

Sermon Given by

David Green

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Acts 16:11-40 - "Breaking new ground"

Some of the great turning points in world history look rather insignificant when they first happened. So when Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in June 1914 I doubt many would have guessed that was going to unleash the first World War that would leave millions dead. Or when Alexander Fleming had his chance discovery of that mould in his lab, who would have thought that that discovery of penicillin would have such massive implications on medicine around the world? Acts 16 is one of the turning points of history. It's a remarkable chapter because here we read the account of the first Christian converts in Europe. Now just think what massive implications flow from these events in Acts 16 – if the gospel hadn't come to Europe then we wouldn't be Christians, and our history over the last 2000 years would be very different indeed. And if our history is different then the whole world would be different too because the gospel largely went from Europe to the rest of the world in the great missionary movements in the late 19th and early 20th century. Now 2000 years on there is a desperate need for the re evangelisation of Europe, and we have much to learn from this part of Paul's 2nd missionary journey.

But before we look at what Paul did while he was in Philippi I think it would be helpful to take a step back and look at the context. Philippi was a key city in the region of Macedonia, which is Northern Greece today (show powerpoint picture). It was a Roman colony and a thriving commercial centre as it sat at the crossroads between Europe and Asia. Following a vision Paul had earlier in Acts 16 to share the gospel in Europe he visited Philippi along with Silas, Luke and Timothy in about 50 AD. They were only there a few days, but it was long enough to form very close friendships with the Philippians which is evident as we look at Paul's letter to the Philippians over the coming few weeks. While they were there they set up a church in Philippi, but it's interesting to see that Luke, the author of Acts, doesn't give us lots of details about the church, but instead focuses on 3 very different individuals. There was Lydia, a religious business woman, there was a spirit possessed slave, and there was a jailer. In each one they appear to turn around with the good news of Jesus Christ (with the young slave girl it isn't explicitly said, but seems likely, but Lydia and Jailer were definite), and the church was started. And there is much to learn from their conversions, so let's have a look at them in turn.

First of all Lydia, and I've called this section, v13-15, **an open heart and an open home**. On arriving in Philippi as was Paul's custom he sought the Jews first. He'd normally go to a Synagogue, but on this occasion there was no synagogue as far as we can tell, so on the Sabbath he went outside the city gate to a place where the Jews met. And sure enough Paul and Silas found a group of Jewish women there and Lydia. Now Lydia wasn't a Jew, but a Gentile from Thyatira. She was a Gentile who had seen the truth that there was one true God that the Jews worshipped and she joined in that worship. When Paul arrived he may well have been discouraged by the size and location of the gathering, but that doesn't put Paul off. Instead v13 he *"began to speak to the women who had gathered there."* And

the result is that v14 *“The Lord opened her (that’s Lydia’s) heart to respond to Paul’s message.”* That is how people become Christians – it is a supernatural work. For someone to become a Christian God needs to open their heart to the gospel. And I think this is a great source of encouragement as it means it isn’t upto us to open our friends’ hearts to the gospel. Instead, like Paul we should tell people the good news and pray that God would open their heart as God needs to be at work for someone to become a Christian.

And did you notice what happened next? Lydia opened her home in v15. True conversion isn’t just shown in the heart, but it is shown in action aswell. It’s not just that true conversion means she’s hospitable, though she was and it’s a lovely sign, but I think it’s more significant than that. She wanted to take part in the gospel ministry. She wanted to support these gospel workers, so instead of giving money, she gave the equivalent – giving them somewhere to stay instead of them having to pay for lodging, and so her home became Paul’s headquarters in Philippi. It’s the right response to conversion, and I think it’s encouraging the great way All Saints responded to Gift Day several months ago as it allows gospel work to continue here in Little Shelford. So that’s Lydia - an open heart and an open home.

Let’s move on to the next character, the slave girl, and she couldn’t be more different. And I’ve called this section, v16-24, **a great deliverance and great opposition**. Paul is in the place of prayer, the same place where he met Lydia, but this time it’s a very different encounter. The young slave girl had no status, no money and no faith in the one true God. As we see in v16 thought she does have a strange power, to be able to predict the future, which resulted in her owners earning lots of money. She follows Paul shouting, v17, *“These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.”* You’d think Paul would be pretty chuffed with that as it was exactly who he was, and that’s exactly what he’s doing. But that isn’t how Paul responds as several days later he casts the demon from this poor anonymous girl. We aren’t told why, but we can assume that this evangelism by the girl, if we can call it that, will bring discredit to the gospel. Paul didn’t want the gospel message to be associated with a crazed woman as truth and evil don’t mix. The result is instantaneous and the spirit leaves her – there is a great deliverance and we might assume that a girl restored in this way would bring great rejoicing to many. But no, not at all. There is great opposition – her owners were exploiting here, and when they realised, v19, *“that their hope of making money had gone they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place to face the authorities”*. You know the owners are infact enslaved aswell. They are enslaved by materialism, all they can see is money and their bank balance. They are more concerned by that than this girl. Sadly there are many today like that, who’s all consuming concern is to get rich, nothing else matters. Sometimes this leads them to ignore the gospel, and sometimes it leads them to oppose the gospel, especially when the gospel clashes and challenges their desire to make money. For example in the early days of the Salvation Army in the East End as the missionaries went around preaching and people were converted alcohol sales went down dramatically and the alcohol sellers were furious and organised the opposition. In 1889 alone 669 members of the Salvation Army were assaulted – some were killed, many were maimed. That is the opposition by those blinded by materialism. Getting back to Acts 16 the owners decide to go to the authorities, but realise that if they went to the authorities and complained that they couldn’t make the money they used to then the authorities wouldn’t be too interested, so instead they make a different excuse to why these preachers must be stopped. They say v20 *“These men are Jews, and*

are throwing our city into uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practise.” They appealed to racial pride – us Romans, and popular anti-Semitism, these men are Jews. And it works. The crowd join the attack against Paul and Silas and the magistrates, who seem more interested in pleasing the crowd than the truth step in and order Paul and Silas to be stripped and beaten.

I think the application for us is to realise that there will be great opposition to the gospel. People have all sort of idols, such as materialism for the slave owners, and when the gospel confronts them instead of accepting the gospel they are often in opposition to it. and it is the same nowadays. For us in the UK at the moment it isn't usually shown by physical beatings, but rather through friends rejecting or just ignoring the gospel and may result in us being made fun of for being a Christian, and the question is how are we going to respond? Let's have a look at how Paul and Silas respond in v25-40.

I've called this section **a joyful imprisonment and a joyful conversion**. After Paul and Silas had been stripped, beaten, flogged they were put in stocks in the inner cell in jail. It was humiliating, degrading treatment, and they would have been in massive pain. If there was ever a time for a pity party it was now. It must have been tempting to question if God really cared for them by sending them to this city which resulted in an undeserved beating. However, we don't find this attitude in Paul and Silas. Instead v25, *'About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God'*.

Paul and Silas responded with joy, even though they were in a high security prison for no good reason. We are unlikely to be jailed for our beliefs, or atleast at the moment, but the question is how are we going to respond to suffering for the gospel, for example with friends who make fun of the fact that we are Christians, or non-Christian family members who think we're strange for what we believe. The natural reaction is to try and avoid it, maybe by being quiet about what we believe, but instead we should stand firm and rejoice. This is a repeated theme that we'll see again and again over the next few weeks as we look at Paul's letter to the Philippians – for example in Chapter 1 Paul rejoices despite being in jail yet again as it provides an opportunity to preach to the guards who are unlikely to hear the gospel elsewhere. His focus isn't on earthly protection and comfort, but on Christ being preached. I find this a massive challenge as it is so easy to become inward focused and caring about myself when I'm opposed, but the challenge from Paul's example is to focus on the Lord and keep praising God. And I think this is something we need to pray about for other Christians around the world who are going through much more opposition for the gospel. That they would fix their eyes on Jesus and praise Him, because life isn't easy for them. For example I've got a friend called Peter in Pakistan who became a Christian several years ago. His wife was distraught at the news and has demanded a divorce, and it looks likely that he will be killed by her family for his beliefs. People like Peter and many others who have much opposition need our prayers that they would focus on Jesus and rejoice as a result.

Getting back to Acts 16, as Paul and Silas were singing there was violent earthquake and the prison doors flew open and the chains became loose. The jailer was distraught as he realised the consequences of the prisoners escaping. So Paul finds him with his sword drawn as he's about to kill himself and so Paul shouts v28 *"Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"* No wonder the jailer is amazed. He calls for lights, and then trembles before Paul and Silas and cries those great words in v 30 *"What must I do to be saved?"* How would you answer that question? There is no more important question than that one. And Paul and

Silas respond in v31 *“believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.”* Such a simple message - they doesn't say you must go to church for the next few years or that you've really got to sort your life out and be a much better person then God will look at your good deeds and your bad deeds. No, that's not what you to. You will never do enough. Believe in the Lord Jesus, who has done enough for you, who died on the cross that you might be forgiven. And the jailer and all his family believed and the result, v34 is *“he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God.”* The right response to believing in Jesus and his death for us is to be filled with thankfulness and joy as there is nothing in ourselves that we can do to be saved other than believe in Jesus. So as we share the Lord's supper in a few minutes let's remember how amazing it is that we can be saved because of what Jesus did for us and so be full of praise. It's amazing news! The problem is that the longer we are a Christian the easier it is to forget how amazing it is, so isn't it refreshing when we meet people who've just become Christians as it reminds us how joyful we ought to be because of what Jesus has done – it's amazing news!

But before we share in the Lord's supper I just want to finish with a final thought from this passage, that **Christ is for all**. Do you notice the three individuals. They couldn't be any more different. Different genders, 2 woman, 1 man. Different social background, a business woman, a slave and middle ranking official. Different religious backgrounds, a convert to judiasm, a demon possessed girl and a Roman pagan. And different racial backgrounds. Someone from Thyatira, a Greek and a Roman. Christ is for all. Perhaps you're thinking that Christ isn't for one of your friends because they are so different to everyone else, or are so set in their ways. I remember my college son at university, Jack. He was a firm atheist when he arrived at university and so I found it very easy to think that Christ wasn't for him – that he was beyond God's reach, but God is powerful and in the end Jack became a Christian last year! It's wonderful news and a great reminder that Christ is for all, but in order for people to become Christians they need to hear the gospel. So the challenge I want to leave us with tonight is who is going to reach your friend? Your neighbour? Your colleague? Or how about the many other groups in Cambridge who need to hear the gospel – for example the international students, the homeless, the prisoners... Christ is for all, for all types, all races, all ages, all backgrounds and people need to hear about it. Who is going to reach them?

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)