

# Saved by Grace

Week Commencing 15<sup>th</sup> May 2023

*Notes for next week's sermon on Acts 16 – Imprisoned but free*

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## **DAY 1: Read Acts 16:1-5**

Lystra and Derbe were the last Galatian towns Paul visited on his first missionary journey. As Paul is now approaching from the east, they are the first to be revisited. I wonder if you felt confused by reading what happened here? Here is Paul taking news of the decision reached by the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem regarding Gentiles not having to undergo circumcision nor follow the Jewish laws and yet he has Timothy circumcised as he wants him to join the missionary journey as a worker!

We know from 1 Timothy 1:5 and 2 Timothy 3:15 that his mother Eunice was a Jew and had become a believer. Presumably, both had been converted during Paul's visit about 5 years earlier. Timothy's Jewish-Greek parentage would give him an entrée into both communities. Although brought up by his mother in the Jewish faith, he had never been circumcised. So, Paul circumcised him *because of the Jews who lived in that area*.

But why? We have only just read in Acts 15:1ff of his sharp dispute with those wanting Gentiles to be circumcised and we read in his letter to the Galatians his vehement statements against circumcision (see for example Galatians 1:6-9; 3:1-5; 5:2-6). Some might condemn him for inconsistency! However, there is a deep consistency in his thought and action. Once the principle had been established that circumcision was not necessary for salvation, he was ready to make concessions in practice. What was unnecessary for acceptance with God was advisable for acceptance by those they were trying to reach for the gospel. What was at stake was how unbelieving Jews might best be won to Christ. So just as Christian freedom caused Paul to fight against the need for circumcision, this same freedom allowed him to remove the stumbling block of Timothy's lack of circumcision. Paul applied his principle from 1 Corinthians 9:20, "To the Jews I became a Jew in order to win the Jews."

Note the encouraging result? v5 *So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers*. I wonder in what ways we as a church need to think through what we do in order to get alongside, remove stumbling blocks and win acceptance by those we are trying to reach for the gospel?

## **DAY 2: Read Acts 16:6-15**

The most notable feature of Paul's second missionary journey is that the gospel was first planted in European soil. From there it would eventually spread throughout the world! But how did it come to reach Europe? Paul's desire when setting out was to strengthen those churches he had planted several years earlier. But God clearly guided him in his next moves. We can only guess *how* the Holy Spirit prevented Paul from preaching at this stage in Asia and Bithynia. It may have been through an inner conviction or something such as illness or Jewish opposition. They arrived at Troas, close to the area we know as the Dardanelles and it is only there they receive a positive lead about their direction through a vision Paul received of a man in Macedonia pleading for help. Note the way the Lord guides here: through some doors closing and other doors opening. That's still the way the Lord often makes his will known today.

Note that from v11, Luke includes himself in the narrative; so presumably he has joined Paul at this point. They made good sailing here, covering 240kms in two days. They then travelled 16kms on foot to Philippi along the *via Egnatia*, whose massive paving stones can still be seen. They stayed *several days* and whilst no doubt they saw many people converted, Luke highlights just three, the first being a business woman named Lydia.

Lydia was a *worshipper of God* (believing and behaving like a Jew without having become one) and as she listened to Paul's message, *the Lord opened her heart to respond*: that is, he opened her eyes to see and to believe in the Jesus Paul proclaimed. Note again that her conversion was the Lord's work, albeit, through Paul's preaching. Lydia and her household were baptised; this would have included any children still at home along with servants. An open heart, meant an open home as Lydia insisted on offering hospitality.

There are many people in central and western NSW who know of God and even say they believe in him. And we need to be faithful in two things: proclaiming the truth of Jesus and praying that God will open hearts to respond!

### **DAY 3: Read Acts 16:16-24**

There was no synagogue in Philippi, probably because there were insufficient Jews in that area. But as we learnt in the previous passage, there was a place of prayer. Paul and Silas head out there one Sabbath when they are met by a slave girl who has literally, a 'spirit of a python'; a reference to the snake of classical mythology which guarded the temple of Apollo. Apollo was thought to be embodied in the snake and to inspire his female devotees with clairvoyance. Luke regards her as possessed by an evil spirit. He also tells us that she was exploited by her owners for whom she made money by fortune telling. Note that the evil spirit identified the disciples as servants of God telling the way of salvation just as an evil spirit knew who Jesus was during his ministry. Paul was grieved and indignant at the girl's condition, and commanded the spirit to come out of her in the name of Jesus. This annoyed her owners as her money making was now over! They dragged Paul and Silas into the market place – the centre of a Roman city's public life. The accusations of causing a riot and introducing an alien religion were serious. The owners were very clever. They concealed the real reason for their anger (which was economic). And the legal case they presented appealed to the latent anti-Semitism of the people (*these men as Jews*) and their racial pride (*us Romans*). Paul and Silas suffered a severe flogging (see 2 Cor 11:23, 25), and were thrown into prison. The jailer was particularly instructed to keep them under close guard so he puts them in an inner cell and places their feet in stocks.

Opposition to the gospel comes in many and varying forms. In this case, it was motivated by anger at loss of income. In the opposition *we* face, there may be all sorts of underlying issues which give rise to the opposition. Sometimes understanding the underlying reason, will help us connect with people where they are at. We need to pray for God's love for those who oppose us, and to stand firm in the truth.

### **DAY 4: Read Acts 16:25-40**

Note what Paul and Silas were busy doing at midnight? *Praying and singing hymns to God!* Not groans, but songs came from their mouths, despite their lacerated backs and aching limbs. No surprise that the other prisoners were listening to them!

A significant earth quake suddenly interrupts the midnight hymn fest! Prison doors open. Chains come loose. The jailer wakes up and is about to take his life imagining that the inmates had escaped and knowing he would have been held responsible. Convicted of sin, the jailer *fell trembling before Paul and Silas* and asked what he had to do to be saved. Perhaps he had heard of the slave girl shouting about 'the way to be saved', or perhaps he was simply expressing the longing of his heart. In either case the missionaries first gave him a straight answer, that he must trust personally in the Lord Jesus and he would be saved, with his household. They then *spoke the word of the Lord* to him and his household and he not only believed but also repented. As a token of his penitence, there and then he washed their wounds and then he and all his family were baptised. Someone has pointed out, that he washed the disciples, and then was washed by them in baptism. "The imprisoned missionaries he washed from their stripes, himself was washed from his sins". (Chrysostom, cited in Stott, p267). The baptised family now welcomed Paul and Silas into their home, just as Lydia had done into hers, and they set a meal before them. And we read the lovely *he was filled with joy because he came to believe in God – he and his whole family*.

When the magistrates sent the message that Paul and company could be released, Paul had different ideas! A grave injustice had been done, for Roman citizens were not to be beaten or bound by a magistrate – let alone untried! Heavy penalties were prescribed for those who violated these citizenship privileges. He insisted on an apology and this may have been very important for the freedom of the church he left behind. They were then personally escorted from the prison, with a (no doubt polite) request to leave the city. This they did via one last visit to Lydia's place to encourage the Christians. Even today, Christians have certain rights – such as free speech – and we need to be bold in our day to stand for our legal rights and not be silenced by the those advocating tolerance or political correctness!

*Resources: The Message of Acts by John Stott*