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Triumph Amidst Trials

Acts 16:10-40

Intro: We are looking at the beginning of Paul's 2nd missionary journey in **ch16**. This trip started with a disagreement and the original dynamic duo of the gospel separated and went different ways. Kind of like the Beatles, they sang "All You Need Is Love" and then broke up. Barnabas took Mark and went to Crete; Paul took Silas and traveled north through Syria then west into Galatia to visit all the churches started on the 1st missionary journey. While in Lystra, a young man named Timothy was added to the ministry team.

Paul's intention was to move on to the Roman province of Asia but the Holy Spirit prohibited him. He then decided to go north into Bithynia but that way was also blocked by the Spirit. Not knowing what else to do, Paul and company continued to move forward and eventually found themselves in Troas, on the coast of the Aegean Sea. There, God's direction was given in the form of a vision. A man from Macedonia appeared to Paul begging him to come over and help them. Paul saw this as divine direction and the team immediately set off to Greece. God had opened the door for the gospel to be carried to the European continent. This is just one of several divine openings recorded in **ch16**.

11-13— Right away, we're to understand that another person has joined the ministry team. It's not blatantly obvious; it only becomes clear if you pay particular attention to the change in pronouns being used. The change actually occurs in **vs10**. In the previous 3 verses, when referring to Paul and his team, Luke says, "they...they...they." But, in **vs10** he starts using "we" to indicate that Luke himself had joined the ministry team in the city of Troas. In the middle of all the previous confusion about where to go, Paul "just happened" to end up in Troas and there he found a servant of God who would turn out to be not just a great asset to him for the remainder of his life but to the church as a whole. If judging by sheer volume, Luke will eventually write more of the NT than any of the other biblical authors.

It is believed by some that Luke was actually from Philippi. Philippi was a Roman colony, meaning it was a "Rome away from Rome." The Emperor

set up these colonies by ordering Roman citizens, usually retired military personnel, to live in certain locations so there would be strong pro-Roman cities in strategic areas. Though living on foreign soil, these citizens were expected to be loyal to Rome, obey Roman law and honor the Emperor. In return, they were granted certain political privileges – like tax exemptions. This was their reward for holding the line across the Empire.

Another odd characteristic about Philippi is that there was little to no Jewish presence in the city. How do we know? To open a synagogue, there was required to be at least 10 Jewish men living in that city. Philippi had no synagogue so we know there weren't 10 Jewish families living there. When entering a new location, Paul's habit was to go into the synagogues first because he knew he would find God-fearing Jews and even some Gentiles that would be open to hearing the gospel. They were there a few days and must have discovered that the Jews in the city met down by the river on the Sabbath to pray. When Paul showed up to witness, there weren't even any men there, just women.

Of course, that didn't matter to Paul. He knew God was no respecter of persons and neither was he. All he needed was an attentive ear and he was in business. He and the team sat down and began to engage them with the truth. It's interesting that Paul had seen a man in the vision but here he was ministering to a group of women! Paul was just being obedient knowing that the Lord had called him to that place and had prepared the hearts of the hearers.

14-15– One of those women was named Lydia, her trade was dealing in purple dye, a very expensive and much sought after commodity in that world. She was from the city of Thyatira, which was over in Asia Minor – where Paul had just travelled from. He had just come from her neck of the woods but Lydia wasn't there; she was in Philippi on business. God had brought both her and Paul all the way to Greece so that she might hear the gospel and be saved!

Luke says she “worshipped God” meaning she wasn't a full proselyte but she worshipped with the Jews. She was seeking the truth and when the truth arrived, she believed it and was saved.

Lydia holds the distinction of being the first convert on the continent of Europe. But, her salvation experience had 2 parts to it. 1st, the Holy Spirit

had to open her heart. This is a work God must do in all who believe and it's something only God can do. Jesus even said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" ([John 6:44](#)). Thus, the most important element in any evangelistic endeavor is to pray for the Father to open hearts. Without this there can be no genuine conversions. The most eloquent or dramatic gospel presentation is no substitute for the work of God in the hearts of lost sinners. We need God to open sinner's hearts first.

The 2nd part is that Lydia responded to the gospel as Paul presented it. God had done all of this, moved a Gentile woman from Asia Minor and a Jewish man from Tarsus across the Roman Empire and brought them together beside a river in Philippi just so that Lydia's heart could be opened to the gospel and Paul could be present to deliver it. God opened her heart to heed the Word and appointed Paul to be there to speak it. The same God who ordained the end (Lydia's salvation) also ordained the means to that end (Paul's witness of Jesus). One is as necessary as the other. Not only was Lydia's heart opened but so were those of her household. They heard the gospel and believed as well; then they all were baptized. Lydia evidenced her faith by setting about to do good, seen in her warm hospitality.

16-18 – Now, no sooner are the lost saved than Satan begins to hinder the work. After Lydia's conversion, Paul and Co continued to meet at the place of prayer and witness to the lost. As they went about witnessing, it seems they had attracted a tag-along as advertisement. Since we live in a "modern" western culture, this story seems unreal to us but in the ancient world and in many parts of the world today, occurrences like this are all too real. In fact, this is very similar to when Jesus walked around Judea ministering. On many occasions, those who were possessed by demons would follow Him, the demons shouting out who Jesus was. "You are the Holy One of God."

The antagonist in this scene is a simple slave girl – who was possessed by an evil spirit. We don't know how this happened; most likely by exposure to or engagement with one of the pagan religious cults of the day. This girl was possessed by a demonic manifestation of a pagan god and through that relationship, was able to tell the future. This ability, though physically and mentally detestable, brought great wealth to her owners. But, when she wasn't on the clock, the demon entertained himself by following Paul and Co

around and announcing to everyone who they were.

There are a number of names for God in the Scriptures but the name this girl used, “Most High God,” is instructive because of 2 OT texts. The first is [Gen 14:18](#), where Abraham returns from defeating the kings of the east who had captured and carried off Lot and his family. When Abraham returned from the battle, he was met by Melchizedek, the “priest of God Most High.” This text also includes with that specific name the words “Possessor of heaven and earth” (19). It’s as the Creator or Possessor of the cosmos that God is called the Most High.

Later, in [Isa 14](#), a passage that describes the inner thoughts of Satan when he rebelled against God and brought sin into the universe, this title occurs again. In [vs14](#) Satan says, “I will be like the Most High.” Satan aspired to be like God, but not in His most loving or gracious aspects. He didn’t want to be like God in love, mercy or even wisdom. He only wanted to be like God in regard to His possession of heaven and earth. Satan wanted to take over the universe.

Thus, the name “Most High God” is especially appropriate on the lips of this girl, since the demon, who was associated with Satan in his rebellion, spoke through her. The demons call God “the Most High” because that’s *what they want to be*. They want to possess heaven and earth. But they can’t and they won’t. In fact, the exact opposite is occurring. Right here, God had come to challenge them and through the gospel witness of the missionaries, He was beginning to take from them what tiny bit of earthly dominion they had. You better believe they were upset!

Paul ignored the free advertisement as long as he could. He knew the OT significance of her constant broadcast, tho no one else in Philippi did. So why did he let it go on so long? Why did he wait to deliver her? He knew it’d probably cause a big stink and he wanted to do as much ministry in the city as possible before he wore out his welcome. But, after many days of this, Paul had enough. He didn’t want or need any demonic approval of his work so he turned to the girl and cast out the demon by the authority of Jesus Christ.

Of course, the demon reacted just as the spirits did when Jesus issued those commands – the girl was delivered immediately! We can surmise that

Paul also began to teach her about Jesus, seeing she was the 1 person in Philippi most open and attentive to the gospel that day! Paul wouldn't be satisfied with just releasing her from the bondage of a demon – but from the bondage sin held over her heart, mind and emotions. It was sin that had drawn her to the pagan religious cult and had opened her up to demon possession. Paul knew her real problem was sin and only Jesus could break that bond and bring her true love, new life and a living hope.

19-24 – Paul was right to delay his exorcism work, seeing how the whole place blew up after it happened. We look at these “masters” and think how despicable they were, giving no thought to the mental or spiritual health of this girl but that's the way that society operated. He who had the gold made the rules and whatever you could do to make a farthing was game. Slaves were property to use, not to care for. But now, their slaves best quality was gone, never to return, and they weren't very happy about that. Someone would have pay for this; they wanted their pound of flesh.

They knew that whining to the authorities about a loss of income wouldn't get them very far so they had to construct a more insidious accusation against Paul and Co that would appeal to the patriotic fervor of this “Roman” community.

They needed to appeal to this loyalty to Rome in just the right way to turn public opinion against Paul and his team. So, they accuse Paul and Silas of being Jewish and of attempting to disrupt the strongly held Roman traditions by insinuating their own “foreign” religious beliefs on the community as a whole. This was patently ridiculous, as we have seen, since there weren't many Jews in the city. The Jewish presence was hardly a threat to the Romans there.

But, when you're angry and feel slighted, any scapegoat will do and this one served their purposes just fine.

These men completely misrepresented the situation. Jews didn't go around the Empire stirring up trouble. Romans were permitted to convert to Judaism. It was a recognized religion by Rome. These men were playing on the racial and religious prejudices of the crowd and they were successful. Chaos ensued and Paul and Silas got the short end of the deal. They were apprehended, publicly stripped and beaten then thrown into jail and placed into stocks. This unfortunate turn of events evokes 2 important questions.

1st) What did Paul and Silas do that night while in prison?

What would we have done in a similar situation? If they'd have been like many modern Christians, they'd have probably said, "We should've never come here. It's too difficult to carry the gospel to Europe." They could've waxed theological and said, "These Greeks are clearly not among the elect. We better get out of here and go wherever God is blessing." If they were teaching the prosperity gospel, they'd have said, "God wants us to be happy, and we're not happy here. Let's find a place where we can be happy." They didn't say any of those things. Instead, they spent the night praying and singing praises to God. How's that possible? They were convinced God had called them there.

25-30 – As Paul and Silas praised God, the other prisoners must have been listening. If so, they would have learned something about the God who had sent Paul and Silas to their city. How could they still sing through the pain? Their hearts and minds were so filled with what God was doing in that city and His blessings on their lives. They regarded the privilege of carrying the gospel to places it had never been heard to be so great that it surpassed the discomfort of being beaten. We may be tempted to think, "Things are so bad; nothing good could ever come of this." But notice, in the midst of their great distress, God acted. He turned this terrible situation into a wonderful opportunity.

As they sang and prayed, an earthquake came and not only opened all the cell doors, it removed the chains from all the prisoners. Paul and Silas could have escaped but they didn't. They knew God had a greater purpose for them being there. The jailer rushed in and was about to kill himself. He knew he'd be held accountable for any escaped prisoners, receiving their judgment upon himself (capitol crimes). Paul stops him from following through, saying all the prisoners are still there. That's when the jailer comes to Paul and asks one of the greatest and most profitable questions of all times: Sirs, what must I do to be saved? How did he, a pagan Gentile, even know he needed to be saved? Apparently, he was familiar with the declaration of the possessed slave girl concerning Paul and his team.

31-34 – The jailer asked the right question; Paul provided the right answer: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ! Paul didn't suggest that he seek counseling; lecture him on theology; explore his religious terminology. He didn't talk to him about any sacraments or even about church. All those

things could be dealt with in time but they had no bearing on his salvation. Paul just told him to believe on Jesus and he would be saved. This obviously implies more than just an intellectual acknowledgment in the existence of Jesus. Paul is instructing him to have faith in the finished work of Jesus (what He accomplished on the cross) and accept it as the defining characteristic of his life.

Did the jailer understand all that Paul meant by this statement? Probably not – but he understood enough of it because he believed and was baptized! I'm not sure we fully understand all that accompanies our salvation, even with all the teaching we receive. But this man knew what he believed and Jesus saved him. Not only was he saved but, through the course of the evening, his whole household was also saved, in the same way he was – by hearing the truth of the gospel and believing it.

This is the 3rd dramatic conversion recorded in Philippi: Lydia, the business woman; the possessed slave girl and the jailer. John Stott points out how Jewish men would often pray the same prayer every morning, thanking God that He hadn't made them a Gentile, a woman or a slave. Yet here, the representatives of each of these despised categories have been redeemed by and united in Jesus Christ.

35-40 – Well, the authorities had appeased the blood lust of the mob and had tired of holding these foreign brigands and order Paul and Silas released. It wasn't until then they realized how much trouble they were really in. They had condemned Paul and Silas unjustly, had publicly beaten them and imprisoned them without trial. This may've been acceptable behavior for travelling foreigners but was criminal conduct was perpetrated against Roman citizens. This was a Roman city concerned about Roman law and the magistrates had broken that law and they were scared to death. So much so that when Paul demanded they come and escort them out of the jail in person, they did it!

This bring up the 2nd important question: If they were just going to be released the next day anyway, why didn't Paul and Silas reveal their Roman citizenship when they were arrested and avoid all this pain and hassle? Paul's primary concern was never his own comfort or safety but the safety of the fledgling church he was about to leave behind. He wanted to do everything he could to establish it and protect it. He was willing to take a

beating so that he could hold the powers-that-be over a barrel. Doing so would lay the groundwork for the future protection of the church. Having the authorities personally accompany them out of the prison would also alleviate any suspicions the people may have had against Paul, his team or the new church. But, when the magistrates asked Paul to leave the city, he didn't insist on his rights – he obeyed their request, after he had the chance to encourage his little congregation.

Ch16 shows how the work of God progresses through difficulties and challenges. Sometimes we have problems with each other and sometimes the problems come from outside. Oftentimes, the way we endure trials provides a more convincing testimony to the power and grace of Jesus to those who are watching from outside the faith.

It also shows that not every sinner comes to Christ in the same way. Timothy was saved partly by the influence of a godly mother and grandmother. Lydia was converted through a quiet conversation with Paul at a prayer meeting. The slave girl was saved in a most dramatic way and you can't get any more exciting than the Philippian jailer. One minute he's a potential suicide – the next, he's a child of God! Vastly different people with vastly different experiences but all of them were changed by the same grace of God.

There are others just like them in our own city who are just waiting to be told God's simple plan of salvation. Will we be the ones to help them hear the truth? Will we pray for God to open their hearts and eyes and ears to the gospel? 😊