

ACTS: THE STORY CONTINUES

Acts 16:16-40: The Gospel Takes Root in Philippi

Last week we followed Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke across Asia Minor and into Macedonia.

When they eventually reached Troas, there Paul received the vision:

“Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ~ Acts 16:9

They crossed the Aegean, traveled from Neapolis into Philippi, and on the Sabbath went outside the city to a place of prayer beside the river, where they met Lydia.

“The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” ~ Acts 16:14

Lydia believed, was baptized with her household, and opened her home to Paul and his companions.

Now Luke continues the story.

Philippi: A Roman Colony





(Archeological Photos: Ancient Philippi)

Philippi was an ancient Macedonian city that had become a **Roman colony**. I

- n around 50AD its culture was strongly Roman.
- It was a place that many Roman military Retirees settled.
- dRoman citizenship carried considerable prestige.

The great **Via Egnatia**, one of Rome's most important highways, passed directly through the city.

- North of the road rose the acropolis and theater. South of it lay the civic center and marketplace - the **agora/forum** - where public and legal business was conducted.

Paul and his companions had entered Philippi from Neapolis along this great Roman road.



Portions of the ancient Via Egnatia can still be seen today.

- The road did not end at Philippi. It continued westward across Macedonia toward Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, and eventually toward the Adriatic.

A Girl With “a Spirit of Python”

Read Acts 16:16–18

“As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.”

Most English translations describe the girl as having a “spirit of divination.”

- Luke’s Greek is more specific: πνεῦμα πύθωνα = *pneuma pythōna* (a spirit of Python.)

To understand what Luke’s readers would have heard in those words, we need to step briefly into the religious world of ancient Greece.

Python, Apollo, and the Oracle at Delphi



(Archeological Photos: DELPHI / TEMPLE OF APOLLO)

In Greek mythology, Python was a great serpent associated with Delphi.

- According to the traditional story, the god **Apollo** killed Python and became associated with the sanctuary and oracle at Delphi.
 - The Temple of Apollos at Delphi eventually became one of the most famous centers of prophecy and divination in the ancient Mediterranean world.

- The priestess who delivered Apollo's oracles was known as the **Pythia**, a title connected with the Python tradition.
 - Kings, rulers, cities, and ordinary people traveled to Delphi seeking answers about the future and guidance for important decisions.
- Over time, **Python language became associated more generally with divination, inspired utterances, and fortune-telling.**

Luke is revealing that the same demonic spirit that was behind the worship of Apollo was behind the spiritual bondage of this slave girl.

- **In 1 Corinthians 10:20** the Apostle Paul equates the worship of false gods and idols with the worship of demons.
 - ***"I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons."** ~ 1 Corinthians 10:20*
 - His Greco-Roman readers would immediately understand what he meant by *Pneuma Pythona*, and associate it with the familiar world of **divination and fortune-telling.**

A Girl in Bondage

Now look again at how Luke describes her.

- **She is: spiritually enslaved** — possessed by an evil spirit.
- **She is also: physically enslaved** — owned by human masters.

And those two forms of bondage have become connected.

- ***"She brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling."** ~ Acts 16:16*
- **Her spiritual condition was making these men wealthy.**
 - That means her masters have very little incentive to see her become free. *(There were several ways slaves could gain their freedom)*

She is entrapped and ensnared: Her spiritual bondage becomes the cause of her physical bondage

- Her spiritual bondage produces divination.
- Her divination produces money.
- And the money gives her owners a reason to continue exploiting her.

A Wider Principle

Spiritual bondage spreads. It rarely stays neatly contained in one corner of our lives.

- **Sin and bondage can begin affecting our thoughts, relationships, bodies, finances, and circumstances.**
- **Addiction is an obvious example.** Something a person once controlled can eventually begin controlling decisions, relationships, finances, and even the body.
 - **Greed, sexual sin, bitterness, fear,** and other forms of bondage can also reach outward and begin enslaving other areas of life.
- **The people profiting from the slave girl's bondage have no interest in seeing her free.**
 - **But Jesus does.**
 - Paul turns toward her and says: ***"I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her."***
 - **And Luke tells us: *"And it came out that very hour."***
 - The girl has been delivered.
 - Surely everyone will celebrate
 - Not quite.
- **Around the Table**
 - **What different kinds of bondage do you see operating in this girl's life?**
 - **Why would her owners have had no incentive to see her become free?**

When Freedom Costs Someone Money

Read Acts 16:19–24

“But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.”

- Watch what the owners notice: *“But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone...”*
 - They do not celebrate the girl’s freedom.
 - They see that **their income is gone**.
 - So they seize Paul and Silas and: *“dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.”*

(RETURN TO PHILIPPI RECONSTRUCTION)

- The Greek word translated “marketplace” is agora.
 - In a Roman colony like Philippi, this was not merely a place to buy groceries. It was the civic center where commerce, government, and public business took place.
- This is the kind of public setting into which Paul and Silas were dragged before the magistrates.
 - But notice what the girl’s owners **do not** say: “These men cost us money.”

- Instead: *“These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.”*

“These men are Jews.” “We are Romans.”

In a Roman colony proud of its Roman identity, the accusation works.

- The crowd joins the attack.
- The magistrates have Paul and Silas stripped.
- They order them beaten with rods.

Luke tells us that they received **“many blows.”** Then they are thrown into prison.

- The jailer is commanded: *“to keep them safely.”*
 - So he places them in the inner prison and fastens their feet in stocks.

Paul and Silas have been publicly beaten and imprisoned.

- And all of this began because an enslaved girl had been set free from a demonic spirit

Around the Table

Why do you think the girl’s owners hide their real complaint and instead emphasize that Paul and Silas are Jews who are threatening Roman customs?

About Midnight

Read Acts 16:25–28

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, 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. But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”

Think about their condition.

They have been:

- falsely accused,
- publicly humiliated,
- stripped,
- beaten with rods,
- thrown into an inner prison,
- and fastened in stocks.

Yet, at midnight they are praying and singing hymns to God.

Luke adds one small detail: **“and the prisoners were listening to them.”**

Their response to suffering is not happening privately.

- **Someone is listening.**

Then: “*suddenly there was a great earthquake...*”

- The foundations of the prison shake.
- The doors open.
- Everyone’s bonds are unfastened.

But notice the order.

- Paul and Silas did not begin worshiping **after** the earthquake.
- They were already praying and singing while the doors were still locked and their feet were still in the stocks.

- Then the earthquake came.

“Do Not Harm Yourself”

Read Acts 16:27–30

'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. But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”'

The jailer wakes.

- He sees the prison doors standing open.
- He assumes the prisoners have escaped.

Luke says: “he drew his sword and was about to kill himself...”

- The jailer was responsible for the prisoners entrusted to him. Losing them could bring severe punishment and disgrace.
- But before he can harm himself, Paul cries out: *“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”*

The doors are open.

- Paul and Silas could run, but they stay.
- **The jailer calls for lights, rushes inside, and falls trembling before Paul and Silas.**
 - Then he asks: *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”*

Around the Table

If someone came to you and sincerely asked, ***“What must I do to be saved?”*** how would you answer?

“Believe in the Lord Jesus”

Read Acts 16:31–34

“And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.”

Paul and Silas answer: ***“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”***

But Luke doesn’t stop there.

- ***“And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.”***

Paul and Silas proclaim Christ to the entire household.

- Then something beautiful happens.
 - Earlier, this man had confined Paul and Silas in the inner prison.

Now: ***“he washed their wounds.”***

- Then he and his household are baptized.
- He brings Paul and Silas into his home.
- He feeds them.

And Luke says: “*he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.*”

- Look at the reversal:
 - Jailer becomes host
 - prisoners become honored guests
 - wounds are washed
 - fear becomes joy

The gospel has entered another household in Philippi.

Around the Table

What evidence of change do you see in the jailer after he hears and believes the gospel?

“But We Are Roman Citizens”

Read Acts 16:35–39

“But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, “Let those men go.” And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, “The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace.” But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.” The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.”

Morning comes, and the magistrates send word to the jailer: “*Let those men go.*”

- Apparently they expect Paul and Silas to leave quietly... but Paul refuses.

- *“They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly?”*

There is an interesting irony here.

- Yesterday the accusation emphasized: **“These men are Jews.”** and: **“We are Romans.”**
- But Paul and Silas themselves possess **Roman citizenship**.
- The magistrates have publicly beaten Roman citizens without a proper condemnation.

Luke says: *“The magistrates were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens.”*

So Paul insists: *“Let them come themselves and take us out.”*

- And they do.
- The magistrates personally come to Paul and Silas, apologize to them, escort them from the prison, and ask them to leave the city.

Luke does not tell us exactly why Paul insists upon a public acknowledgment.

- **One reasonable possibility** is that Paul does not want the new believers left behind under the public accusation that the Christian missionaries were simply criminals who had been convicted and expelled from Philippi.
- Whatever Paul’s full reason, he refuses to allow a **public injustice** to be corrected only by a **quiet private release**.

Back to Lydia's House

Read Acts 16:40

"So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed."

Notice where Luke takes us.

- When Paul first arrived in Philippi, Lydia believed and **opened her home**.
- Now, before Paul and Silas leave Philippi, they return **to Lydia's home**.

This time Luke says: ***"when they had seen the brothers..."***

- Something now exists in Philippi that did not exist when Paul arrived.
- We have seen:
 - **Lydia and her household**
 - **the jailer and his household**
 - **other believers gathered at Lydia's home**

A church is beginning to take shape.

Look at Who Jesus Has Reached

Think about the people Luke has introduced to us in Philippi.

- **Lydia:** A businesswoman. A woman with resources. A worshiper of Israel's God.
 - ***"The Lord opened her heart..."***
- **The Slave Girl:** Owned by others. Economically exploited. Spiritually oppressed.
 - ***"I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her."***
 - Jesus sets her free.

- **The Jailer:** A Roman functionary. The man responsible for keeping Paul and Silas imprisoned.
 - Before the night is over, he is washing their wounds, listening to the Word of the Lord, and rejoicing in Christ.

These people could hardly be more different.

- Different backgrounds.
- Different social positions.
- Different circumstances.

Yet the gospel reaches into every one of their lives.

And before Paul leaves Philippi: **Jesus has begun building His church.**

Around the Table

- **As you look back over Paul's time in Philippi, what stands out to you about the different kinds of people Jesus reaches?**
- **What do you notice about the ways the gospel changes not only what people believe, but how they live and treat other people?**