

Acts 16:11-40
Corinth: conflicts and conversions

Be prepared for *anything!*

It's been a really difficult year for our government. As well as trying to counter Coronavirus infections and serious illness, they've had to juggle the country's need to keep the economy functioning. At just about every step, there have been criticisms from opposite directions: we're being too restrictive, and we're also being too lax. Almost every industry has wanted special treatment.

From time to time we have heard about the travel industry, and continual dissatisfaction with the **traffic-light system** relating to visiting various foreign countries. People have insisted on booking holidays abroad as soon as travel to this or that destination has been tentatively permitted - and then complained when the COVID tide changes, and restrictions are reimposed.

So this year, this summer holiday 2021, we're offering you a **Staycation**. Over the next few weeks we will be touring the Mediterranean ... but making only **virtual visits**. So many of those favourite holiday destinations of the present day have been around for several thousands of years, and the evidence is still around nowadays, too. Maybe you've heard of the Roman sites still available to see in **Ephesus**, particularly, and we'll be coming to that before too long, later this month. But today we're visiting another place with spectacular ruins from 2000 years back: **Philippi**.

Let me flash up a **map** for you, too, just so we can get our bearings. All of the places we'll be visiting this month are around that top right end of the Mediterranean. Remember that Jerusalem is at the far right of the Med map. And from there, in those early years of the Christian church, people took the message first up that eastern seaboard of the Med, and then left across what is now Turkey - or "Asia", then - until eventually getting to Italy and Rome over the next two to three decades.

The story of that adventure comes in the Bible in the book of Acts, and we'll be following through five escapades over these five weeks. *Escapades* is probably a fair word, just as we have seen in today's set of readings. It is not all a laugh a minute, or a relaxing holiday. There's thrills and excitement, for sure, and it doesn't take much to work out exhilarating some of the things we read must have been. But there's some pretty scary stuff going on, too, as we also read. All in all, we could sum it up by saying that ***in a new area, Paul's team encounter serious challenges as well as wonderful opportunities for the Gospel***

But that's enough introduction from me. I find these accounts from the Bible just tell themselves so well. Let's pick it up just a bit earlier from where we started reading earlier on, right at the end of Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas have already done one tour of the area of our modern Turkey, and reported back to the other apostles in the church at Jerusalem. And then ...

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”

(Acts 15:36)

So that’s what he did, along with Timothy.

As they went on their way through the cities, ... the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

(Acts 16:4-5)

But before our first episode opens up, there is a bit of confusion. They’re doing some good stuff encouraging those churches they are re-visiting, but, since they’re in this kind of area again ... what about going into some *new* territory to share the good news, just like last time? Only now it all seems very confusing and discouraging, even. Doors just stay shut.

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

(Acts 16:6-7)

We’re not sure precisely how the Holy Spirit said *No* ... but the message was clear enough. So on they go.

So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

(Acts 16:8)

And now a door opens.

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

(Acts 16:9)

And when there is an obviously God-arranged invitation like this, there can only be one answer. Let’s make plans. And conveniently, they are in a port!

So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days.

(Acts 16:11-12)

So here we are, Philippi. Something a bit curious in the way Luke wrote that sentence there. It doesn’t have a word for *Roman* in it. He just says ... “and a colony”. Because that’s the only thing there really were “colonies” of, in those days.

And we needn't think of it like we might do nowadays about the British (or French, or Belgian, or Dutch, or whatever) *colonies*, as somehow a rather dark part of our history, something that we should be ashamed of. There's no shameful oppression of the natives in this, nothing particularly racist. Yes, Roman society was built on the routine employment of a huge number of slaves, and that's maybe a different issue.

But, back then, for a provincial city to be named as a *colony* was a glorious achievement, something that people would be immensely proud of. I checked out Philippi just a bit.

Rome conquered Macedonia (Of course, Macedonia *then* is not going to be identical to Macedonia *now*) in 168 BC, and divided it into four administrative districts. Then in 146 BC Macedon became a single Roman province, and was Philippi one of its prominent centres. The city benefited greatly from the construction of the **Via Egnatia**, the major road which connected the area to the Adriatic in the south and the Dardanelles in the north. A well-planned forum was built, along with a basilica, and a commercial street joined the heart of the city to the Via Egnatia.

In 42 BC, it was the scene of the huge **battle** which saw Mark Antony and Octavian gain revenge on Julius Caesar's assassins, Brutus and Cassius. It then became a Roman colony settled by army veterans and produced its own coinage.

And when Octavian defeated Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, the city received another influx of new residents, this time settlers who had lost their land during reforms in Italy. In 27 BC the city gained the honorary title of *Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis*. And because of its strategic location Philippi became a strategic location for trade despite the fact it was 10 miles from Neapolis, the nearest sea port.

As a Roman colony, Philippi was intended to be a miniature version of Rome. Of a population of maybe 10,000 - 15,000, the vast majority of that population would have been slaves, service providers, and peasant farmers. Most of them would have lived either at or below subsistence level. But with the grant of land to retired soldiers nearly 80 years before Paul set foot in Philippi, military veterans and their families would have comprised an important though small minority within the population.

And see how it must have been have revelled in its *colony* status, with **ruins** like this still giving us some hint of the grandeur of the place. And so it's probably not surprising that Paul's first recorded encounter here is with one of the wealthy entrepreneurs making the most of the city's highly strategic location.

Episode 1: the trader

But not quite what or how you would expect. Paul's regular procedure in visiting a new town would be to head for the synagogue, to start sharing the message about the Messiah with Jews. But here in this city of ten thousand or more

people, *there is no synagogue*. Jewish tradition stated that there needed to be only ten men in order to form a synagogue, but it appears that there are not even that many. So, right away, Paul has to improvise. No synagogue ... but surely there cannot be *no* Jewish people in a city of this size? So ... maybe ...

And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, ...

(Acts 16:13)

And yes, they *do* find some people there. But ... this is still rather odd ... it looks as if there are no men there.

... and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.

(Acts 16:13)

So ... pause a moment. If we hadn't read on already, what would our expectations be? It seems to me that there's a kind of theme running through the whole of this chapter, about being prepared for anything. Do you think Paul was actually a bit disappointed by what he finds here in Philippi? No synagogue ... and then no men? I can't see much coming from this ... can you?

And actually, the person we go on to read about becomes quite a key player in the establishment of a new church in this town. Maybe disappointments are a way that God uses to show us that *he* is nothing like defeated even if it looks like a bit of a dead end to you and me. So it just happens that there is a high-powered trader here in this little group of women.

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, ...

(Acts 16:14)

Now "**purple goods**" might not mean much to us nowadays, but that is elite-level merchandise. Think of those period dramas from Roman days, and the emperor and such like would very likely be wearing robes dyed in "Tyrian purple" - the most expensive you could get. And *that* makes this Lydia very well-to-do indeed.

But here is something else you couldn't have predicted - unless you bear in mind where this meeting took place.

... who was a worshiper of God.

(Acts 16:14)

Now that's a slightly technical word. It's a bit like we might say nowadays that someone is "on the fringe" of a church. But this is about as near as you can be without actually having officially signed up. Men from a non-Jewish background were rather more common as "worshippers" - because to become fully Jewish convert would involve circumcision.

But this would mean that she had already heard quite a bit about the true God from what we call the Old Testament. Heard ... but not totally understood yet. Folks, notice that. It is quite possible to do church for years, to be one of the regulars ... and yet miss what it is all about. Here's what makes the difference now, in Philippi, with those visitors joining in at the place of prayer on the riverside:

The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

(Acts 16:14)

Now I don't think that was primarily a big emotional experience. So don't go fretting about whether you've ever known a time when it seems as if you were sort of turned inside out, or dissolved in floods of tears. It's not a question of whether the **scales** fall from your eyes *and make a huge clatter when they hit the floor.*

It's really down to do you really see and understand what God has done in sending Jesus, and how that applies personally to *you*. It's not accepting the fact that there is a God, and human beings are sinful. It's realising that *you* need a Saviour from *your* sin; it's realising that Jesus is that Saviour; and it's then turning *from* your sin *to* him. All those truths that were just so many facts to **tick off** your mental list of what constitutes reality, all so much theory ... suddenly becomes personal. And you realise that *you, personally*, can come to know God through Jesus Christ. That's why Luke writes not just "the Lord opened her heart" - which could be all very personally-experientally-touchy-feelie - but to the specifics of Jesus Christ, to

The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

(Acts 16:14)

You can tell it has to be those specifics included, because of what comes next.

And after she was baptised, and her household as well, ...

(Acts 16:15)

Being a Baptist, I think that most likely means that it means she invited Paul to share this good news with her household as well, but I know that on both this occasion and one later in this chapter, we're making an argument there from silence, and not everyone will find that convincing. But you can certainly see that this Lydia was very *convinced*. See what happens now! No, Paul has not been received by a group of God-fearing *men*, but by a single woman with substantial means at her disposal. And it looks as if her home then becomes Paul's base for the mission to Philippi.

... she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

(Acts 16:15)

So that's episode 1: the trader. Now we go to someone at totally the other end of the social scale, with

Episode 2: the slave girl

We're some time later, I presume. I don't know just much later, but it might be on a subsequent Sabbath, to judge by the destination. The first few words, in that culture, would have been nothing unusual, remember:

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl ...
(Acts 16:16)

But this rapidly escalates into a sorry picture of dire exploitation. I don't think we are far off people-trafficking here, or at least the mindset that means this girl is depersonalised into simply a source of income. But instead of selling her body, this girl is being forced to sell her soul.

... a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.
(Acts 16:16)

And I know it's quite possible to think that this is 2000 years ago, when they believed in stuff like that. Nowadays we'd put it down to some kind of mental illness. But I think that kind of sniffy approach is really not very fair.

For one thing, did you notice that at verse 10, "they" changes to "we"?

So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.
(Acts 16:8)

... we sought to go on into Macedonia, ...
(Acts 16:10)

So among the group of people on this mission we now have Luke, who has joined them at some recent point: Luke, an educated doctor, with an astute observational mind that would not be easily swayed by superstitious nonsense. It's this Luke who records "a spirit of divination":

... a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.
(Acts 16:16)

And this is made all the more credible by his reporting the cold economics of the scene. This girl made a load of money by this "fortune-telling". If it's just a show, it's a very convincing show, that has people digging into their wallets.

And if we need further convincing ... read on and see how the power of Jesus totally changes the situation. If it's all just a show ... why didn't the show carry on? And to start with, this slave girl was exactly right in what she said, wasn't she? Isn't this precisely what Paul and Silas and Luke and anyone else were about?

She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."

(Acts 16:17)

There's quite a bit of theological truth in there, way about the standard fare of the Roman Empire and its standard beliefs. A "**Most High God**", for example - not that rag-tag rabble of **so-called "gods"** bickering on the top of Mount Olympus. And **the way of salvation**, not just one more possible route to some kind of spiritual experience. Where is a slave girl going to get *those* kinds of ideas from?

But when this first started happening, what do you think that Paul and the guys thought? *Great, a bit of free advertising? Endorsement from one of the local traders?* But ... it continues ...

And this she kept doing for many days.

(Acts 16:18)

And Paul responds. How do you read this? What's going on in his head and his heart here?

Paul, having become greatly annoyed, ...

(Acts 16:18)

Now I'm not convinced that "annoyed" is the right translation there. The word speaks about a lot of inward turmoil, but I don't think this is directed at the girl herself. Far more likely, I think, he knows what will happen if he responds by freeing her from this spiritual bondage. It is exactly what Luke records does happen, when the financial implications of her deliverance strike home. The "nice little earner" no longer earns, and you can bet your bottom dollar that somebody's going to be mighty unhappy about that. And that's going to affect this Gospel campaign.

So I don't think Paul is quite so much "annoyed", as just inwardly *tormented*. There's all these people hearing the Gospel, perhaps even helped by this probably quite famous slave girl's announcements. But look at the cost *to her*, spiritually tormented. Eventually I reckon it is that Paul cannot stand the heartbreak of seeing her so degraded by that "spirit of divination", and then further exploited by her owners. Never mind the preaching that could save dozens of hundreds ... but what good is that if it's maintained at the cost of that life being further and further corroded? ... and when Jesus could set her free! So here's the breaking point.

Paul ... 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.

(Acts 16:18)

So she was free - not that we have any idea from what Luke writes what happened to her afterwards. "Many days" leading up to this moment of deliverance ... and now I get the impression that things start to happen very fast.

Luke has written this very subtly, I think. Just see how mercenary that slave girl's owners were. They don't care how awful it must have been for her to be spiritually abused in this way. All they see is the money. Luke uses precisely the same word in the following verse. What is the spirit that "came out"?

And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, ...

(Acts 16:18-19)

Folks, isn't this pretty awful, really? People just used as commodities. I doubt that we would do anything at that kind of level, but how do we view the people who just come into our lives occasionally? People who serve us in **shops or restaurants**, maybe. Are they just sort of invisible to us? Or people you may have only a few seconds with, but whose day you could brighten by a friendly word or a smile or a **Thank you!**

I confess that some are more difficult to interact at all positively to. **Traffic wardens**, perhaps, spring to mind. What about those people who have those awful jobs that involve **phoning you up** and trying to scam you? I don't know that I have a lot of good responses to people like that. I have learned a bit of assertiveness over the years, interrupting their patter. Most times I try to answer peaceably, though I can't say I have always managed that.

But have you stopped to think just how desperate those people must be, to take on jobs that simply involve trying to trick people on the other side of the world into giving them credit card or bank account details so that you can be stolen from. You might think those people are despicable. I have at times tried shaming them, and I don't think that's necessarily wrong. But the jobs they do are despicable. And the people who put them to work, I have to say, come closer to being despicable. How far different do you think people like that are from the people we're reading about here ... who don't care for their now useless slave, just about the money they are no longer getting? And who therefore raise a serious stink in the Philippi marketplace.

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.

(Acts 16:19)

The magistrates get involved. The crowd is incited to join in some kind of riot. A semi-official but very thorough beating is dished out to the trouble-makers, and then they're dumped into the high-security section of the local jail.

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.

(Acts 16:23-24)

And that closes Episode 2. It had looked as if things were going well. But the **wheels have definitely come off** now, haven't they? Paul and Silas (goodness knows what happened to anyone else in the group!) stuck in the cold, dark stench of a prison at midnight. Not a very cheerful escapade now, is it?

Episode 3: the jailer

But they're odd old guys, these evangelists. I'll bet that the jailer here - probably a retired Roman soldier, with a fair amount of experience of life - might have seen a few things in his time ... but nothing quite like this!

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ...

(Acts 16:25)

It is definitely what you'd call a captive audience! But isn't it interesting that people in that situation found the Gospel - I'm presuming a bit about the content of those hymns - worth listening to. Maybe we *shouldn't* write off people so easily nowadays, do you think?

And what happens now is not *quite* so unusual as it might seem. Remember that that part of the world is known to be subject to earthquakes. Corinth, for example, though quite a bit to the south, had been flattened several times over the centuries. So it isn't necessarily a totally miraculous event for an earthquake to strike ... but it is curiously selective in its effects, you have to admit.

... 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.

(Acts 16:26)

And so the jailer, assuming that the prisoners were gone, and - even though it was beyond his control - his life would be forfeit if he let any prisoners escape ... well, immediate suicide looks like is *best* option!

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.

(Acts 16:27)

But here is another kind of miracle, I think. Did you notice what Paul says about the other prisoners?

But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

(Acts 16:28)

Doors open, chains unfastened. Everyone's going to do a runner ... surely? But they *don't*! Do you think they stayed realising that they needed to find out more about this God that Paul and Silas were singing hymns to? If after they had been knocked about and then dumped into jail they could *still* rejoice ... what is this God to them? Do you think that that God could be something like that to *them*, too? That kind of joy has got to outweigh even escape from these jail cells.

Folks, does the Gospel of Jesus Christ grab *you* like that? For all that there might be hardships associated with following Jesus, does the prospect of *that kind of peace and joy* force you to stay and listen, no matter the risk?

See now, here's the jailer, who has missed out on some of those goings on, is overwhelmed with it all.

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?"

(Acts 16:29-30)

Perhaps he is just asking how he may avoid the penalty the law said he was due if any prisoners even now escaped. After all, if all the inmates' restraints are unlocked, there's no way he could keep them all confined. Or perhaps he is thinking about salvation in a bigger sense. Whichever, that's how Paul and Silas answer him:

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.

(Acts 16:31-32)

So again, here's the pattern. You believe, and you are baptised to publicly acknowledge that belief. On this occasion, when a whole household is baptised, we're told that they all had "the word of the Lord" spoken to them - unlike earlier with Lydia's household. And notice the change that already has come over this man, even before they can get him dunked. Before, these prisoners were merely his job. Now they are his brothers!

And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptised 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.

(Acts 16:33-34)

And now we find that God's purposes to do good to the people of Philippi have *not* been derailed after all. There's quaking all round in Philippi that day. First there's the earthquake, then there's the jailer quaking in his boots ... and then it's the turn of the magistrates, when they find out that they have roughed up a Roman citizen. No, they will *not* just leave quietly. They need to have it officially acknowledged that the local authorities cannot just cart you off and man-handle you

for telling the truth about Jesus Christ. Actually, we might need to stand up for that right in *this* country nowadays, too.

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.

(Acts 16:37-38)

So the public apology is forthcoming. But it might be better if the evangelists moved on.

So they came and apologised to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.

(Acts 16:39)

But no. There is something more to do in Philippi before Paul and his group will move on. There is a group of God’s people here who will need nurturing. In time, they will need writing to, when Paul does have some more time on his hands. But for now, a visit will do - whether the authorities like it or not.

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

(Acts 16:40)

There’s Lydia again, by the sounds of it with “the brothers” meeting in her house. God opened her heart. She opened her house. God sprang open the chains of various forms of confinement in Philippi. The slave girl set free in the name of Jesus Christ. The prisoners and even the jailer in charge of the local clink hear of an even greater liberation than from chains of iron.

This God of grace set people free in Philippi. And he still does today. And the mission of Paul and the others is set to continue. We’ll see them in Thessalonica, for another **virtual visit** next week. Another town. Another group of people who need to hear that message of freedom, life, grace, hope, peace, joy ... in Jesus Christ.



Be prepared for *anything!*