

The Continuing Acts of Jesus: Unusual Suspects

Acts 16:13-34

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Dan Hoffman

Today we are in Acts chapter 16 and are looking at highlights from Paul's second mission trip.

It's a trip that starts with a conflict between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark. John Mark had left with Paul on his first trip, but only made it about a third of the way around the circuit before he bailed out and went home.¹

We don't know anything about the circumstances, but whatever happened Paul figured that was it for John, but Barnabas – the encourager – was ready to give him a second chance.

Paul and Barnabas couldn't agree on this and so Paul took Silas and Barnabas took John Mark, and they both headed off in their own directions. And it's Paul's journey, through Syria and Cilicia, that the text follows.

Today we are going to look at the first three stories from this second mission as the witness of Jesus continues to spread towards the ends of the earth. But as we get started I want to bring us very briefly back to where this all began which was with Jesus' words in Acts 1. Just prior to returning to heaven Jesus told His disciples:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

And these words are the motivating force that is propelling Paul and the other brothers out on mission. Jesus left a mission for us to join. It's a mission that started 50 days after He rose from the dead when He poured His Holy Spirit out on the original believers, but it is a mission that has extended from there right down to present day.

And we know this because we are here. None of us have ties to being Jews in Jerusalem. But we are here because Jesus' gospel continued to spread, and is continuing to spread. And so history is full of stories of people encountering Jesus and He is still in the business of drawing people to Himself and drawing people back to Himself.

And today I want to call on Glen to come and share a brief piece of his story of God drawing him back to faith.

[Glen Grant's Testimony about the crows]

¹ Acts 13:13

Isn't that great? Now Jesus has never used crows to speak to me, but the brilliant thing is God knows exactly where we are and what will speak to us – and that's what He uses. So he is constantly drawing different people from different circumstances in to abundant life. And Acts 16 contains three stories like this. Incredibly different people encountering God's grace in incredibly different ways.

The first one is a wealthy business woman from Philippi. Look with me at Acts 16 starting in verse 13.

[Read Acts 16:13-15]

So here is what we know about Lydia. She's a religious and moral woman who has done very well for herself as a fashion designer. She had established her business in a city called Thyatira, which was a large trade city, but now she is living in Philippi which was another major trade city. So she is franchising, and expanding. She is doing well.

But she isn't just rich, she is religious. She was a worshipper of God. Now this means that she had rejected the pantheism of Rome and was pursuing the God of the Jews. And that's why she is at this ladies prayer meeting by the river.

So the group of them have settled down to some tea and treats – I'm pretty sure people have always been combining treats with Bible study. And they've just opened up a great Right Now Media Bible study, and that's when Paul shows up.

And as Paul starts talking Luke says "The Lord opened [Lydia's] heart to respond," and she got baptized.

So what we have here is a very wealthy and upstanding woman who is pursuing God but doesn't know Christ. She is religious. She is moral. She is involved with the church. And it is out of that context that God meets her. And in that moment she recognizes her need for Jesus and lays her "yes" down. "I'm a follower of Jesus, and I'm going to dedicate my life to following Him.

And Jesus still saves people like this today. Some of us were saved like this. I don't necessarily mean you used to be a wealthy fashion designer, but that you were a religious, and morally good person prior to meeting Jesus.

Perhaps you grew up in a family of faith, or were a Christmas and Easter person. You called yourself a Christian, but what that meant was you tried hard to be a good person. And in comparison to the people around you, you were pretty good.

And then in the middle of that Jesus rescued you from your own self-righteousness. You recognized that you weren't good. That in fact you were a sinner who needed a Saviour. And you knelt down at the foot of the cross and received the forgiveness Jesus offers by His shed blood.

This is my story. I'm still working on the rich fashion design part, but I grew up in a religious family. My parents were highly involved in church, and this was normal to me.

But it wasn't until I was in my twenties that the gospel of Jesus really hit home for me. Up to this point Jesus was helping me be good. But then, all of a sudden, I found myself facing the fact that I was a desperately broken sinner who needed a saviour.

Some of you have this testimony too. You were quasi-religious, moral people before you met Jesus. And then Jesus changed from being someone you knew about, and spent Sunday morning thinking about, to being your main passion. Now you live for His glory, using the gifts and abilities He has given you, to increase His kingdom.

If that's similar to your story would you raise your hand? You were a moral person before you met Jesus.

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Now sometimes people with this kind of testimony are embarrassed. It's almost like we wish we had a real testimony about being a terrible person who then got radically transformed by the blood of Christ. But here is the reality, everyone who comes to Christ has a radical transformation. The only people Jesus saves are broken sinners. But there are all kinds of different ways to be broken.

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Now the second person we are going to look at is as different from Lydia as you can possibly imagine. Look at verse 16.

[Read Acts 16:16-19]

Now this is an interesting story. This girl is demon possessed and is being used by her owners to tap into the power of the demonic realm in order to predict the future and see into people's lives.

But then, catch this, when Paul shows up she tells the truth about him "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." And she keeps this up for days.

Now everyone knew who this girl was. And the crowds know she has power, because they've paid for her services. And now she is telling people to listen to Paul. Isn't this a good thing? Wouldn't this be like free promotional material?

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Paul doesn't think so. Luke says he got annoyed. He's been patient. He's been enduring this girl. But he's at the end of his rope. I love how human this is. And so he turns around, casts the demon out, and it leaves.

Now there are two things I want to say about this. The first is that this isn't the only time in Scripture that a demon has been telling the truth, and been exercised for it. In fact the Gospels are full of this – particularly the Gospel of Mark – this is the one John-Mark

wrote, who Paul wouldn't let join his second missions trip. There's a story there for another day.

But Mark includes a lot of accounts like this, so for example in chapter 1 we read:

Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" (Mark 1:23-25)

The demon knew the truth about Jesus, but Jesus wouldn't let it speak. And that's because Jesus knew that the demonic always speaks a shred of the truth, but it's intent is never to lead people to God. And Jesus didn't believe all publicity was good publicity. He wanted the truth to go out from people who looked like Him.

And so that's why it is only after He puts His Spirit on them in Acts 1 that His followers are transformed into His witnesses. Friends, Jesus only wants you to talk about Him if you look like Him because He is in you. Our words and our actions have to line up. That's the only testimony that Jesus wants.

And that's what's going on here. This girl's words don't line up with her actions because the spirit in her is not the Holy Spirit. And that's why Paul is annoyed by her truth.

But the second thing I want to draw out here is what happens to this young fortune teller. In his book "To Live is Christ, to Die is Gain", Pastor Matt Chandler talks about how this girl joined the church in Philippi. Now he says this in spite of the fact that there is nothing in this text that specifically mentions it.

But he bases his argument off of what he reads in Matthew 12 where Jesus teaches about what happens when an evil spirit is kicked out.

When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. (Matthew 12:43-45)

So Jesus says when the demonic is cast out, something else – the Holy Spirit – needs to move into the place it left, or else that evil spirit is coming back in force.

But in verse 19 Luke says this girl's owners realized that their hope of making money was gone. And so that means that things didn't get worse for this girl, they got better. Something else had moved into her house. And so I believe it is safe to say this young slave girl met Jesus.

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Now probably very few of us here today come from this kind of background. Put your hand up if you've been a demon possessed slave girls before. Nobody. But while the specifics of this girl's story are unique, we can extrapolate from it a bit. So really what is going on here is that, either by some action of her own, or by the force of others, this girl has given herself over to a type of depravity that was now consuming her life.

And this is something that more of us can relate to. So if you have ever been trapped in addiction this is you. Now usually we think of addiction as drugs and alcohol – and it certainly can be that. But really an addiction is anything you habitually go to, besides Jesus, in search of meaning or to dull the pain or quite the rush of the day.

So when you get home at the end of the day from work or whatever it is you do and are spent, where do you go for life? Is your first instinct to flick on the TV and grab a bowl of ice cream? This can be just as much an addiction as anything else. And all addictions always promise life, but end up stealing it.

And prior to encountering Paul, this girl was a shell of a person. Her life had been stolen by the thing she relied on to support her life.

And so some of you have come from this kind of background. You were trapped in life-stealing addiction prior to meeting Christ, and He delivered you, or has been delivering you, by the power of His blood. This is an incredible victory. Put your hand up if you have a story like this?

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But let's not think that this story is any more special than Lydia's. Luke's point by putting them together is to draw out the similarity in the midst of diversity. So Lydia was a successful, respected, wealthy, intelligent, well known business woman. And Jesus reaches right into her life, which looked totally put together to everyone around her, and saves her from her broken mess.

And right after this we come across this obviously depraved, abused, messed up little girl stuck relying on the demonic to bring her life. And Jesus steps into her world and saves her from her broken mess.

And so to Jesus every one of our stories looks the same. You might have fooled everyone around you into thinking you really have your life together, but the reality is all of us come to Jesus as sinners who need Saviour. Jesus only saves broken people.

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But the story isn't quite finished yet. After Paul exercises the demon, the girl's owners incite a riot and in the end Paul and Silas end up beaten and thrown in prison. And the magistrate tells the jailor "guard them carefully."

I guess word had gotten out that these Jesus followers are be a bit tricky when it comes to confinement.

And so the jailer doesn't just put them in prison but he goes all out. He puts them in the inner cell. Now the inner cell was not just maximum-security, but it was the worst cell in the prison. So it would be a little lower than all the other cells so any human waste would end up trickling down there.

And then the jailer decides to lock them up in stocks, which force your body into an incredibly uncomfortable position and hold it there.

So imagine yourself on a really bad day. Everything is going wrong, and then on top of it all your sewer backs up. That's not even close to what Paul and Silas are experiencing. But look at verse 25.

[Read Acts 16:25]

When given every excuse to get down Paul and Silas make the decision to praise instead of pout. And the result is witness. People are listening. The other prisoners are listening. And the guards are listening too. And what they hear is something totally different to what they've ever heard in a situation like this before.

Something extraordinary is going on here. These people aren't like everyone else. And here's the challenge: when the poop hits the fan in your life that is your opportunity to witness. So if things are tough right now make the decision to praise. People will notice, and God will get glory.

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And it's at that moment that something else starts hitting the fan – and it's the whole countryside. Verse 26:

[Read Acts 16:26-34]

Wouldn't you hate to be a prison architect in the first century? Designing a prison that could contain the gospel was a futile endeavor.

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Now there are a few things we know from history that this story doesn't specifically spell out. But one of the relevant points here is that chief jailor positions were sought after and would be rewarded to heroic Roman commanders who were "retiring" from the front lines.

Now Rome in the first century was a brutal regime. Their war machine was in full force conquering the world. And they had developed some incredible scare tactics to accomplish this. So in order to convince peripheral civilizations not to revolt they would conquer a city between them and crucify everyone; men, women and children. I read one account of 6000 people being crucified at once.² So everyone walking by would think twice about double-crossing Rome.

² The Appian Way – Wikipedia

Now to become a heroic Roman commander worthy of being rewarded with a jail post like the one in Philippi you would have had to lead multiple attacks like this. And that is going to mess you up. Nobody talked about post traumatic stress in the first century, but you can believe it existed just like it does today. And so this jailer would have been a scarred and hardened man with an incredibly broken heart. His home life was likely a combination of bitterness and anger and violence. And yet Jesus steps confidently into that darkness and saves.

And some of us have a story like this. Some of us were angry and bitter about how life treated us. Bad stuff happened to you that wasn't fair and it has messed you up. You had to live with the consequences. And yet God didn't let you kill yourself, He stepped down into your self-centered, self-destructive life and pulled you out of the mud.

Friends, it is a beautiful thing to watch God save. Every one of us has a story like one of these, or perhaps some kind of combination of all of the above, or something a little different. But one thing is for sure, every one of us who have encountered Jesus have found Him initiating our salvation, stepping into our mess, and pouring out His grace while we didn't deserve it.

So it doesn't matter where you start, or how good or bad things look. Jesus has always been in the business of saving sinners. And He is still in that business today.

So brothers and sisters, here is the call: wherever it is that you find yourself, whether you are in a good spot or a bad spot, let the truth of Jesus' gospel soften your heart and pull you in.

If you are saved, rejoice and be thankful that Jesus saw fit to reach into your mess and draw you out. And if you aren't saved yet please hear that no one is either good enough or too broken for the grace Jesus offers. So come to Him and be set free.