Preparing to Teach Start of 2nd Missionary Journey (end of Acts 15-16)

Those of you who had to teach Acts 15 may have felt cheated when I didn’t cover the transitional verses at the end of Acts 15. I’m sorry, but I felt there were too many issues that had direct bearing on Acts 16 and beyond. So, I will attempt to address some of those issues, now.

First, I think we should get over the popular notion that Paul was a “fire and forget” evangelist. Some evangelists today act like spiritual obstetricians. They cultivate non-believers until they make a public decision for Christ and, perhaps, follow in baptism, but then they ignore long-term discipleship. In these transitional verses, we see Paul and Barnabas partnering with other believers in teaching at Antioch (Acts 15:35) and then, in Acts 15:36, we see Paul’s intent to go back to the churches that he and Barnabas had started and follow-through with encouragement, teaching, and direction.

**35) So, Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and evangelizing the word of the Lord along with many others. 36) But after some days, Paul said to Barnabas, Let’s turn back and look after the brothers [and sisters] according to all the cities in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord. “How do they have it?” [fig. “How are they doing?”] [PJT]**

The two verbs where Paul suggests the agenda to Barnabas are έπιστρέϕαντες [eh-pihs-TREH-fahn-tehs] meaning to go back over the same ground and ἐπισκεψώμεθα [eh-pihs-kehp-SOH-meh-thah] meaning to look over, oversee, or care for. You may notice that second verb sounds like “episcopos” from which we get the modern noun, Episcopalian. With the two verbs so close together, both starting with the same sounds, and both having the idea of going over or watching over, you get the idea that the missionaries intended to be very methodical and consistent in developing these new churches. You especially get that idea when the text has the idea of hitting every city as I translated it or going “city-by-city” as an older commentator explained the grammar [Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume III: The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 240.].

There’s no idea of the spiritual obstetrician here. That verb for watching over meant that Paul knew, as we should know, that the work isn’t done when the non-believer is converted. Indeed, the work has just started. As noted here, Paul wanted to see how they were doing: “That is, whether they continued steadfast in the faith received, and grow and profit in godliness.” [Du Veill, Carolus Maria, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. Haddon, 1851), p. 270.]

Yet, even with the best of intentions, things don’t always go smoothly. I find myself in agreement with those who suggest that Paul and Barnabas were ministering in Antioch largely through the period when weather and high winds made travel next to impossible. Then, Spring “with the consequent opening up of travel routes, stirred Paul to fresh activity.” [Marshall, I. Howard, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983 reprint), p. 257.]

**37) But Barnabas wanted to take along with them John who is called Mark. 38) But Paul considered it improper to take the one who abandoned them from Pamphylia and hadn’t gone with them to the work. [PJT]**

Barnabas, ever the encourager, wanted to bring his cousin (Colossians 4:10) John Mark along as a maturing opportunity. “It appears that Barnabas discerned promising qualities in his young cousin which could be developed under his care rather than under Paul’s. It would do Mark good to spend more time in the company of such a ’son of encouragement,’ …” [Bruce, F. F., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974—original 1954), p. 319.].

Paul, who could be very sharp in identifying potential problems, thought it was more than questionable to bring along someone who didn’t follow-through in the first place on a trip designed to provide follow-through in the established churches. Luke doesn’t really designate whether Barnabas or Paul is the ultimate cause of the division here. Both thought they were correct. Indeed, both may have been in the light of what Paul eventually says in Philemon 23 and 2 Timothy 4:11.

But do you notice what is overtly missing from this account? Luke neither specifically cites the Holy Spirit as leading in either Paul’s plan or Barnabas’ plan. It may be that Luke doesn’t want the Holy Spirit associated with the quarrel [Marshall, p. 257.]. I think that’s probably the best answer, although when Paul recruits Silas, they do get the blessing of the church and, in Acts 16, we see where the Holy Spirit changes their itinerary.

Of course, more than one effort for God has been divided over the question of leadership. Notice the word that is used in verse 39--παροξυσμὸς [pah-ruhx-suhs-MOHS]. If you listen carefully, you can hear the root of the English word, paroxysm, which can infer irritation or exasperation as well as the more severe convulsion, earthquake, or quarrel [Brown, Lesley (ed.), *The New Shorter Oxford English* ***Dictionary: Volume 2: N-Z* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 2106.].**

**39) So, a dissension occurred such that they severed themselves from each other, Barnabas taking Mark and sailing out for Cyprus, 40) Paul chose for himself, Silas, and left, entrusted [handed over] to the grace of the Lord from the brethren. 41) So, he went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches. [PJT]**

Now, what we have here is a crisis which originated from different visions. Barnabas was concerned with his home country and Paul wanted to make sure he fortified what he had helped to establish. When I was a young pastor, my denomination had a Home Mission Board that dealt with reaching those in the U.S. and Canada and a Foreign Mission Board to reach the rest of the world. It appears that Barnabas was the Home Mission or Domestic Missions Board and Paul was the Foreign or International Missions Board.

And many commentators point out how, despite the human argument presented here, the Holy Spirit used the division to create two mission thrusts instead of just one. “Even dissension among the church’s leaders only serves to double the church’s mission work. Almost anything, even squabbles within the church can be transformed by the Spirit into a means whereby ‘the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily’ (v. 5).” [Willimon, William H., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts* [Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), pp. 135.] Others have suggested: “It was a pity that the present dispute was allowed to generate such mutual provocation, but in the providence of God it was overruled for good, for in the upshot there were two missionary expeditions this time instead of one.” [Bruce, p. 319.] We might even be able to argue that the break-up needed to occur so that Paul could recruit Silas, a fellow Roman citizen (Acts 16:21), so that Paul and his companion would be on equal footing when persecution arose [Marshall, p. 258].

I have mixed feelings about those observations. Yes, even church splits and dissension CAN be transformed by the Holy Spirit to accomplish something greater, BUT we shouldn’t presume on it. I served as a youth and music minister for a small church in California that had a couple in its membership who, without blinking an eye, declared that God had called them to split churches as a missionary enterprise. And they could point to the results of their work all over Southern California.

But there was very little of God’s glory to this because you didn’t have multiple strong churches as a result. Instead, you had lots of little struggling and indebted congregations. Indeed, few of them (including the one where I served) have survived to the present day. Yes, multiple efforts CAN have a multiplier effect that is more effective than one large effort but that doesn’t mean that God blesses every effort.

The good news is that we know Paul’s journey was effective. It was the focus of Luke’s account, probably because we’ll see a hint of Luke getting on board in Acts 16. Even better news is that Barnabas’ missionary journey must have had some success considering what Paul later says about John Mark in Philemon and 2 Timothy. But dissension leaves scars. But we don’t hear about Barnabas in Acts again. I just want to say that dissension in the church rarely accomplishes the positive except when God picks up the pieces by His grace. But we shouldn’t count on it.

I also find it sad that the church at Antioch gives Paul and Silas an official send-off, but we don’t have that recorded for Barnabas and Mark. Is that because of Luke’s focus on Paul’s trip or is that because Barnabas was so angry at Paul that he left abruptly? I can just hear him saying, “How dare Paul question my judgment after all I did for him!” That’s the way Pastor Johnny would probably do it unless the Holy Spirit grabbed hold of me and changed my direction. There are some fellow pastors in my former denomination that I keep thinking I’ve forgiven and then, WHAM, something comes up and angry, hateful feelings come up that I have to confess and let God deal with.

Finally, before we fully complete the transition to Acts 16, let me observe that: “Luke refers to churches in Syria and Cilicia, but he does not state when and how they were established. Probably, Paul started them during his ten-year stay in Cilicia after his conversion (9:30; Galatians 1:21).” [Arrington, French L., *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 160, n. 41.] The truth is, we don’t know who started these churches or when they were started, but Paul was aware of them and Paul was concerned about them.

What we do know is that this was not an easy trip. Here is a map showing what is now Southern Turkiye and the city of Tarsus and the Cilician Gates, that steep and difficult path through the mountains pictured on your right. Alexander marched an army through there, as did Hadrian, but it wasn’t an easy trip.

But we arrive on firmer ground when we get to Acts 16. 1) Then, he came to Derbe and Lystra, and check it out, a disciple was there named Timothy, son of a Jewish woman who believed, but a Greek father. 2) The brothers from Lystra and Iconium witnessed positively toward him. [PJT]

Notice that this trip is taking a reverse order to the first missionary journey. And we’ll notice in the way Paul deals with Timothy that he is well aware of the hostile Jews looking for any excuse to accuse him and his companions. It’s also interesting to note that verse 1 doesn’t say that THEY cam to Derbe and Lystra, but that Paul came there. There are two possible reasons for that. One is that Luke wants Paul to overshadow everyone. “In Acts, Timothy, like all of Paul’s fellow workers, stands completely in Paul’s shadow. In reality, he carried out important assignments independently.” [Conzelmann, Hans, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible: Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 125.] I think the emphasis on Paul here is because Paul had been there before and Silas hadn’t. Paul is the one following through, and it is very likely that Timothy is part of that follow-through.

It's very clear that Paul approves of the good report, the character witnesses that he hears from the church members in both Lystra and Iconium, the next city up the road. So, Paul sees an opportunity to develop another missionary.

**3) THIS ONE [Timothy], Paul wanted to go with him, and took him [and] circumcised him because of the Jews that were in those places because they all knew that his father was Greek. [PJT]**

Isn’t it interesting that Paul was confident about Timothy as opposed to concerned about John Mark? Yet, both of them became vital to the growth of the church in the future. Still, Paul had his reservations about Mark from personal experience and Paul, whether he had been God’s instrument in converting Timothy or not, had the testimony from at least two different churches of what a faithful witness Timothy had been. This needs to be a principle in choosing church leadership. We need to choose people who have a good reputation, who are demonstrating a desire to grow and service even before we entrust them with important jobs. In fact, Paul insists that Timothy follow this rule himself in 1 Timothy 3:7.

There is also an irony here. Paul and Silas have been carrying this letter that says it isn’t necessary for Christians to be circumcised, yet Paul insists on Timothy’s circumcision. But Timothy wasn’t circumcised in order to effect any salvation [Campbell, Constantine R. and Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the New Testament as Christian Scripture: A Literary, Canonical, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), p. 167.], but because it was well-known that his father was a Greek.

Yes, technically, if one’s mother was Jewish, that made you Jewish. But verse 3 makes it clear that Timothy’s father was well-known as a non-Jew. “Was” is the operative word because the tense makes it appear that the father was already dead [Marshall, p. 259; Robertson, p. 244.]. Paul already knew that the Jews would seize upon every opportunity to accuse, so he had Timothy circumcised as an accommodation to Jewish prejudice. “By this the apostle put into practice the principle of 1 Corinthians 9:19: …” [Arrington, p. 161.]. That verse and the one after it reads: “**19**Although I’m free from all people, I make myself a slave to all people, to recruit more of them. **20**I act like a Jew to the Jews, so I can recruit Jews. I act like I’m under the Law to those under the Law, so I can recruit those who are under the Law (though I myself am not under the Law).” [CEB]

Paul’s general principle, and Timothy followed through on it, was to meet the needs and concerns of others in order to have influence with them. Indeed, even though I said it was ironic that Timothy underwent circumcision despite the Jerusalem Council’s decision that they were carrying in written form, I think another reason for Timothy undergoing circumcision was so that no one could say he was carrying this written decision out of a personal conflict of interest. He had himself undergone what the decision said new Christians could avoid.

4) So, as they were traveling through the cities, they entrusted to them for guarding [keeping] the dogma decided by the apostles and elders of Jerusalem. 5) Therefore, the churches were strengthened in faith and increased in numbers per day. [PJT]

I know a lot of English translations make this “doctrine” or “decrees” instead of using that harsh word “dogma.” But dogma is accepted, approved doctrine. We westerners don’t like it because it sounds arbitrary. We use the word dogmatic to suggest that a person has already made up their mind and that there is no reasoning with them. Yet, dogma is wisdom that is passed down by the church which can strengthen both churches and individuals. It isn’t simply something dry and boring. It’s something that answers questions to that you can move on.

Okay, eventually Paul is going to migrate up toward the area of modern day Istanbul—not exactly because Troas is slightly south of that city. But it’s close. We read in verse 6 that they went through Phrygia and Galatia where they probably crossed back and forth between cities in the two regions. NOW, we start to see the influence of the Holy Spirit. They are sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit because they are told not to preach the word in Asia.

Why? After all, Asia is where Paul ends up spending a lot of time in Ephesus. After all, Ephesus is where the seven churches of Revelation are located. It’s where the biblical cities of Colossae to which Colossians is written and Hierapolis are located. I believe they are to neglected at this time because God had a plan for their future and God wanted the missionaries to keep on headed toward Europe—the next step in the plan.

Then, when we get to verse 7 and they are nearing Mysia, the temptation was to move into Bithynia. “…it was natural for them to cast their eyes farther north, and think of the highly civilized province of Bithynia in North West Asia Minor, with its Greek cities (of which Nicomedia and Nicaea were the most important) and Jewish colonies.” [Bruce, p. 326.] “It was over Bithynia that Pliny was governor, when he wrote his remarkable letter concerning the purity and constancy of the Christians to the Emperor Trajan. At that time, as Pliny states, many of all ages, and of every rank, had embraced the gospel, and the temples were almost forsaken (Plin. x. 96,97). “ [Gloag, Paton J., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Volume II* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), p. 108.]

But the Spirit of Jesus kept them from going there. For those who are tempted to treat the Holy Spirit as lower than Jesus and Jesus as lower than the Father, subordinationism in the Trinity, here’s another proof text that shows that doesn’t work. Some commentators have observed that the earlier versions of the text have this unusual wording, used nowhere else in the New Testament, while some of the later versions do not. I believe later copyists were trying to harmonize Spirit with Holy Spirit used earlier to avoid the question of the relation of the Son to the Spirit. But the earlier reading is clearly the authentic one [Gloag, p. 108; MacGregor, G. H. C., “The Acts of the Apostles: Exegesis” in Buttrick, G. A. et al. (eds.) The Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Volume IX: Acts-Romans (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 215.] and, after all, 2 Corinthians 3:17 tells us: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” [NRSV]

But when they get to Troas, Paul has a vision in verse 9. A person in Macedonia urges Paul to come to Europe and spread the gospel. Visions are very important to Paul. In Acts 18:9-10, the Lord appears to him in a vision to let him know not to be afraid and that God will protect him as he stays longer to complete his ministry. In Acts 22:17-21, the Lord appears in a vision and warns him to get out of Jerusalem in a hurry. In Acts 23:11, it says the Lord stood near him and encouraged him. It doesn’t specifically say it is a vision, but it seems to follow the pattern. In Acts 27:21-26, he sees an angel of the Lord that assures him that the ship’s crew and Paul will get to Rome safely, despite the shipwreck. “Luke feels that all the great turning points of Paul’s career he received divine guidance ‘by revelation’ (Gal. 2:2) either through direct vision or through the inspired insight of others…” [MacGregor, p. 214.].

Traditionally, a lot of people think that Luke was the Macedonian in the vision, since Luke seems to have joined them in verse 9. Up until verse 8, the narrative always said “they” or “he,” but in verse 9 we start reading “we.” Some commentators believe that this means “Luke is a personal eyewitness of the events he narrates.” [Bruce, p. 327; Campbell, p. 167.] However, there is significant evidence that “we” was often used in ancient writings about sea journeys to enhance the dramatic value [Willimon, pp. 134-135.]. This is possible, but I am in agreement with those who think this is most unlikely, especially as Paul’s prison letters make it clear that Luke accompanied him [Marshall, pp 263-264].

Even though I believe the Holy Spirit is involved in all three interventions, I think they reflect three different levels of communication. First, there are times when God simply says, “Don’t!” It may be through some inner feeling that you just shouldn’t. You just don’t feel right about what you plan to do or want to do. It might be through someone like a pastor, teacher, or more experienced believer who points out a problem with what you’re planning to do. You might even resent that person, but the message could still be from God. It may be through a passage of Scripture you never noticed before. It might be through a dream that troubles you or excites you until you pray and ask God for an interpretation of that dream. God works through the Holy Spirit in all these ways.

Second, there are times when God doesn’t forbid us when we want to do something, but God discourages us and attempts to dissuade us. Even though some of the later texts omit the phrase “of Jesus” in the “Spirit of Jesus” in verse 8, I have a great deal of confidence in this reading and think it makes sense. Instead of using a prophet or brother/sister in Christ to say “No” or giving that frightening negative deep in our spirit, God influences us through a fresh experience with grace. It might be a vision of Jesus or even just a thinking of “What Would Jesus Do?” I know you probably think I’m a little bananas on this vision thing, but I’ve told you about a friend of mine pastoring in Kentucky with this cantankerous deacon who thought it was his duty to straighten out the pastor all the time. The deacon had heart surgery and during the time he was under, he had a vision of Jesus coming and healing his heart. According to him, Jesus came and touched his heart and said that he was going to live in order to take care of the Lord’s pastors. Now, you can call this a drug-induced hallucination or a wish-induced dream if you want, but I was amazed to discover how this man’s attitude and actions changed after that experience. I believe it was a true vision, however God used it. This “Spirit of Jesus” might merely mean recalling something in Jesus’ teaching that would discourage us from what we intended to do. We aren’t sure what this means, but I am certain that the Bible uses different wording to suggest that God spoke to the team in a slightly different way.

Third, Paul saw a vision. Today, we don’t expect to SEE visions. When we speak of vision statements in the corporate environment, we mean PERCEPTION as opposed to symbolic persons/actions in an ecstatic state. In fact, we usually think of anyone who experiences a symbolic vision as being anywhere from a little “off” to being completely crazy. But God still gives us visions. For me, visions usually come as warnings—little images when I first close my eyes at night before I’m asleep or just before I’m completely awake in the morning. They aren’t full-fledged dreams but they often deal with improper intentions, dangerous plans, or mistaken directions in my life. I often ask God, “What was that about?” And then, I get an answer that’s usually more than I bargained for. Sometimes, though, instead of a warning, I get a sense of need—especially if it’s something I can meet. Sometimes, I get a sense of potential, of possibility, and realize that God is directing me to mobilize to make something happen. That’s great. And sometimes, it might be a biblical character or story, a fictional character, a line from a book or movie, an experience in a game, or a work of art that becomes a symbol and defines where I’m going. God offers us a “vision” in all of these experiences.

Fortunately for us, Paul and company are sensitive to the leading of God. As a result, they undertake the Macedonian mission and the gospel officially begins to make its way toward Western Europe. Philippi is called the “first city” in most manuscripts of this text and it bothers a lot of scholars who note that it wasn’t either the capitol of the province or the biggest city in the province. I don’t worry about that because I think the Bible was using “first” city like the word “premier” without the “e” as opposed to “premiere” with the “e.” The latter means the absolute first in chronology, but without the “e” it can mean “most influential,” “first in size,” or “regarded as first.” We used to call Computer Gaming World the “premier” gaming magazine and our competitors chided us for still using it after they managed a higher circulation during one audit period. I shot back that “premier” can also mean “most authoritative” or “most influential” and they shut up.

Maybe a better example is to look at California. Los Angeles is the “first city” in population and Sacramento is the “first city” in politics, but San Francisco is certainly one of the first cities one thinks of when one thinks of California and it is, like Philippi, a port city, a wealthy city, and a city noted for its culture (both good and bad). The same could be said for New York City. It is not the capitol of New York nor of our country, but it is known as the “first city” even as Chicago (not the second most in population) is known as the “Second City.” Regardless, some translations make it “leading city” or “most influential city” within that region, even though the Greek literally says, “first.”

Things rarely go smoothly, though, even when we’re following God’s explicit direction. Look how many times God changed the itinerary for Paul’s team and yet, when they arrive, their ministry is quickly disrupted. The first few verses of today’s text tell us that they stayed some days in Philippi and, on the Sabbath, they were looking for some Jews to preach to. They went down to the river looking for a place of prayer (προσευχὴν, which Philo and Josephus sometimes use as a synonym for synagogue [Gloag, p. 117; MacGregor, p. 219.]. Some ancient authorities indicate that, when possible, synagogues were often situated close to a river [Munck, Johannes, *The Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1967), p. 161.]—possibly for cleansing rituals). Interestingly enough, we never read that they actually got into the expected circle of men (It required ten men to form a “minyan” and constitute a synagogue, so this suggests that there wasn’t a substantial Jewish community in Philippi [Bruce, p. 331.] who would have formed a synagogue. Instead, we see them ministering to the women who are praying and studying the word outside of the circle.

The leader of these women is one who is named Lydia, an interesting name because it is the same as the region from which she was born. It would be like having a girl born in Arizona’s largest city being named Phoenix or a woman born not far from here named Aurora. I also find it interesting that she was from Thyatira, the city we mentioned earlier that is found in the Book of Revelation and known for its purple dying industry. [Note: Thyatira used a plant-based dye to get their reddish purple while coastal cities often mashed certain beetles to get the red-hued dye.]

When this woman receives the Lord Jesus as Savior, she not only wants to be baptized immediately, but she influences her whole household to be saved and baptized. [Note: I prefer the idea that she influenced her family as opposed to the idea that “…family and friends would compulsorily follow her into the new face. This sense of family solidarity, admirable in many ways, must have led to some quite superficial ‘conversions.’ [MacGregor, p. 219.] He could be right; there are superficial ‘conversions’ in every age. But there is nothing in the text that presumes she demanded that they convert—see my later comment on the jailer’s family/household.] Regardless, her family becomes the core group around which the Philippian ministry/later church is built. Presumably, she would also influence her family back in the old country, too. Isn’t it interesting that even though Paul was forbidden to go to the province where Thyatira is located, he ministered to a woman with ties back to that city? Sometimes, God works indirectly in order to make our service, our testimony, and our dreams/goals reach even further than we could have anticipated.

But God also works directly. Look at the full text of verse 14: **14) And there was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira and worshipper of God was listening, the Lord opened her will [lit. “heart”] double-wide [the verb is an old Greek word combining “two” and “wide”—Robertson, p. 252.], holding her attention to the utterances of Paul. [PJT**] “Luke underlines that conversion is due to the action of God who opens the hearts, *i.e.* the minds, of men and women to receive his Word.” [Marshall, p. 267.]

So, Lydia and her family are baptized, providing testimony to the whole town. I do want to make two suggestions to those who might be considering baptism. First, here was a woman who was already devout, already leading in God’s work, and already faithful who thought it was important to go another step forward in baptism. Believer’s baptism doesn’t devalue who you are or your current relationship to God; it doesn’t undo the infant/child dedication from your parents anymore than gaining a magisterial or doctoral degree would undo your B.A. or B.S. It indicates that you’ve gone further. Second, notice that with her active witness in baptism, her family followed. I would suggest that we have more influence with those we care about when we are bold enough to follow God in scriptural baptism.

Of course, we should also note something else about Lydia, her insistence on hospitality. “She gave practical proof of her conversion by pressing the four missionaries to be her guests.” [Bruce, p. 331.] In fact, the phrasing was such in verse 15 that she urged them to stay with her if they really believed she had changed [Arrington, p. 170.]. “She was thus quick not merely to follow the early Christian practice of being hospitable (Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 3:2; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9; 3 John 5-8) but also to share material goods with those who teach the Word (Galatians 6:6; cf. 1 Corinthians 9:14).” [Marshall, p. 268.]

Yet, no sooner do we read of the success of the gospel with Lydia and her family than we read of this slave girl who makes a great deal of cash for her owners by telling fortunes. Most modern translations call it a “spirit of divination.” The Greek actually says “spirit of a Python” (πύθωνα). That may sound weird to you, but you should know that the Python was considered to be the monstrous snake that guarded the Oracle of Delphi, the famous center of divination and soothsaying. All of these pictures and paintings on this slide depict the Greek god Apollos slaying the Python and the engraved image is from the temple at Delphi itself.

Why is that important? Well, it’s important because the priestesses at the Temple of Delphi were said to be “pythonesses” and by all accounts, they spoke indistinctly such that they sounded like the hissing of a snake. Since there was already a snake associated with the oracle at Delphi, this hissing like a snake (the equivalent of Harry Potter’s **possiltongue**?) came to be associated with supernatural fortune telling. Today, we know that the lower cavern of the Oracle at Delphi fills with a methane gas at intervals. The priestesses would go down into the Oracle and get high on the gas and then, offer up what ideas they could in, obviously, slurred speech patterns. Their prophecies were vague and often misinterpreted, often leading to disaster. Relying upon fortune telling usually does lead to disaster.

So, this female **possiltongue** was making a fortune for her masters when, all of a sudden, she becomes fixated upon Paul and Silas and begins to act like a carnival barker in using her fortune-telling voice to encourage people to listen to Paul and Silas, as well as to affirm the authenticity of their message. 17) She followed Paul and us, shouting out saying: “These men are servants of the highest God and they keep on announcing [proclaiming/broadcasting] to you the way of salvation.” [PJT]

So, my question is, If the only bad publicity is no publicity, why does Paul react so negatively to her message? After all, she’s telling the truth isn’t she? They *are* servants of God and they *do* have an authentic message.

There are probably two reasons for this. One is that many of the exorcism stories in the Bible have the demons recognize Jesus before they are cast out. It is almost as if they are daring Jesus or His representatives to deal with them, and that they think they are somehow superior over God or God’s representative [Culpepper, R. Alan, “Paul’s Mission to the Gentile World: Acts 13-19” in *Review & Expositor* (Louisville, KY: The Faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1974), p. 494, n. 24; Marshall, p. 269.] The other reason is to recognize that Satan and his minions DO use the truth to weasel their way into people’s minds.

Merrill Unger tells of a pastor who had an elaborate horoscope cast for himself. He wanted to prove that it was all a hoax. Every day, he would check the reading in order to catch it being in error and every day, he could interpret something as being true. Eventually, he found himself consulting the horoscope first every day before prayer, Bible reading, breakfast, medicine, or anything. He realized that there was just enough truth in the horoscope to wean him from his spiritual discipline in the Word and in prayer.

If Paul had allowed the pythoness to keep proclaiming the truth, eventually people could have turned to her instead of to Paul and Silas. Eventually, they would be settling for those ambiguous fortunes and perhaps, ruining their lives, instead of receiving the truth of God. So, Paul commands the spirit to leave her in the name of Jesus Christ. Here, even if you disagree with everything else I say today is the key point. Satan, Satan’s minions, and even evil forces in general are helpless in the face of Jesus’ presence and authority. Paul doesn’t presume to cast out the girl’s demon by his own power, but under the authority of Jesus.

Note that this works a lot better than when the imposters try to use Paul’s own words to cast out a demon later in the Book of Acts. The imposters invoke the Jesus whom Paul preaches and the demons beat them up because they weren’t really operating under the authority of Jesus. It isn’t just a matter of knowing the right words or the name of Jesus. Victory requires being obedient to and under the authority of Jesus.

In verses 19-21, Paul and Silas are accused of spreading Jewish customs [Culpepper, p. 494], violating Roman customs. This wording sounds a lot like the wording of a charge described by the Roman historian Dio Cassius (Book 67, Paragraph 14) who tells about a former Roman consul named Flavius Clemens and his wife, Flavia Domitilla. Now, note that these events occur roughly a half-century after this passage with Paul, but I think we can see a consistency.

“In the same year Domitian executed among many others, also consul Flavius Clemens, although he was a cousin and his wife was Flavia Domitilla, a relative of Domitian. Both were accused of godlessness, a crime on account of which also many others, who were inclined to Jewish practices, were condemned. Some lost their lives, others at least their fortunes. Domitilla was exiled only to Pandateria.”

Apparently, Paul and Silas get hit with a double-whammy here. First, Jews are already viewed with suspicion because they are such rabble-rousers. Then, probably because they were such rabble-rousers, there was a Roman law that made it illegal to convert any Romans to the Jewish faith. Notice that antisemitism led to violence then as it often does now! Indeed, F. F. Bruce believes that the reason Paul and Silas were seized, beaten and imprisoned instead of Luke and Timothy is because Luke as Greek and Timothy as half-Greek wouldn’t have been as Jewish-looking as Paul and Silas [Bruce, p. 335.] Christians, like Jews were considered to be “godless” as we heard in Dio Cassius’ account, so converting Romans to Christianity would have likewise been illegal. HOWEVER, Paul and Silas technically didn’t convert the little Pythoness. They simply commanded their demonic opposition to get out of their way. I suppose the slave owners could have been referring to Lydia’s family and friends, but we don’t actually see any opposition until they’re hit in the wallet by the deliverance of the girl.

But when religion is involved (and, as in this case, whenever it is convenient to involve religion to obscure the real issue(s)), emotion will cloud the facts. The person committing sexual sin may not object to the inappropriate poster in one cubicle, but they’ll certainly object to the Bible verse poster in another. The person guilty of substance abuse may not complain about the occasional song laced with profanity or lewd video on an office computer, but let them hear so much as a “God bless you” and they’re horrified. Why? Because they’re afraid they’ll have to change, afraid that any claims from God will cost them. And in this text, the owners of the “Pythoness,” our “possiltongue” from last week’s message, know they’ve lost a bundle of money. Of course, there are a lot of businessmen who think you have to be open on Sunday, too, but wouldn’t they like to have the money of Truett Cathy, the founder of Chick-fil-a restaurants—none of which are open on Sundays.

So, I think we have to take away from this portion of the passage the idea that we *are* going to face hostility, persecution, and censorship—even when we’re not technically breaking the law. We also need to learn not to take it personally. Notice that it really isn’t about Paul and Silas here, it’s about money. And it isn’t really about us, it’s about comfort, security, self-image, or anything else that can be idolatrously set against God’s will.

We also notice in verse 22 that the magistrates took the route of least resistance. We don’t see any hint of a trial. We just see the magistrates removing the clothes from the missionaries and scourging them. This is a valid historical practice. Even in recounting a famous case of mutiny, Tacitus tells of soldiers apprehending a traitor: “Dragged out of his tent, his garments torn, and his person severely beaten, he was commanded to declare for what bribe and with what accomplices he had betrayed the army.” (*The Histories*, Book IV, Paragraph 27) If you think that’s too anachronistic, think about this. Livy told of a dictator during the Samnite Wars (325 BC) named Lucius Papirius Cursor who chastised a master of horse named Quintus Fabius by ordering: “…the master of horse to be stripped, and the rods and axes to be got ready. Fabius, imploring the protection of the soldiers, while the lictors were tearing his garments, betook himself to his quarters…” (Livy, *The History of Rome*, Book VIII, Chapter 32) and then fled to the protection of his father. Fabius, after a huge scene where the tribunes of Rome beseech the dictator to change his mind, finally is allowed off the hook, but you can see that they were preparing him for the whipping. And, of course, if you need a biblical reference, we need only look at the scourging of Christ to note that His clothes were removed prior to the scourging.

Now, it may well be that this was originally done in order for the bloodthirsty crowd to be able to see the blood flowing,but it made good medical sense, as well. After all, if you’re wearing clothes and the scourging starts to rip up your back, you’re going to get bits of cloth stuck in the wounds and increase the risk of infection. And, at least theoretically, the goal of scourging was rehabilitation, not death.

Verses 23-25 tell us that the officials beat the missionaries severely and threw them into prison. They didn’t merely dump them in a dark cell or cavern, however, they bound them in the stocks as though they were incredibly dangerous. Dangerous? They don’t know the half of it. There is no cell so dark or confinement so constricting that God’s people cannot praise God. As Jonah sang his psalm in the great fish, we see God transform his circumstances. It might not have been pretty to end up on the beach covered in fish vomit, but it was better than being eaten alive by the acid in its stomach. It was after seven days of demonstrative praise that God brought down the walls of Jericho. It was after Elijah declared God’s sovereignty aloud and asked God to prove divine power to all the spectators that the fire came down from heaven. To that we could add the experience of Daniel, praising and thanking God three times per day—even after the edict against praying to a non-sanctioned god had been passed by Darius. Do you think Daniel’s expectancy with regard to God and thankful spirit had anything to do with his deliverance?

And let’s be logical about this. Assume that we have a supernatural enemy who doesn’t want God to get the glory, who wants that glory for himself for as long as he can have it. Then, assume that, as part of that usurped glory, the enemy – let’s call him Satan because that means “The Opposition,” – picks on God’s chosen, God’s beloved people. How much joy would that enemy get when God’s people began to praise God? It reminds me of that song God’s Glee sings about lifting up prayers to God even when it seems like there is no use. Faith requires declaring our allegiance, our dependence upon God in many and varied circumstances. And, as the song says, “You can do miracles if you believe,” I’d prefer, “God will do miracles when you believe.” Beaten, bleeding, chained, cold, and imprisoned, Paul and Silas recognized that God was still at work. So, they praised God. One of my former pastors used to say that “Faith is believing God, even when it looks bad for Him.” I think that’s right except it should probably read, “Faith is believing God, whether ‘things’ look bad or good.”

We’ve all been guilty of proclaiming that old canard, “I’m doing okay, under the circumstances.” I remember one great pastor who always answered that with, “Well, what are you doing under the circumstances?” That Holy Spirit-filled pastor recognized that circumstances are external, but the most powerful force in the polyverse, multiverse, or universe is inside believers—the Holy Spirit. He was pointing out that the “circumstances” are subject to God’s power and it’s our responsibility to make sure we’re in a right relationship with God so that God can transform those circumstances if it is God’s will. Of course, there are times when there may still be some lessons to be learned, so God doesn’t always work as immediately as God does in today’s text.

Why is praise important? I believe praise is important because it transforms us, it opens our minds and wills to possibilities beyond our own control and challenges us to expect more from God. It starts a biochemical reaction tied to hope that immediately starts pulling us out of our tailspin. You know how when a prop-driven plane does a hammerhead stall, the engine stops and it looks like the pilot is crazy to tilt the nose of the plane straight down, but on the descent, the force of the wind restarts the engine? It’s an incredible rush, I’ll tell you. Well, it’s a lot like praising God allows the force of the Holy Spirit to restart our “engines” before it’s too late.

The Lord hears the praise and thanksgiving of Paul and Silas and miraculously intervenes. But instead of doing what most of us would do, get out while the getting is good, we see Paul and Silas keeping all of the prisoners together in the jail. The jailer is horrified. He is responsible for those prisoners and, at times, jailers who fell asleep on the job and let prisoners escape would pay with their own lives. Even as I depicted this in the film clip, the jailer was ready to commit suicide—feeling like his life was over as a result of something beyond his control.

But when Paul and Silas give him the good news, he is ready to receive it. He knows something remarkable has held them in the prison when they could have escaped. That’s a marvelous message to you and me. When we do what God wants us to do—including submit to laws, rules, regulations that are inconvenient or unfair to us—God may well use us to influence other people. That extra discipline, honesty, loyalty, and forthrightness just might inspire them to respond positively to the Lord.

So, the jailer asks Paul and Silas what he needs to do in order to experience what they have experienced. And what do Paul and Silas respond? They inform him that he needs to believe in the Lord Jesus and he will be saved. Notice that it doesn’t say that he needs to show his belief in the Lord Jesus by giving a bunch of money, doing something dramatic, or even by being baptized. He and those that he cares about can be saved on the basis of what Jesus has done. It’s a future passive tense – something WILL be done TO you as opposed to something you do for yourself.

Now, there is lots more that we could say about this passage. We could talk about how the jailer demonstrated his salvation by performing good works—starting with caring for Paul and Silas. We could note how Paul used his Roman citizenship to be able to impact more citizens than he could have if he’d just kept on preaching at the riverside. Then, we could apply it by suggesting that we need to use every resource God gives us in order to share about God. That’s what Paul does here.

In summary, we can impact others if:

1. We submit to authority, even when it is painful, inconvenient, and unfair;
2. We emphasize that the difference is what the Lord Jesus does, not what we do;
3. We follow-through upon our faith with good works; and
4. We use all the resources that God has given us to create opportunities to share God’s love.