

Acts 16:6-40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 16 verses 6 to 40. And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night.

A man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, Come over to Macedonia and help us. And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

So setting out from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, 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. 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.

[1 : 0 2] One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

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.

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination, and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.

And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.

And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city.

[2 : 0 9] They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice. The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them, and gave orders to beat them with rods.

And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison, and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken.

And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

But Paul cried with a loud voice, Do not harm yourself, for we are all here. And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas.

[3 : 1 2] Then he brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

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. 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. But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, Let these men go. 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. 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. The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them.

[4 : 19] And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed. In Acts chapter 16, the gospel finally arrives in Europe from Asia, and Paul and Silas carry out their mission in Philippi.

Paul and Silas had a plan for the second missionary journey. They intended to visit churches that they had already visited, and to spread the gospel further in Asia. However, as they try to do this, they find that the Holy Spirit stops them from engaging in further ministry in Asia.

The apostles depend upon divine guidance for their mission throughout. The mission is ultimately the Holy Spirit's mission. It's the mission of Christ continued from heaven in his ascended position. We could perhaps draw comparisons here with the way that kings in the Old Testament seek the Lord's counsel before battles, military maneuvers, or various campaigns. Paul and Silas are engaged in a different sort of conquest.

The gospel is spreading from Jerusalem and Judea through places like Samaria, through Syria, through Asia Minor, and now into Europe. And at each step, the Spirit is directing those who are spearheading the mission.

[5 : 29] How the negative direction of the Spirit came is not entirely clear. Perhaps it came in the form of prophetic words. Maybe the missionaries received some strong internal intuition about the Spirit's direction.

Or maybe there was a vision. Or perhaps just some obstructing circumstances. Whatever it was, it was clear that this was not the way that the Lord wanted them to go. In verse 6, the Holy Spirit forbids them.

And in verse 7, the Spirit of Jesus does not allow them to go into Bithynia. The association between the Holy Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus is a very important indication of just how high Luke's Christology is.

In Luke's understanding of Jesus, Jesus is so identified with God that God's Holy Spirit is understood as the Spirit of Jesus. After this succession of obstacles or negative guidance, the missionaries go down to Troas.

Troas was in the region of the famous city of Troy, about 25 miles away. It was beneath the Hellespont and would have been an ideal place from which to sail to Macedonia. One way to see this, perhaps, is that Paul and Silas are engaging in an invasion of Macedonia and Europe from Asia.

[6 : 39] And this was the mirror image or reversal of Alexander the Great's invasion of Asia from Macedonia earlier in history. Paul receives a vision of a man of Macedonia. The man doesn't seem to be a specific individual.

Some commentators have suggested that the man might have been Alexander the Great, or perhaps the Philippian jailer. However, no indication of either of these things is given us within the text itself.

We should note that the first occurrence of the we pronoun for the missionary journeys occurs here. It seems as though Luke may have joined Paul and Silas in Troas, subtly indicating his presence by this shift in the language.

With this shift in the pronouns, we have an indication that we are now getting a first-hand report of what occurred. Following the vision, Paul and Silas set sail from Troas to Samothrace and then on to Neapolis, from where they go to the small city of Philippi, which is a Roman colony in the region. The city of Philippi enjoyed autonomous rule and exemption from taxation, and would have had a far more Roman character than many other cities. This is the first arrival of the gospel in Europe,

and the significance of this event should not be understated.

[7 : 47] From this small seed of an event arises vast swathes of human history. On the Sabbath, Paul and Silas go to a place outside of the city, by the riverside, where they expect that there will be a place of prayer, possibly a synagogue.

Some have suggested that Jews and God-fearers met there because it was outside a line restricting burials and small cults to a site outside of the city proper. Perhaps finding no evidence of a synagogue within the city, they looked for the most likely site of prayer for a small Jewish community.

Beside a river would be a promising location for such a community. It would be a place where ritual washings could be performed. It was also possible that they had heard reports in the city of a group meeting in such a location.

The likelihood that it was a synagogue community is lowered by the fact that it seems to be primarily women engaged in prayer, rather than the male and female company that one might expect in a typical synagogue.

One of the people there is Lydia from Thyatira, a Lydian city that might help us to explain Lydia's name. She is a seller of purple goods. There's no statement here that she actually dyes the goods herself.

[8 : 56] If she dyed the goods herself, she might have been kept outside of normal society as it was a smelly profession. Another example of such a smelly profession would be the work of tanning. We encountered Simon the Tanner at the end of chapter 9 and beginning of chapter 10.

It's likely that Lydia had some independent status and wealth, but as a foreign merchant, she would have been looked down on by any member of the local aristocracy. Nevertheless, she seems to have a large enough house to be able to put up Paul and Silas without displacing the other members.

She also seems to have a number of people working for her as slaves and others. Lydia seems to be a god-fearer, not a Jew nor a pagan, but she opens up her heart to the gospel, and as a result, her whole household is baptised.

The description of the baptism of her household with her suggests that it's almost a matter of course that the faith of the leader of the household would be shared by all of the members within it.

Although the other members of the household would presumably largely be adult slaves, Lydia's reception of the gospel is expected to have implications for everyone within her orbit.

This is a feature of the reception of the gospel that we can see on a number of occasions within the New Testament. The reception of the gospel is not just a matter of personal heart conversion. It's a matter of public solidarities, alignments, and allegiances.

[10 : 12] And where these sorts of things are expressed by the head of a household, everyone under them, children, slaves, and others, are implicated within their decision. While each person would be expected to affirm this within their own lives, it was presumed that they would do, and that their coming under the reign of Christ was not just a matter of private and personal individual decision.

While they're going to the place of prayer, Paul and Silas are met by a slave girl who has a spirit of divination and who follows them, declaring that they are servants of the Most High God. This girl is possessed by a Pythonian spirit, a spirit of divination, inspired by Apollo, the Pythian god, who defeated the Python servant.

This servant girl might be similar to some of the priestesses at Delphi. The confrontation with demons and evil spirits that we see here continues from the book of Luke. In the Gospel of Luke, we see Jesus confronting the spirits in his temptations in the wilderness, in rebuking and exorcising demons.

The same conflict continues here. The apostles are struggling against Satan's kingdom.

Throughout this book of Acts, we've already seen magicians like Simon the sorcerer and Elymas, and in later chapters, we'll see more examples of people committed to magical arts.

Lest we forget, the missionaries are not struggling against flesh and blood. but against principalities and powers and rulers of this present age. In carrying out this mission, they are facing many evil forces that will seek to oppose them or drive them back.

[11 : 39] The slave girl is bearing witness to Paul and Silas, but in a way that is quite troubling, perhaps not least in the fact that she is a voice of someone representing polytheism. After many days of this, Paul becomes annoyed and commands the spirit to depart from her.

