

Philippi

Acts 16:6-40

Why we're looking at Acts

A couple of years ago I visited the ruins of Ephesus in Turkey. One of the things that really struck me was just how full of other religions the place was – the main street was lined with beautiful, ornate temples to different gods – and in between the temples were brothels where prostitutes worked.

I was struck how far from Christianity this all was; if you were to design a city as opposite to a Christian city as possible, you might come up with a design something like Ephesus – and that was similar to every other city at the time – full of the worship of false gods; full of immorality; full of 'worldly wisdom and philosophy; absolutely hostile or indifferent to this new Way that a handful of people from somewhere on the edge of the Roman Empire were talking about.

If you looked through human eyes, these massive, multi-cultured cities must have looked **so big** and the new Church must have seemed **so small!**

And yet, within a generation, the Church had grown and taken root across the known world – across Asia and the Middle East as far as India; down into Africa; Around the Mediterranean and, as we'll look at today, into Europe.

And in some of these hostile cities, within 100 years half the population were Christians; and within 300 years Christianity was the 'official religion' of the Roman Empire and the largest faith on the planet – which it has remained to this day!

What happened was an unprecedented explosion in the Church, which, 2000 years later, is still rumbling on and gathering momentum.

And the beginnings of this are found in the Book of Acts (at least the Northern and Western expansion; the Southern and Eastern growth was happening too, it just isn't covered much in Acts)

So as we meet in the shadow of huge Gurdwaras and Mosques and surrounded by immorality, with much of Britain saying Christianity is irrelevant, I think that the Book of Acts has something to say to us!

We need to keep remembering just how explosive it is that Jesus the King has commissioned and empowered His Church to take the Good News of His Resurrection and Reign to the ends of the Earth.

And we need to know that, because humanly, we look very small in this city and the godlessness of this city can look very large.

As Gavin reminded us last week, Jesus got hold of Saul – the man who was persecuting the Church the most and turned him into the apostle to the Gentiles (the nations). And so, after some years of preparation, Barnabas and Saul went on a journey around Cyprus and southern Turkey starting churches.

We're now looking at Paul's second journey, without Barnabas, but now with a new team of Silas, Timothy and Luke (the writer of Acts)

And as Gavin talked about last week, as they set out, they were clearly guided by God to go to Macedonia in Greece.

I want to take a moment to talk a bit more about this guidance:

Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:6-10)

God's guidance

- 1st journey – common sense Paul & Barnabas (Barnabas was from Crete, Saul was from Tarsus in Galatia, so they went to Crete and Galatia)
- 2nd journey – strategy – aim for Ephesus, the biggest city nearby

- Led by opposition/circumstances (illness?)/prophetic words – “The Spirit stopped us...”
- God’s intervention – “vision of a man in Macedonia”
- Testing the word – “it seemed good to **us**...”
- Guidance by all these means v.10 “sumbibazo” (to knit together) – “we concluded...”
 “...we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (v.10)

This guidance is all about strategy for mission, not which job to do, but I believe there is a lot to learn from the way that Paul was led by God, and I think we can apply this when we pray for direction.

Paul and his companions then acted straight away and set off to Philippi. This was a small city in southern Greece which had grown up around a gold rush a few hundred years before. Then in 42 BC there had been a battle there. The Roman Emperor – Octavian won and to thank his soldiers, gave some of them land in Philippi. He then made Philippi a Roman colony – giving it the same legal status as the City of Rome; this made it an important strategic city with a lot of influence.

And here’s what happened next.

From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us. (v.11 – 15)

Paul and his companions used a lot of common sense in going to a Jewish place of prayer (you needed at least 10 Jewish men to form a synagogue, so this would have been where the Jews of Philippi met)

And Paul made use of his position as a visiting Rabbi to speak to the people there. And the result was Lydia and her household believed and were baptised, giving the Gospel its first toe-hold in Europe, with a base to work from and presumably, some financial support.

So this was a fantastic, quick start in this hard city.

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

I've often wondered exactly what happened here and why Paul reacted in this way. The passage says that the girl 'had a spirit of a python' (snake). This refers to a place in Greece called Delphi where the Greek god Apollo was worshipped and where people came to from all over the known world to get kinds of pagan prophecies or oracles.

The god Apollo was represented by python snakes and at the centre of Delphi was 'the Serpent Column' picturing this. And so this girl (or the demon that was afflicting her) was linked to this worship of Apollo and the kind of fortune telling or prophesying that happened in Delphi.

So why did Paul get so troubled?

It seems like the girl was saying true things about them – they were servants of the Most High God and they were proclaiming the Way of salvation; if the slave girl was well known in the city, surely this must have been useful, free publicity!

None of the books I've read on this help much, so here are a few of my thoughts:

Firstly, the term “Most High God” is one that could have been ambiguous and confusing – to the Jews and Christians, The Most High God is the One we worship as revealed in the bible, but to Greeks, the most high god was Zeus.

Secondly, as I’ve tried to picture the scene, and based on some experiences I have had with people being troubled by demons, I wonder whether it wasn’t what she was saying, but how she was saying it – possibly in a mocking way.

But I think that probably Paul was just troubled at seeing this girl bound up by demonic powers and so was moved to set her free. I don’t believe that he saw the girl as the enemy – rather than a poor woman who was bound up and needed freedom and a Saviour. The word used “troubled” could mean that he responded in anger – losing his temper at the demon; but I think that the implication is more that he was moved with **compassion** – as Jesus had been when He saw the crowds harassed and helpless (Matt 9:36) (“Splanchnizomai”)

If we want to see the effectiveness of the Church in our city like Paul saw in the places he visited, then I believe that we need to be moved with compassion too.

Are we? When’s the last time you saw someone or heard about someone and were moved?

When’s the last time your knee-jerk reaction to a loud group of young people or gang members or Jehovah’s Witnesses or people on the Gay Pride march yesterday or Muslim neighbours was to be moved with compassion in your gut?

We have two choices; either we are moved with compassion and move towards people, or we see the people around us as the enemy or the problem.

And if we’re not being moved with compassion, then it’s time we knelt down and repented and asked God to open our eyes.

And whenever Jesus was moved with compassion (which happened 8 times in the Gospels) the next thing that happened was action – He taught the crowd; He fed them; He healed.

Paul’s compassion led to the slave woman being set free of the demonic oppression she had lived under – and, reading through the chapter, the implication was that she then became part of the new Philippian Church.

An American pastor called David Wilkerson died last month; in 1963 he saw a news story about a New York gang who had beaten a disabled boy to death. Instead of being appalled by the crime (or as well as being appalled) he found himself being moved with compassion – so he moved to New York and started working with the very worst gangs – and God broke through.

Godly compassion leads to action leads to breakthrough.

But we also need to be realistic and understand that establishing God's Kingdom – His Church amongst pagan temples and brothels and the depravity of a city will lead to **opposition**:

When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. (v.16-24)

Remember that on his last journey Paul had been stoned and left for dead and after the Brothers had prayed for him he rose up, went back into the city (Lystra – Acts 14) with the message "We must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God." Here on their second journey, they were about to demonstrate this again.

They were stripped naked, beaten and severely flogged. Roman floggings were often fatal. There is a book from the 2nd Century AD called "The acts of Paul and Thecla" that describes Paul, probably based on eyewitness accounts passed down. He is described as "moderate height, rather bald with a long nose and beetling brows and bow-legged." (The Apostle, Pollock, p.37)

The bow-legged part was probably due to permanent damage caused by the floggings he received.

The beating (without trial) that happened was brutal, and then they were put in stocks – feet locked in a way that was extremely uncomfortable, in the inner room of a prison and closely guarded.

But they don't come across as people in prison with an uncertain future:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family. (v.25-34)

This is an amazing scene; two badly beaten men are encouraging each other on – worshipping at the tops of their voices in the middle of the night...and then God responds to their faith and love for Him by sending an earthquake that loosed everyone's chains and burst the prison doors open – and all the other prisoners are so stunned that nobody moves!

Imagine what it must have been like to be in the next cell – firstly hearing worship to an unknown God as a response to a severe flogging; and then suddenly there is an earthquake and your chains fall off and the doors to your cell burst open, and as the dust settles, in the darkness, you are thinking "What just happened!?"

And then the gaoler who knows that under Roman law – which he is bound under, it is his life forfeit for any prisoner that escapes – so he is about to kill himself when he hears a voice from the darkest cell – "Don't worry!"

I think this whole account raises the question who is free?

- A slave girl is set free from a demon
- Two men are put in prison, but act as if they are completely free
- Then the free prison guard realises that he is chained to the law that will cost him his life and he has nowhere to run

And then, wonderfully, his prisoners tell him how to be free too.

When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: “Release those men.” (but they are already free) The jailer told Paul, “The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.”

Then Paul played his trump card; he was born a Roman citizen – which means that he has a status that even the city officials probably didn’t have – and they had broken their own law and could be held to account. So now Paul and Silas were very free indeed, but the officials were feeling very un-free!

But Paul said to the officers: “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.”

The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, *requesting* them to leave the city. But as free men, they decide when they will go. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left. (v.35-40)

There’s a huge challenge in building churches anywhere, but the challenge across cultures – challenging false religions and immorality is huge.

And there’s cost involved – I believe that so far we have faced intimidation and some inconvenience; but I believe that God may choose for us to pay a higher cost.

But the job is possible – and in fact it is guaranteed! Jesus is building His Church and the gates of Hell will not stand against it, let alone Mosques, Gurdwaras and gangs!

And if we allow God to keep on moving us with compassion then we will see His Church established; those in chains being set free; the sick being healed;

the Good News being preached to the poor...and the most unlikely people coming to faith in Jesus!

If you had asked someone who knew Philippi before Paul arrived “Who do you think might follow Jesus?” they may have guessed at Lydia – already a God-fearer, already seeking God – open to the Truth; but I doubt that you would have guessed the demonised slave girl or the hardened, compassionless Roman gaoler. But God chose them all for Himself.

And in Birmingham, God has people for Himself too.

The people out there are not the enemy; they are people God dearly loves and He wants us to see them like He does and He wants us to see this city with all the love and grace and compassion and hope that He has.