

## Open Hearts & Open Doors **Acts 16:6-40**

Last summer, our family was given the once in a lifetime opportunity of going on a trip to Greece with some extended family, and we were humbled and grateful to get to go. In addition to the wonder and beauty of the entire experience, it was fascinating to see how much Greece is saturated with symbols of Christianity – symbols of Jesus. From the cross on the **Mars Hill rock** in Athens (which we'll hear more about next week), to **tiny chapels** hidden among the ancient streets, to the spectacular **blue dome cathedrals** in Santorini, to the many **frescos, paintings, and relics** in Orthodox churches. And it all had me thinking that none of those symbols would be there if it wasn't for today's story in Acts!

As we continue our journey together through the book of Acts, today we're picking things up in Acts 16, looking at what's referred to as the Apostle Paul's *second missionary journey* – his journey to Greece. And this morning, we've already heard a summarized version of this story in our kids' experience, which gives us a great head start. But to really lean into what Jesus might want to say to us through this story today, I now want to go back through the story, section by section, to see and experience the power of the good news of Jesus coming to Greece 2,000 years ago, which I believe is good news for us today as well. And to do that, since today's story is a long passage of text, rather than put all the verses on the screen, I want to just read the story for us as we go. Now obviously, if you have a Bible or Bible app, you're welcome to turn to Acts 16 to follow along as we dive in starting in verse 6.

### **Acts 16:6-10.**

So, this is the travel context of Paul's second missionary journey and the geographical framework where our story takes us today. And as Paul and his companions had travelled through Asia minor – which is now modern-day Turkey – it says the Spirit “kept” them from and “would not allow” them to preach the good news of Jesus there. Now, we don't get the

details of what exactly this meant. Some think it refers to a vision of some kind, or a prophetic word that was spoken, or a challenging circumstance or obstacle. Or some commentators wonder if Paul was dealing with an illness at this time and that this might be how he was introduced to Luke – the author of Acts – who was a physician by trade. But regardless of the circumstances, what's clear is that these Christian missionaries were seeking to live fully in tune with the risen Spirit of Jesus, all as a continuation of *“all Jesus began to do and teach”* just as Luke described in the very first chapter of Acts. And in that spirit, it says that one night Paul had a vision of a man in Macedonia – northeastern Greece – who begged him to come to Macedonia. So Paul and companions said, “Let’s go!”

Now one more note at this point in the story of Acts so far... Did you notice the “we” in verse 10 where it says, *“we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia”*? This is the first “we” in all of Acts where suddenly the author, Luke, writes himself into the story. Again, we don’t know exactly when and how Luke officially joined the Jesus movement, but this is the first place where we see him not just talking about what Jesus was doing, but living, participating in, and giving his life to what Jesus was doing through the movement of the church!

Let’s continue with **Acts 16:11-12**.

In response to this vision to come to Macedonia – to bring the good news of Jesus to Greece – Paul and his companions eventually arrive in a city called **Philippi**. I’ve got a couple of maps to help illustrate where this is... Now, despite being over **1,000 kilometers away from Rome**, Philippi was a very important city in the Roman empire because it had been established as a Roman colony of esteemed citizens and military veterans. It was an outpost of the customs and culture of Rome in the far stretches of the Roman Empire. *“Rome away from Rome”* you might have called it. And so, it became a significant stop on the missionary journey for Paul and his friends as they kept following Jesus’s call to share the gospel with all

the nations. And yes, this Philippi is the city to which the Apostle Paul eventually wrote his *Letter to the Philippians* which we studied together as a church a couple years ago.

So, let's see what happened in Philippi as the story continues in **Acts 16:13-15**.

Now, so far, on Paul's missionary journeys, he always began sharing about Jesus by going to the local Jewish synagogue first. However, a synagogue required a minimum of 10 Jewish men to be established. But Philippi didn't have enough Jewish men for a synagogue. So it says, they went down to a river on the Sabbath where they thought people might gather for prayer. In cities or rural areas without synagogues, those who longed to worship God or were faithful to Judaism would often worship and pray near a river in order to use the water for purification ceremonies, and this is exactly what Paul and his friends discovered in Philippi. And specifically, it says that they met some *women* and began to speak with them. This worshipping community in Philippi was a community of *women*. And it's extremely unique and significant that Luke would highlight this, setting the stage for the grand opening of the church in Philippi all because of the faithful *women* who lived there.

As we've heard this morning, it says that one of the women was named Lydia from Thyatira – a Greek city in a Roman province called *Lydia*. So you could say, they met *Lydia* from *Lydia*! And it says Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth, which was a sign that Lydia was wealthy and a successful business woman, likely independent and established as the provider of her household. But it also says that Lydia was a worshiper of God, and that the Lord *opened her heart* to the message of Jesus, and immediately she and the members of her household were baptized – as the first Jesus follower in Greece!

Now as a quick aside on this story: if you've ever wondered whether baptism is for you, cause you've been putting your trust in Jesus and are growing in following him, but you've assumed baptism is something for later in the "spiritual journey" once you've got everything figured out, Lydia from Lydia might say, "*What better time than now?!*"

And then, at the end of this episode in the story, it says, once Lydia came to believe in Jesus, she invited – and even persuaded – Paul and all his companions to stay at her house throughout their time in Philippi, having opened her heart to Jesus, she opened her home and her wallet to what Jesus was doing, setting the stage for the grand opening of the freedom and salvation of Jesus to all of Greece!

Now, let's see where that freedom went next... In **Acts 16:16-18**.

While continuing to stay at Lydia's and spend time in Philippi, one day on the way to prayer, Paul encountered a young girl with a strange spirit who seemed capable of predicting the future and fortune-telling. Now whether this was a misguided prophetic gift or an expression of an evil spirit, either way, the *girl's life and spirit* had been distorted and taken captive by men who had enslaved her and taken advantage of her for their own financial gain.

However, something in her spirit couldn't help but recognize Paul and his companions for who they were: shouting, "*These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.*" As though her true spirit couldn't help but recognize and long for the Spirit of Jesus. And yet, as a victim of human trafficking, in her enslavement, she wasn't free to experience Jesus for herself. That is, until Paul became so exasperated by her shouting that he commanded the evil spirit to come out of her, and immediately, she was free!

From Lydia opening her heart to Jesus and experiencing the freedom of sharing what he was doing with others, now this young slave girl was no longer a slave, as the freedom of Jesus had changed her life and was spreading through Philippi!

But not everyone appreciated this newfound faith and freedom that Paul and company were spreading... Picking things up in **Acts 16:19-23**.

As Philippi was being opened to the good news of freedom and salvation in Jesus, some began to try to close the door on the freedom Jesus was bringing. It says, the owners of the slave girl quickly realized that their scheme of making money off the girl's spirit –

ultimately, preying on people's anxious dependence on superstition and good fortune – their hearts were immediately filled with rage. And so, they brought Paul and his companion, Silas, before the city officials, claiming charges of advocating customs and practices against Rome – a significant no-no in the prestigious "*Rome away from Rome*" colony of Philippi. And although the charges were embellished, especially given the religious privileges the Jewish community were afforded throughout the empire, the crowd quickly joined in the accusations and so the city officials abruptly had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into prison.

And this is where the story of freedom in Philippi reaches its apex... In **Acts 16:24-34**.

From Lydia, to the slave girl, now the local jailer becomes the third Philippian citizen to take the stage during Paul and Silas's missionary journey to Philippi. This jailer was likely of mid-to-low rank in the Roman military, performing the overnight security duty of the local jail, living in a home attached to the jail. He had been given fierce instructions to watch these trouble-makers carefully and not let them escape, a responsibility he knew had deadly consequences should he fail, all in the midst of what already felt like a dead-end job. So, he put Paul and Silas in the inner most cell and fastened their feet with stocks and chains.

Then it says, that around midnight, with their backs blooded from their beating and their feet clamped in chains, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God in a way that caught every other prisoner's attention – an incomprehensible demonstration of their faith and freedom in Jesus that hadn't changed even if they were locked in chains! **A freedom that Paul would write about a decade later from another prison cell in his eventual *Letter to the Philippians*.**

Then, all of a sudden, in the midst of their prayers and songs, there was a violent earthquake that shook the foundations of the prison. Now, historians and commentators say that earthquakes were not uncommon in this area, so whether we interpret this as an act of

God or a timely coincidence of nature, it was an earthquake violent enough to open the prison doors and break the chains from its walls.

Having been sleeping through his night shift, as the jailer awoke during the earthquake, he saw that the prison doors were opened, and in his half-awake anxiety assumed all the prisoners had escaped, creating such panic that he thought it'd be better to quickly take his life than take the chances of facing any consequences in the morning. Thankfully though, Paul caught his attention and let him know that all of them were still there. Some way and somehow, not having felt the need or impulse to immediately flee – perhaps inspired by the inner freedom that Paul and Silas had opened all of the prisoners' hearts to, even in the midst of the imprisonment of their circumstances.

As his panic subsided, the jailer asked Paul and Silas, "*What must I do to be saved?*" – the most existential and eternal question in the human condition. Perhaps the jailer had heard of the accusations against these men, that it had something to do with the slave girl saying they had come to tell of the way to be saved. Or maybe it was their praying and singing and no-need-to-escape sense of freedom that he now desperately wanted to get in on. So Paul and Silas told him about Jesus, and like Lydia, *immediately* he and his whole household were baptized – that very night! And he took Paul and Silas into his home, showing them hospitality by caring for their wounds, giving them something to eat, and sharing together in the opening of the door to the freedom and faith that Jesus had brought to Philippi!

And here's how today's story concludes... **Acts 16:35-40.**

Although it sounded like good news that Paul and Silas were told they could leave in the morning, it was probably the city officials' plan from the beginning. Having not investigated any charges against them, to calm the rioting mob and send a threatening message, the beating and night in jail were just a scare tactic. But Paul pushes back to the quiet release by claiming his and Silas' Roman citizenship, a point he didn't get to raise among the mob the

day before. And interestingly, most commentators would say, Paul's request was less about making a public statement on his own behalf and more about standing up publicly for the protection of the grand opening of the new Jesus-community in Philippi. Having been willing to suffer for bringing them the gospel, he wanted to ensure they wouldn't face the same suffering in case it would threaten to close the door of freedom and faith in Philippi.

And then the story concludes with Paul and Silas going back to Lydia's, not only the first convert but first church host in all of Greece – perhaps, along with the slave girl and jailer as well – all together, for one more party and church service before continuing on their way! And that's the story of the good news of Jesus spreading to Greece!

So then the question for us is, what can we take away from Paul's second missionary journey and the story of freedom and faith in Jesus arriving on the shores of Greece in Philippi, some 2,000 years later?

Well, I wonder if some of us can relate to Lydia. That our lives are fairly put together and independent. That we have what we need, and that includes an element of faith and worship that adds meaning to our lives. But at the same time, we wouldn't say that our hearts are always *open*. If we're honest with ourselves, we don't know Jesus all that well, personally, in our heart of hearts. And we'd be hard-pressed to say that Jesus is transforming our lives or changing how we use what we have to share his life with others. And if that's you, how might Jesus want to open your heart to a greater freedom today? A freedom that goes beyond financial security or independence? And as Jesus opens and enters your heart more fully, how might Jesus be inviting you to use – both your home and your money – to love and serve others with the free-flowing hospitality and generosity of Lydia?

Or maybe, at some level, you feel like the girl that was enslaved. That someone or something in your life has you feeling trapped. Perhaps you need to reach out for support or access therapy in the midst of an unhealthy or overbearing relationship. Or maybe you're

wrestling with your mental health and need to receive from Jesus the wholistic care he wants to provide – through community, counselling, medication, and spiritual practices. Or maybe, you're wracked with anxiety about your future, making it impossible to feel free in the present, and you need to pray for a peace that passes understanding. If that's you, I believe Jesus wants to bring freedom to your life when we persistently pursue him as the one who can save.

Or maybe, you relate to the jailer – or those who were in prison alongside Paul and Silas. Caught in a dead-end job or what feels like dead-end circumstances, with no hope for escape. And how might Jesus want to open the doors of your heart to experience a freedom and peace in him, even in the midst of your circumstances? To experience the freedom of singing and praying with joy even when our circumstances feel like a prison?

This is the freedom that Jesus brought to Greece, 2,000 years ago, through Paul's second missionary journey to Philippi, and this is the freedom Jesus still brings and wants to bring to our lives today. And whether this is the first time you've heard of this freedom or are putting your trust in Jesus, or perhaps you've been on the journey of faith for decades – opening your heart and wanting to grow in peace and contentment... A decade after sharing the good news of faith and freedom with Lydia, the slave girl, and the jailer in Philippi, Paul wrote this in a letter to them, and their growing church and growing faith:

***I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.***

***Philippians 1:3-6***

Friends, Jesus is in the business of bringing freedom when we open our hearts and lives to him. And whether it's for the first time today or as a fresh time in your journey, like what Jesus began in Philippi, and is up to in our lives, he promises to continue until completion for all eternity! So may we open our hearts to him today and receive the open doors of freedom of the good news and saving work of Jesus! Let's pray together...