

November 17, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

A Woman, a Slave and a Soldier

Acts 16:1 – 40

This morning we are looking at three stories in chapter sixteen that involve a wealthy woman, a demon-possessed slave girl, and a retired Roman soldier. And Luke could have chosen many other stories I suppose, but he chose these three I think to shine a spotlight as it were on just how the grace of God pursues a person to faith. These three come from widely different backgrounds and cultures; they represent vastly different socio-economic levels; and they come to faith in incredibly different ways. But before we get into these stories, I want to go back just a bit and bring us up to speed with what happened after the council in Jerusalem we looked at in chapter 15.

If you'll recall, two weeks ago we looked at the challenge to the gospel that this controversy over circumcision represented and saw the importance of gospel truth, gospel clarity, gospel community, and gospel cleansing. Gospel truth is vital because what we believe will determine how we behave. The gospel of Jesus Christ is first of all good news, not good advice. It is not a prescription of what you must do, it is a proclamation of what has been done for you. It is the life-changing news that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became man, lived a sinless life under the Law, died for sinners like you and I, and rose again to reconcile us to Himself. And it is crucial that the message of the gospel is clear. It is not a gospel of addition – Jesus plus something. It is a gospel of subtraction. The gospel works to remove burdens, not add stuff on.

The gospel of grace removes ***the burden of the present*** in trying to prove yourself anymore. It removes ***the burden of the past*** – of all the guilt and regret and all the things you've done wrong. It removes ***the burden of the future*** – the fear that you won't live up to the standard. It removes ***the burden of cultural expectations*** – you're saved by grace, not by what others think of you. We saw too the importance of gospel community. The fact that everybody, Jew and Gentile, is saved by grace means that the gospel creates a new community that is neither Jewish nor Gentile. It is totally something other. And finally we looked at the importance of gospel cleansing. The whole issue of circumcision served to point out the fact that by the circumcision of Christ we are cleansed from our past and brought into this new covenant community. Because on the cross, the Son of God went under the knife, He bore the curse of sin, He was cut off from the land of the living, He was cut off from God, and His blood was shed. And because He was cut off we can be brought in – because He was made unclean, we can be clean – because He bore the curse we don't have to. So it doesn't matter what you've done – doesn't matter what you are guilty of – the circumcision of Christ cleanses you utterly.

And so Paul and Barnabas are sent back to Antioch, along with Judas and Silas with this clarification of the gospel to share with the believers, and Luke records that Paul and Barnabas spent awhile there teaching and preaching the word of God. And then we get to verse 36: *And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.* Acts 15:36-41

Paul wants to go and visit the churches that were started on the last trip, and Barnabas is right there with him – but – he wants to take John Mark with them. And Paul says, 'No way are we taking that guy – he deserted us on the last mission'. Actually the word he uses, 'withdrawn from them' is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe those who fall away from the faith – apostatize. In other words, he didn't just leave them – he deserted them, walked away from the faith as it were. And Barnabas, ever the encourager, wanted to give him another chance. But Paul was adamantly opposed. So much so that Luke records that they had a sharp disagreement. And Barnabas takes Mark and goes to Cyprus and Paul takes Silas and goes into Syria and Cilicia.

And since the Bible doesn't tell us outright that Paul was right and Barnabas was wrong or vice-versa, we really can't comment on that. But we do know this – eventually John Mark was restored because when Paul is in prison, probably awaiting execution, he writes to Timothy and says, *Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.* 2 Timothy 4:9-11 O for men like Barnabas! He saw something that Paul missed in this young man and took him under his wing and discipled him and encouraged him until one day, he was one of the faithful men that Paul looked to when things were coming apart. The grace of God will not let us go once He has gotten hold of us – and we shouldn't write people off either.

So Barnabas goes to Cyprus, and Paul and Silas revisit the churches begun on the last trip. While they are in Lystra, they pick up a young man, Timothy, to join them in ministry. And here Paul does something that is hotly debated among Bible scholars – he circumcises Timothy. Timothy is the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father – a mixed marriage. By Jewish law, Timothy was a Jew because of his mother, but because he was uncircumcised he was considered apostate. And because Paul's ministry method in every city was to go into the Jewish synagogues first, Timothy would not have been welcome. So to make his message acceptable – he has him circumcised. Far from demonstrating that Paul placed any saving power in circumcision – it actually worked to emphasize his commitment to become all things to all people, that by all means he might save some.

As Paul and his little band of brothers travels and speaks in the cities of what is now Turkey, he gets a midnight message to go to Macedonia and they eventually get to Philippi. And here is where we'll spend the rest of our time. This is a remarkable section for many reasons. This is the beginning of the Philippian church; the founders are a rich businesswoman, a demon-possessed slave girl and a rugged Roman soldier. We see the proclamation of the gospel bringing not only wholeness and healing and salvation, but is the means for social justice as well. And Paul and Silas demonstrate once again that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution as they are beaten and thrown into prison. But the most remarkable thing we see here is how the gospel is effective in saving the religious, the oppressed, and the indifferent. And we see how the gospel cuts through all that to save.

First of all we see how the gospel saves the religious. And in one sense, this is the hardest group of all. Religious people are almost impervious to the gospel message because they don't think they need anything. When Paul arrives in Philippi, one of the first things he does is look for the synagogue. He always goes there first. But Philippi did not have a synagogue because one of the rules was that you had to have at least ten Jewish men in order to form a synagogue community. Apparently Philippi didn't have the requisite number of Jewish males, but what they did have was a place of prayer. *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.* Acts 16:13 In a city without a synagogue, Jews and God-fearing Gentiles would find a place where they could get together and go through the Jewish service of prayer for the Sabbath.

And Luke, who apparently by now had joined the group, records, *One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.* Acts 16:14 Lydia was a businesswoman who had her own business. She was obviously wealthy because we find out that although she lived in Thyatira, she also had a home there in Philippi; and she was a dealer in purple goods. A dealer in purple goods meant that she was a high end merchandiser since the purple dye that marked her goods was very rare and expensive. And she was a God-fearer – that is, a Gentile who believed in the God of the Jews but had not taken the final step to being converted to Judaism. But she was hungry to know God. The way Luke puts this, we assume this was her regular habit. She believed in God, she read the Bible, and was trying her best to follow Him.

So here was a woman, trying to follow God by following what she could of the Jewish religion, which put a premium on observance of the Law, and along comes this Jewish rabbi who no doubt starts talking about the very fulfillment of that Law in a man called Jesus. And how does she receive it? Luke tells us that the Lord opened her heart. All of a sudden, all the stuff she had been studying came alive. There really is no other way for those who are religious to get it. God has to open their hearts.

If Paul laid out the gospel to Lydia as he did in his letters, no doubt he told her that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that through Him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. He would have told her that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law – He was the righteous One through whom our righteousness comes. She would have realized by then that no one could ever keep the Law and here is Paul telling her that there is One who kept the law perfectly; and furthermore laid down His life in place of hers so that she might live and not die. And through the very Scriptures that she would have been reading, Paul reveals Jesus to her and the Lord opens her heart to receive. And not only her but Luke tells us she was baptized along with her whole household. What the religious person needs is for God to break through and open their hearts. When Luke tells us that she responded to the gospel, he uses a word that means to bring a ship to land – to land the plane so to speak. Lydia had been sailing on the seas of religion, looking for God, knowing that there was a destination – and God opens her heart to Jesus, who is the destination.

Religious people think that they are approaching God by doing stuff – the gospel says the way to God is by accepting the stuff His Son has already done. Religion says, 'I obey – therefore I am accepted'. The gospel says, 'I am accepted – therefore I obey'. Religion says, 'Because I'm good – God owes me'. The gospel says, 'Because of His sacrifice – I owe Him everything'. Religion is your best effort not to sin – but the gospel tells us that we are sinners saved by grace. The gospel is the grace of God saving us in spite of our sin. Religious people will say, 'That sounds like you're just giving people a license to sin.' Well the last time I checked, **people were doing a really great job of sinning without a license!** The gospel doesn't make you religious – the religious need the gospel.

Lydia was religious – but she needed the gospel. Religion is **outside in** – if I really obey the law. If I really live right – then God is obligated to bless me. The gospel is **inside out** – through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God loves me and accepts me – therefore I live to please Him. In religion God is useful. If I obey then God will give me things – He'll answer my prayers, He'll give me a good job, good health and He'll let me into heaven. But the gospel makes God desirable. You don't obey Him to get things – you obey because you want to please Him. You've suddenly seen how beautiful He is – how wonderful He is – He's an end in Himself. So Lydia, the religious woman, was won to Christ by God opening her heart to see how beautiful He is.

The next thing we see is **how the gospel saves the oppressed**. On their way to church, Luke tells us that Paul and Silas encounter a demon-possessed slave girl who kept following them day after day, yelling out, *"These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."* And one day Paul had had enough and commanded the spirit to come out. Just a side note – it is never a good thing when the devil offers unsolicited testimonials about you even if it is the truth. This girl was possessed by the spirit of Python which was associated with the Greek god Apollos who was worshiped as the Pythian god at the oracle of Delphi which purported to tell the future. And she was used by her owners for profit by supposedly telling people's fortunes. But the fact that the gospel was being attested to by Satan did not sit well with Paul so he put an end to it.

The story of this slave girl is in such contrast to the story of Lydia that we have to assume that Luke purposely set it here. Lydia was wealthy and independent. This slave girl had nothing that her owners did not provide – she was completely powerless and shamefully exploited. Lydia was moral and spiritual and went to church. This girl was not just irreligious – she was demon-possessed. Lydia was a seeker – this girl was in league with the greatest opposition to the gospel. On all levels, they were radically different people and cases. But where the religious woman was won to Christ by the Lord opening her heart to understand the Scriptures, this slave girl was liberated from oppression by a Holy Spirit power encounter. What people who are oppressed or possessed by evil spirits, or enslaved by evil men, or chained to sin by addictions – what they need is a transforming power encounter by the Holy Spirit to break through. Although we are not told that this girl received the gospel, it would have been uncharacteristic of Paul to free this woman and then just let her go her way.

The really important thing to note here is that this slave girl was not only possessed by an evil spirit – she was oppressed socially because she was owned and exploited by evil men. She not only has demonic masters, she has human masters. She was spiritually bound by demons, but she is also socially bound by her owners. And when she was liberated by the gospel, she is liberated across the board. Not just personally, internally, spiritually but the whole social order was changed. She could no longer be exploited by these greedy men – she didn't fit that old order anymore.

The single most effective power for the positive transformation of culture and society is the gospel. When this girl was liberated by the gospel, the old social order in the city was disrupted. That's why the reaction of her owners and the rest of the city was so violent. That's why Paul and Silas, Roman citizens, were thrown into jail without so much as a hearing or a trial or any investigation into the charges. The gospel comes in and exposes the evil in a culture and things change. The whole concept of universal human rights and equality comes exclusively from the biblical idea that all people are created in the image of God. It doesn't come from Buddhism or Islam or Confucianism or Hinduism – it is a gospel concept. In every place the gospel has penetrated, it has worked to improve the lives of individuals, promoted social justice, and broken the back of evil practices.

In the world in which Paul and Silas lived, infanticide was not only legal, it was applauded. Killing a Roman was murder, but it was commonly held in Rome that killing one's own children could be an act of beauty. Through the gospel, it was the early Christian church that ultimately brought an end to infanticide in that society. When the Romans were throwing their unwanted babies into the river Tiber, it was the Christians who were out in little boats trying to save them. Abortion in that day was common, but a Christian document called the Didache, from the late first century, makes it clear that Christians preached against abortion.

Everywhere the gospel has penetrated the status of women has invariably risen. In the Greco-Roman world, a wife was considered the property of her husband. Her status was somewhere between a free man and a slave. It was extremely common in this society to throw out new female infants to die from exposure, because of the low status of women in society. The gospel brought an end to that. Christianity was the first religion to not force widows to marry. They were supported financially and honored within the community so that they were not pressured to remarry if they didn't want to. Pagan widows lost all control of their husband's estate when they remarried but the church allowed widows to maintain their husband's estate.

Christians were also the first people in history to oppose slavery systematically. Early Christians purchased slaves in the markets simply to set them free. In our own time, it was the impact of the gospel on the heart of William Wilberforce that moved him to lead the fight in England to end the international slave trade. The gospel worked to elevate the roles of those oppressed in society – by accepting women and slaves as full members of the church and to equally participate in worship and the community and afforded them contract and property rights. **The gospel of Jesus Christ does not just save and transform individuals – it radically changes society and culture.**

Finally we see **how the gospel saves the indifferent.** This is the story of the jailer. Finally we get to the man – the gospel is powerful to save men too. He is almost certainly a retired Roman soldier – that's who got the civil service jobs in this era. And the thing about the jailer is that unlike Lydia, he wasn't looking for answers. All he wanted was to know that his prisoners were in the prison and not breaking out. He was just a civil servant – going about his job – apparently unconcerned about the state of his soul. And unlike the slave girl, this guy wasn't oppressed – he probably griped about his job and taxes and the politicians like everybody else – but he didn't need a power encounter. If you would have asked him, he probably would have said he was doing okay. He wasn't a success like Lydia, nor was he a mess like the slave girl. He was indifferent to the gospel.

Lydia needed a rational explanation of the gospel; the slave girl needed a power encounter of the gospel; this guy needs an earthquake. You don't start off by telling the gospel to the indifferent – you start off by showing him the gospel. So what did he see? He saw two things. First of all he gets these two guys that have been beaten within an inch of their lives with rods. They would have been bloody and bruised, maybe even carried into the jail, and he puts them in these torture devices and left there. Later in the story we see where he binds up their wounds, which is what he should have done to begin with. But he shows no concern for them, totally indifferent to them. ***But what he sees that absolutely changes him is their attitude toward suffering. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them,*** Acts 16:25 They are praying and praising God in the midst of their suffering. They had a joy that was rooted in something so deep that you could take their money away, take their freedom away, take their comfort away, anticipating perhaps even taking their lives away – and the joy was still there. They rested on something so solid and unchanging that you could take everything away and the joy was still there.

And then an earthquake happens and all the doors that kept the prisoners in were flung wide open. *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. Acts 16:26-27* In that time, if a jailer lost his prisoners – his life was over. He would have been executed. And he comes and sees that the doors are open and his prisoners have probably all escaped and he gets out his sword to kill himself, and avoid the humiliation of the thing – and everybody's still there! The prisoners should have been gone – especially Paul and Silas because they were in there unjustly to begin with. But everybody's there. *But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."* Acts 16:28

Paul and Silas knew that they could have just walked out, but they knew that they would be free at the cost of the jailer's life. And they knew that if just one of the prisoners got free the jailer would die. But somehow Paul and Silas kept them in there – they repaid evil with good – injustice with mercy. And the jailer had never seen anything like that. But at the center of who Paul and Silas were was the message of the gospel. It was the pattern of a life that repaid the ultimate evil with the ultimate good. A life that looked the ultimate injustice in the face and extended the ultimate mercy. It was a life that looked to the example of Jesus on the cross, praying for the people who were killing Him. **The reason they wouldn't get their freedom at the expense of the jailer's life was that they had already gotten their freedom at the expense of Jesus' life.** And when the jailer saw this, his indifference was broken. He falls to his knees and says, 'You have something I don't have – what is it?' *Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*" Acts 16:30 He saw something in Paul and Silas that gave them a way to handle suffering and abuse and injustice in way he never could. A way that conquered injustice, conquered suffering, conquered abuse, conquered earthquakes. There was a power working in their lives that the jailer finally saw he needed in his own. All at once his indifferent life had been exposed to the very real need that lay at the bottom.

A few years ago there was a terrible earthquake in Chengdu, China where two of my daughters and granddaughters and my son-in-law lived. Thousands of people died and even though Chengdu was not the epicenter, tall buildings were swaying and glass was shattering and everyone was panicking. No one knew what to do – there was chaos in the streets. Even after the initial shock, there were days of aftershocks that had everyone nervous and worried and fearful. But during that time, people began noticing how the Christians they knew among them were handling the shock and stress. They noticed an incomprehensible peace and joy in these people. One young Chinese man, Brian, a friend of my kids and many of the other missionaries in Chengdu, noticed this as well. And Brian said later that it was watching how these people walked through this thing that brought him to Christ. They had something he didn't – and he wanted to have that kind of peace, that kind of joy, that kind of steadiness that earthquakes couldn't touch.

Very quickly, three conclusions here. First of all **the gospel is for everyone.** There is no religious type. Very often you'll hear someone say something like, 'I'm just not the religious type'. But what Luke is showing us is that there is no type that is more predisposed to the gospel than another. We have a successful person, a messed up person, and an okay person. We have people with very different socio-economic backgrounds – and we even have different ethnic backgrounds. Lydia was probably middle-eastern – the jailer was probably a Roman – the slave girl could have been from anywhere, being a slave. And Christianity is the only religion that has never been dominated by one geographic region. That is not true of any other religion. In fact the epicenter of growth for Christianity has moved around the world throughout the years. It started in the middle east and moved through Europe and North America and now the fastest growing demographic is in Asia and South America and Africa.

That's because there's no type of person that the gospel attracts – its for everyone. It's not just for the rich, it's not just for the poor, it's not just for the Republicans; it's not just for the wimps; it's not just for the ambitious; it's not just for the moral types; it's not just for the immoral types. So that means that if anyone here has the thought, 'Well I'm just not the gospel type', you may not relieve yourself of the responsibility of responding to the gospel. And if you have responded to the gospel and you look around you to anyone else in your family or friends or your neighborhood and say, 'Well that kind of person is a lost cause – they're not the type'. Oh, and you are? Of course you're a wonderful example of the right type – so glad you're with us. If you lose hope for anybody, if you show contempt for anyone – you don't really know you're a sinner saved by grace. The gospel is for everybody.

Secondly, there is no greater force for the transformation of society in the earth. **The gospel transforms culture.** Look at the impact on that city where one little slave girl is liberated. There was an ancient morning prayer that Jewish men prayed every morning – and Paul would have prayed this prayer as well. They would get up every morning and pray: 'God I thank you that you made me a man and not a woman, or a slave or a Gentile.' And strangely enough, the first three members of the Philippian church are a woman, a slave and a Gentile. If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you've probably got several friends or acquaintances or people in your circle with whom, outside of the gospel you wouldn't have anything to do. There are people you now consider your brother or sister that apart from Christ you would never have mingled and might even have despised. If your identity is based on being liberal and progressive – you don't want to know conservatives. If your identity is based on your ethnic or social or economic background – you don't want to know people from other groups. But if your identity is based on Christ – you don't disdain anybody. There is no greater force for the transformation of society in the earth than the gospel.

Finally, there is no one-size-fits-all gospel presentation. **The gospel is specific to every case.** The gospel is rational enough for the religious; it's powerful enough for the oppressed; and it's effective enough for the indifferent. Jesus doesn't present Himself the same to everyone. To Lydia He comes as enlightenment -she sees the beauty of the gospel. To the slave girl He comes as power to liberate – she feels the strength of the gospel; to the jailer Jesus comes as an earthquake to shake him out of his indifference – he experiences the wonder and the mystery of a life that cannot be shaken. And Jesus knows each one of you – He knows what you need; and He comes to meet you right where you are – where your deepest need is found.

Wherever you are in the spectrum this morning – whether you're a religious person, trying to reach God on your own – trying to do stuff to make yourself acceptable to Him; or you're one of the oppressed – driven by demons you can't control; or you're merely indifferent to God – you're a pretty good person, satisfied with your life – wherever you are – Jesus comes and says, 'My death was enough for you – you don't have to do stuff to get in – My blood is sufficient to cleanse the mess you made of your life – My resurrection is the power of God to free you and to shake you out of your complacency and give you life. Let God open your heart to see the beauty of His Son – experience the power of God to liberate you from every bondage – respond to the shaking going on in your life as the jailer did and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ – and you will be saved.

Our gracious God and Father,

Thank you for the gospel that tells us the great work of salvation has been accomplished and all we need to do is receive it. Forgive us for trying to work our way to You and grant us rest in the finished work of Christ. Thank You for the power of God through the gospel that is able to break every chain of sin that binds, every foe that oppresses, every addiction that possesses. Show us our ruined self and the help there is in Jesus. Shake us from our indifference to You and come and grant repentance in our souls. Let our heart be won by the beauty of our Savior – let us feel His power to save – let us see His arms outstretched – let us hear His heartbeat of love – and let us commit our souls to Him without reserve that we would be those who delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.