



Catalog No. 1267

Acts 16:11-40

Twenty-fifth Message

Gary Vanderet

September 18th, 2005

OPEN HEART, OPEN HOME

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

In our studies of the apostle Paul's second missionary journey we have already seen how God redirected the missionary team from their original itinerary. Driven west by the circumstances of closed doors and rejection, they correctly interpreted these events as God's loving direction. We left the missionary team in Troas, where Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia asking him to come over and help. Their conclusion was that God was leading them to Europe.

In hindsight, this seemingly obscure event turned out to be one of the most significant moments in history. The entrance of the gospel into Europe changed the whole course of Western civilization. If Emperor Claudius, who occupied the throne in Rome at the time, was asked to name the most significant event of his reign, he would not have said it was the time an obscure, bald-headed Jew decided to leave Asia for Europe. Unbeknownst to Claudius, the flag of Christianity was unfurled in the empire that day, and the reigning Christ was about to win many to himself.

We resume our studies in Acts 16.

So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. (Acts 16:11-12 NASB)

In nautical terms, "running a straight course" means that the wind was at their backs. Unable to go north or south, they had been driven west by the Spirit, and they correctly interpreted that through all of the difficult and hindering circumstances, God was leading them to Europe. So favorable were the winds they were able to sail the 156 miles in just two days. Their return journey, recorded in Acts 20, took five days. They must have known that God was propelling them forward with the message of grace. Reading this, I thought of the Irish blessing, attributed to Saint Patrick, "May the wind be always at your back."

They spent the night on the little island of Samothrace, in the Aegean Sea. On the following day they sailed to Neapolis, the seaport of Philippi. They then walked the 10 miles to Philippi, along the famous Ignatian Way, which ran across the whole Greek peninsula from the Aegean to the Adriatic Sea.

Macedonia was divided into four districts. Philippi, a very strategic place and tough to penetrate, was the chief city of one of those districts. It was a Roman city, a little bit of Rome in the midst of Greek culture. A century earlier, Augustus, the

Roman emperor, had granted Roman status to Philippi, so that everyone living there was considered a Roman citizen. The city was settled with many retired Roman soldiers who took great pride in the fact that they were a Roman colony located so far from the capital.

Philippi was a large, thriving, metropolitan city that was hard to reach. Apparently, very few Jews lived there. In fact, as we will see, it seems there may have been a strong anti-Semitic spirit in the place. So Paul faced a dilemma. Where would he begin his ministry there? His usual pattern was to first go to the local synagogue, but there was no point of contact for him. How would he break into the culture of that city?

Many of you face similar obstacles in life. How do you break in and influence your workplace, campus, or neighborhood? How do you reach people who seem indifferent to spiritual things? Paul must have wrestled with these questions too for those first few days.

And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us. (16:13-15)

According to Jewish tradition, ten adult male Jews were needed to have a synagogue. Apparently they lacked that number. If these requirements could not be met, then the Law provided that the Jewish people were to gather under the open sky, near a river or by the sea. Thus the missionary team (Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke) walked to the Gangites River, just outside the city, seeking some fellow Jews on the Sabbath.

They found a small group, all women, probably made up of wives of Roman soldiers or, in Lydia's case, a single businesswoman, a Gentile, meeting for prayer down by the riverside. They realized that this was a divine appointment, and they sat down and began to teach.

One woman in the group listened attentively. She is described as a worshiper of God. She had a yearning for God and, finding nothing to meet her need in the pagan religions of the Gentile world, she had attached herself to this group of Jewish

women and was worshiping with them. As Paul preached, she realized that Jesus was the one she was seeking.

Here was a bright, successful businesswoman competing in the marketplace with men, and succeeding, something of an anomaly in those days. She sold purple garments, an exotic, expensive cloth, working for some firm in Thyatira. She was doing well. She had a large home with a number of servants in Philippi. God opened her heart, and she opened her home. The account indicates that she begged these people to come into her home. She realized that was one thing she could do for them. There was need for a place to meet for this new church, so she opened her home. She made available what she had. She didn't wait until she got a new carpet or the sofa was recovered. As soon as God opened her heart, she made what she had available to him. That is so encouraging. God had opened her heart, so she opened her home.

I'm thinking today of my wonderful friend Vern Crosby, who went home to meet his Lord last week. Vern and Mildred were such an important part of so many of our lives. They weren't Bible teachers, and they didn't necessarily have any gifts of evangelism. They simply asked a question early in their marriage, "What if we made our home available for people to use?" As a result of that decision, lives were changed. Scores of high school students met Christ in their home. Many Young Life leadership teams were trained for ministry there. Their hospitality provided a place where relationships were cultivated.

That's what Lydia did. She had a home, and she made it available. It was from this beginning, from this new church in Philippi, that the Church rolled on to the West through Europe and into Spain and Germany by the middle of the second century, and eventually on to us.

In retrospect, Lydia's simple gesture of making herself available, of opening her home, became an extremely significant gesture.

It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment. (16:16-18)

Continuing their outreach in Philippi, the team is accosted by a demon-possessed slave girl. The phrase, literally translated, is, "a spirit of python." This is not the kind of python we might imagine. In this case it refers to a monster in Greek mythology. Supposedly, the god Apollo slew a dragon called Python, and in doing so gained the ability to predict the future, which he gave to others. A group of women called pythoresses evidently could predict the future with some accuracy.

Ancient Greek and Roman writers refer to them. They had this ability because they were demon-possessed. So here is a demon-possessed woman with clairvoyant powers, owned by spiritual pimps who sold her metaphysical powers. Day after day she followed Paul and the team, shouting what seemed to be the truth, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." Paul finally became so irritated, not at her, but at the demon, that he exorcised it.

Why did Paul stop her from preaching what appeared to be the truth? He was simply doing what our Lord did. Jesus would not allow the demons to speak even though they spoke truth, because the character of the witness is important. James says that the demons have doctrine down pat. They know as much theology as we do, probably more, and they know it well. They are accurate in their understanding of biblical truth. But they are not permitted to give witness because their demonic character has never been changed.

This says something about the integrity of our Christian witness. It probably would be better if some Christians never said a word, because when they speak, they diminish the gospel. This certainly doesn't mean we have to be perfect. If that were the case, none of us could give witness. But the intention of our heart must be to live out the truth as we discover it. Because these spirits were demonic in their character, Paul would not allow them to speak. He exorcised the demon, and presumably this young woman became a member of the church at Philippi.

We are not told that specifically, but I think she wanted what these young men were proclaiming, which is why she was following them. Although Luke does not explicitly refer to either her conversion or her baptism, the fact that her deliverance took place between the conversions of Lydia and the jailer leads readers to infer that the Lord opened her heart as well. If that is true, we can picture this new little church gathering in Lydia's home: Lydia in her beautiful clothes, sitting next to this former demon-possessed ragamuffin, loving each other, because the gospel breaks down all the barriers that we erect. Things like education, culture, race and income don't matter anymore. The gospel demolishes all these divisions.

As a result of the exorcism, the slave-girl's owners lost their source of income.

But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans." The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a com-

mand, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. (16:19-24)

In a clever word play, the verb translated “was gone” (verse 19), is the same verb used of the spirit “having gone out.” When Paul exorcised the spirit, he exorcised their source of income as well. In the ensuing melee, false charges and racial slurs are made against Paul and Silas, and their arrest followed. Timothy and Luke are spared, probably because they are Gentiles.

It was a severe flogging, perhaps the first of the three which Paul later mentions (2 Cor 11:23, 25). Their backs were reduced to a sticky, swollen mass of lacerated skin and dried blood. Then they are placed in the maximum-security area of the prison where air had to be pumped in, a very dark place indeed. Later, when the jailer tries to find them, he has to light a lamp. It was winter—dark, damp and cold. Their feet were in stocks, not made of wood, but metal braces fastened to their legs.

But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. (16:25-26)

Luke records that about midnight, the worst time of night, when our energy level is at its lowest and we are most inclined to be anxious and depressed, Paul and Silas were moaning and complaining about the injustice of it all. No, that’s what Luke would write if I were in that jail. They were doing what God had called them to do. They were faithful to that call.

And this was a terrible injustice. I suspect that many of us would be complaining or full of self-pity. But not Paul and Silas. They were “praying and singing hymns of praise to God.” And the prisoners were “listening intently” to them. They were amazed by the behavior of these men. The Lord heard the praises and decided to have nature join in, so the rocks “cried out,” in the form of an earthquake, big enough to shake the foundation of the prison. Someone has said, “This was the first sacred concert in Europe, and Paul and Silas brought the house down!” The building itself didn’t fall down, but it was shaken to its foundation. The doors flew open, and the staples that held their chains to the walls fell out as the mortar was shaken loose.

When the jailer awoke [his house was evidently over the top of the jail] and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. [He was on the verge of killing himself, because he knew what would happen to him when the Roman authorities found out that his prisoners had escaped.] But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!” And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (16:27-30)

Would the jailer have asked that question if Paul and Silas had been responding to injustice the way most of us respond to the difficulties and stresses of life? We complain about our work situation. We criticize our boss. We whine about how much money we make. We’re depressed because we’re single or because we’re married. We’re irritated with our kids. Who in the world would say, “I’d like to be just like you”?

It was that sense of the missionaries’ peace, contentment and joy in the midst of injustice and pain that caused the jailer to say, “What can I do to be delivered from my fear and anxiety, from my frustration, self pity and depression?” Paul would later write to the church at Philippi, “[T]o you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Phil 1:29). But the Scriptures declare that our suffering is purposeful. We suffer for Christ’s sake so that when people see us, they recognize some power in us that cannot be explained by our background, personality or education.

The jailer saw it, and that’s why he asked them, “*What must I do to be saved?*” The missionaries’ answer is the gospel in one simple command.

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 together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household. (16:31-34)

The jailer and his entire crew believe the simple message of the grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ. They all believed. The two subjects, “you and your household,” are controlled by the two verbs “believe and you will be saved.” In other words, Paul didn’t say to the jailer, “You alone believe, and your household will be saved as well.” His statement was that if you and your household believe, you will all be saved. And they all responded.

Notice the immediate manifestation of the grace of God in the jailer’s life. The first thing he does is wash their wounds. What a beautiful picture. The tough jailer, who just hours before had thrown them into the cell and brutally locked them in stocks, was now washing their wounds, washing away all the blood and dirt and filth. He was washed, and now he washed.

As we saw earlier in the passage with Lydia, an open heart leads to an open home. The Philippian church is growing. There is an upper-class businesswoman and her household, a lower-class slave girl, and now a middle-class Roman soldier and his family.

Following their release, Paul went back to Lydia’s house and encouraged the believers to go on in their life with God.

These events are some of the most significant in the history of Western civilization. The Church in Europe began in Lydia's house. It spread on to Thessalonica; then to Berea, Athens, and Corinth; then into Italy; then into Spain; then into Germany and Britain, and then on to North America. All of this happened because one woman opened her home to God.

I don't know what God wants to do in your life, but if you are like me, you want to be a part of what he is doing in this world. The only thing necessary is that we make ourselves available. We say to God, "Here I am. Here is my house, my apartment, my car. Here is my body. I make myself available to you." There is no more exciting way to live than to give yourself away in serving others.

It is also possible that you have never given your life to the Lord at all. Perhaps you are a seeker, like Lydia or the slave girl or the jailer. Whatever your need is this morning, Jesus can meet it as he did those different needs in Philippi. If your need is intellectual, a search for reality, the Lord can open your heart as he did Lydia's to respond to the gospel. If your need is psychological, maybe you are experiencing some inward or personal bondage, he can free you from oppression as he did that slave girl. He can set you free. If you have a guilty conscience, he offers you cleansing and salvation if you will put your trust in him. He longs to meet your deepest needs.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Rom 15:13 NIV)

© 2005 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino