’s narrative.⁵ The map below gives some concept of his mission.



Despite the fact that it is likely that Paul actually traveled through Asia, he was forbidden by the Holy Spirit from speaking the word to the people there. When they attempted to go north into the region of Bithynia “the Spirit of Jesus” will not allow them to go. This is the only time the

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 285.

phrase, “the Spirit of Jesus” is used in the book of Acts.⁶

Because of this hindrance Paul bypasses Mysia and heads west toward the city of Troas (verse 8), which is a port city on the extreme western shore of Asia Minor. Even if the geographical detail seems confusing the point of the narrative seems clear. The point is that the “providential care of God,” offered, by God, through the Holy Spirit, and the spirit of Jesus, is not allowing Paul and his companions to become distracted. They are not even to be distracted by the preaching of the gospel before reaching their destination.⁷

Verse 9, during the night through a vision Paul understands that his mission is to pass into Macedonia and proclaim the gospel there. Paul and his companions, which now appears to include Luke, since the pronoun has now changed to “we”; are convinced that there is a sense of urgency to their mission and so there is an indication that “immediately” (εὐθέως) they set out to cross over to Macedonia. They traveled to Samothrace, on to Neapolis and

⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 285.

⁷ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 280.

then onto Philippi, where they remained for a few days.

While staying in this city they went out of the city seeking a place of prayer along the river and when they got there they spoke to the women who were gathered there. It is perhaps the case that Paul is searching for Jews and like-minded people with whom to share the gospel message.

At this place they find Lydia, who was originally from Thyatira and the “Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.” The text then moves instantly to the point where her, and her household were baptized and then she invites them to her home. This baptizing of “her household” is all done rather matter of factly and without elaboration. It leaves us with a great many questions with regard to salvation. People who view baptism as a very personal and individual response are often troubled by the implications of this account. It seems to indicate that the head of the household makes the decision and the whole household can be saved on the basis of that decision.

Certainly further along at verse 32 it is made clear that Paul

and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to all of those in the jailer's house, but here there is silence in that regard.⁸

It is important for modern readers though not to impress their individualistic notions of personality and identity upon this ancient text. Ancients held a far more collectivist understanding of personality and identity. Persons in antiquity tended to find their identity and personality much more than moderns do in the context of the larger significant groups in which they were embedded. The most significant group to them would have been their kinship group, and this would have especially included their immediate household. Members of such a group would take their "cues," even when a decision was voluntary, from the head of household. Readers here concerned, or not concerned, with infant baptism will insert, or not insert small children into the household, depending upon their own practices and preferences, but here the text advocates nor denies either perspective. The note that Lydia was "a worshipper of God" very likely is an indication that she is a

⁸ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 283.

non-Jewish “godfearer.”⁹ Since she is a woman circumcision would not have been an issue.

Verse 16 moves to a new scene where Paul and his companions encounter a “slave-girl” who was possessed in some fashion with a “spirit of divination” (πνεῦμα πύθωνα). According to Greek mythology, the *python* (πύθων) was the serpent, or dragon that inspired and guarded the oracle at Delphi. This creature was slain by the god Apollo and the word *python* came to be synonymous with “divining spirit.” Ventriloquists were called *pythons* because they were believed to have mantic spirits that spoke oracles from their stomach. Luke, undoubtedly viewed this girl as possessed by a spirit.¹⁰

Through her gift she was a valuable asset to her owners. She comes into the story of Paul because apparently she followed him and his companions around incessantly proclaiming that they were “slaves of the most high God.” She did this for days and Luke indicates that Paul

⁹ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 283.

¹⁰ Robert F. O’Toole, “Slave Girl at Philippi”, in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 57-58.

became “very much annoyed” (διαπονέομαι) and he orders the spirit to leave her and it does. This distresses her owners who now are concerned that all the money that they were accustomed to making from her former situation is lost. They seize Paul and Silas and drag them to the marketplace before the authorities.

They then accuse them of “disturbing the city” and advocating “customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” The charge appeals to the xenophobic attitude of a Roman Colony. There is no indication of the actual content of the charges which seems to stand due to the inherent anti-semitism present in much of the Hellenistic world.¹¹ The crowd then joins in the attack, which seems to cause all semblance of justice to fly away and then the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. Once this has been completed orders are given that they be thrown into prison and kept securely there. The jailer then proceeds to place them in the innermost cell and fasten their feet in stocks.

¹¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 295.

At verse 25 there is a remarkable moment that occurs when it is absolutely apparent to anyone who chooses to take note that there is something very different about these two men. Rather than grumbling or complaining they are praying and singing hymns at about midnight. The other prisoners were listening and it seems that so was God as suddenly there is a violent earthquake so that the very foundations of the prison were shaken. Another remarkable thing also happens at this point as all the chains, from everyone in the prison, fell off and all the doors were opened. The jailer, who had been asleep, wakes up to find all the doors to the prison open and he then draws his sword to kill himself, thinking everyone had escaped.

Instead of escaping Paul and Silas remain in place and rescue the jailer from himself. The jailer then orders lights and rushes in trembling at the feet of Paul and Silas. Prison was the most severe form of custody in the Roman empire and jailers were noted for their cruelty. The inner part of a prison was the worst possible location within a prison. In this inner area the space would often be cramped, the air

would be bad, the darkness would be profound and the stench would be almost unbearable. This jailer finds his way to Paul and Silas and asks the question of all questions, “Men, what must I do to be saved?” It is likely that he had no idea that he had just opened a whole universe of possibilities up. He likely was not speaking of the salvation of his soul at this point. He may have meant nothing more than, “what must I do to get out of the mess that I am in?”¹²

Whatever his intent Paul takes this as an opportunity to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ to him and his household. A remarkable thing then occurs, Paul and Silas have their wounds washed, but even more remarkable is that at the same hour of the “night” the jailer and his entire family are baptized, “without delay.” They could not wait to undertake this expression of their faith in Jesus, not even darkness would delay them. This sense of urgency and excitement indicates that they could not live in anticipation but must have that anticipation requited in this obedient

¹² J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 289.

faithful action. The jailer then takes Paul and Silas to his house, feeds them, and they spend the night rejoicing.

In the morning the magistrates send a message to the jail ordering the release of Paul and Silas. There is no explanation for this sudden change of heart, but it may have been motivated by the earthquake that had come the night before. In the Western Revision of the text of Acts circumstantial details are added here to indicate that this is what is behind the motivation for the magistrates change of heart.¹³ The jailer conveys the message from the magistrates to Paul and Silas, but Paul sends a message, a question, back to the Magistrates. The message is that they have ordered Roman citizens beaten and now they are going to be dismissed quietly. The public beating was intended to shame Paul and Silas, this private dismissal is intended to save the magistrates from shame. It was necessary for magistrates to take care in order not to infringe upon the rights of a Roman citizen.¹⁴

¹³ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. corrected (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), pp. 450-451.

¹⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 301-302.

Roman citizens were given special rights and privileges that included freedom from arbitrary treatment such as had been experienced by Paul and Silas.¹⁵ Cicero states it like this, “It is a crime to bind a Roman citizen; to scourge him is a wickedness; to put him to death is almost parricide. What shall I say of crucifying him? So guilty an action cannot by any possibility be adequately expressed by any name bad enough for it.”¹⁶ The magistrates, upon hearing that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens came to them personally and “apologized”. They take them out of the jail and “ask,” not order, them to leave the city. They go to Lydia’s house, encourage them and then they leave the city.

¹⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 301-302.

¹⁶ Cicero, Ver. 2.5.170.

Synopsis

Chapter 16 begins Paul's second missionary journey, this time with different traveling companions. Silas is chosen at the end of chapter 15 and then Paul chooses Timothy, and has him circumcised, because his father was Greek before beginning this mission on from Lystra. It appears this was done for expediency and was not in any way related to Timothy's salvation or discipleship. They continued on their journey delivering the decision of the Jerusalem Council as they went.

They travelled through Phrygia and Galatia, but were forbidden by the "Holy Spirit" from preaching the gospel in Asia. They then move further an attempt to travel to Bithynia, but the "Spirit of Jesus" would not allow them to enter. A vision comes to Paul that includes a man of Macedonia pleading with Paul to come and help. Paul perceives this as a call from God to proclaim the gospel there. The party sets out for Macedonia immediately. The group here now seems to include Luke as the text says; "we"

set sail for Troas.

They then travel on to Philippi where they encounter Lydia and her and her household are converted. After this Paul gets into trouble by driving a spirit of divination from a slave girl. Her owners incite the magistrates to beat and imprison Paul and Silas who at midnight are praying, singing and praising God when the prison is shaken by a terrific earthquake that leaves all the doors to the prison open and their chains removed. The jailer is about to kill himself when Paul calls to him. He proclaims the gospel to him and his household who are baptized without delay.

The next morning the magistrates send to have Paul and Silas released from prison. Paul sends a message back to them indicating that he is a Roman citizen, and that they should come and take him and Silas out themselves. They come and apologize to them and then ask them to leave the city. They do after visiting Lydia's one more time and encouraging the Christians meeting there they depart.

Main Points

1. It is okay for Jews to be circumcised and Paul has not abandoned his people as the situation with Timothy demonstrates.
2. They are directed on their mission by God.
3. The message continues to be preached through all circumstances and to all people.
4. Paul and Silas demonstrate the power of rejoicing in all circumstances.
5. The power of the gospel message can reach even the most hardened heart (the Philippian jailer).

Questions

1. Why do you think Paul would choose to take a young man with him on his journeys?
2. What do you think Paul's intent was in circumcising Timothy? What might that teach us today?
3. Why do you think the Spirit is so prominent in the work of Paul?
4. How does the Spirit work in your life?
5. What do you think it means for the Lord to "open" someone's heart as he does for Lydia at verse 14?
6. Why do you think Paul became so annoyed with the slave girl's crying out?
7. Is it okay to get annoyed? Why or why not?
8. Why do you think the people of Philippi were so quick to condemn Paul and Silas for doing something good?
9. Are people today quick to judge others?

10. Were Paul and Silas the only prisoners in the jail?
Why do you think your answer is correct?
11. Why do you think the jailer and his family were
baptized so urgently?
12. Why do you think Paul made the magistrates come
and apologize? What does this teach us?