

Acts 16:6-40, No. 34**“How the Gospel Goes”****June 5, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We had an extensive account of Paul’s evangelism and church-planting ministry in chapters 13 and 14. Now Paul returns to that ministry and, in this case, we are furnished with more personal detail. There are sermons aplenty in the text we are about to read, but I plan to concentrate on one of its over-arching themes.

Text Comment

- v.6 How the Spirit communicated such instructions we are not told.

- v.8 Again, the Holy Spirit is directing. The southwest and the north having been closed to them, the only road left was the one that led northwest. And so they came to the port town of Troas on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea.

- v.9 So far their guidance had been negative. Finally they were given a specific direction to follow. Throughout Acts the Lord intervenes to guide only when the obvious direction was not the one he wished his missionaries to follow.

- v.10 Did you notice the change in pronoun. Suddenly “*we* sought to go on into Macedonia.” Luke is now present and is describing events which he witnessed personally. This is the first of four such “we-sections” in the book of Acts, sections of Luke’s history that were based on his own eye-witness testimony. Where Paul picked up Luke and added him to his entourage is never said but it was obviously before he left Asia Minor and crossed over into Europe. There is a 2nd century tradition that Luke was from Antioch, but, if he were, he was apparently not with Paul and Silas when they left Antioch on this second journey. Of course, in those days no one would have been conscious of the fact that they were leaving Asia and entering Europe. Nor would they have thought their doing so to be particularly significant. History, of course, would later make Europe the center of Christian thought and missionary endeavor for most of the period that separates that time from our own, but no one at that time would have had any idea of Europe’s eventual importance to the fortunes of the church.

- v.11 The details of the voyage are provided because Luke was along.

- v.12 Philippi was a ten mile walk from the port of Neapolis.

- v.13 There was no Jewish synagogue in Philippi, but there was a place where Jews and God-fearers gathered for worship. You had to have ten Jewish men to have a synagogue and the small group was apparently mostly women.

- v.14 Thyatira in Asia Minor was famous for its dyes and Lydia was probably the local agent for a Thyatiran manufacturer. [Stott, 263]

- v.15 No one can prove, of course, that there were infants or little children still in this woman's home, the servants of the home might well have been the household, but the term often includes children and, in any case, what we don't have is the highly individualistic approach to salvation common in western evangelicalism. That families were baptized together is a commonplace in the New Testament. In fact, of the ten specific instances of baptisms mentioned in the New Testament, five of them were the baptisms of households.
- v.17 From this point we do not have the first person plural pronoun for the rest of the chapter. But that doesn't mean that Luke wasn't still with them, only that he had no occasion to include himself in the narrative. He is recording what happened to others.
- v.18 It strikes us as odd that Paul allowed this to go on for days before finally doing something about it, but, then Luke was there! In any case, the girl was delivered from the evil spirit that controlled her and, though it is not said in so many words, her story being sandwiched between that of Lydia and the jailer, we may assume she too became a Christian.
- v.22 The real complaint of the slave girl's owners was that her deliverance had ruined her as a source of income – it's the economy stupid! – but to secure the interest of the magistrates they had to accuse them of things that would be considered important to Roman magistrates. Introducing a religion that didn't have the formal approval of the state was a serious crime. At the same time they appealed to the widespread anti-Semitism of the Greco-Roman world.
- v.25 With lacerated backs and in great pain, perhaps unable to sleep, Paul and Silas encouraged themselves by singing hymns to God. As Tertullian beautifully put it, "The legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven." [*To the Martyrs*, 2]
- v.27 He would have been executed as a matter of course had his prisoners escaped.
- v.30 The Lord was at work in his heart too and by a God-given instinct he realized that larger questions were raised by what had happened and that these men were the ones to consult.
- v.31 We have here one of the simplest and profoundest of statements of the gospel summons to be found anywhere in the Bible. And note again the promise that faith and salvation is appointed to run in family lines.
- v.35 They thought a public flogging and a night in jail would be sufficient to persuade them to leave town quietly. Paul had other plans.
- v.39 It was a serious infraction of Roman law to punish a citizen without trial, so there was no possibility of simply ignoring Paul's insistence. They needed to mollify him.

v.40 They left Philippi, but not without seeing the new believers first. Apparently Luke did not leave with them, as the pronoun reverts to the third person in 17:1.

What we have read this morning is a passage to which a biblically informed Christian will have reason to return repeatedly. It's importance lies not merely in his historical significance, as the account of the gospel's entrance into Europe, the part of the world that would prove to be the center of the gospel's influence and the base of its missionary activity in the world for nearly 2,000 years; not only in its account of the origin of the church in Philippi, which, as we know, will play an important role in the rest of the New Testament; but, still more, as a historical commentary on the way of salvation. Do you want to know how people are saved, how they pass from death to eternal life? Acts 16 is a very good place to begin. It is not, of course, a theological exposition of salvation. It is not, for example, what Paul gives us in Romans 1-9, where salvation is systematically explained: its accomplishment by Christ and its application by the Holy Spirit, its various dimensions or parts, and so on. What we have here is something different. Here we have salvation described in flesh and blood, in three memorable episodes, in the lives of three different people, two women and a man.

The chapter is most definitely an account of salvation. We pointed out in our reading of chapters 13 and 14, Luke's account of Paul's first missionary journey, how often the language of salvation appeared. Without stopping to explain his terms, Luke wanted his readers to know that the story he was telling was the story of salvation. Throughout that section we encounter repeatedly the vocabulary of salvation as we learn that vocabulary first in the Gospels and then throughout the rest of the New Testament: Jesus is presented to people as *the Savior*, Paul preached *the message of this salvation*, he declared *the forgiveness of sins, freedom to sinners*, Paul and Barnabas proclaimed *the grace of God*, they *brought salvation*, those who *believed in Jesus obtained eternal life*, the apostles bore witness to *the word of God's grace, the good news*, and so on. These terms – gospel, faith in Jesus Christ, the grace of God, eternal life, forgiveness of sins, and salvation – were Luke's way of explaining the meaning of the history that he was reporting. The significance of Paul's ministry was precisely that it was bringing *salvation to the unsaved, forgiveness to the unforgiven, and eternal life to the spiritually dead*.

Well, that is again what we find in chapter 16. We read in v. 10 that Paul went to Macedonia *to preach the good news to them*. And in v. 14 that Lydia paid attention to the message that Paul brought. In v. 17 the demon possessed girl herself identified Paul as one who was *proclaiming the way of salvation*. In his terror the jailer fell on his knees before Paul and asked: *what must I do to be saved?* And Paul replies, *Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved*. We are reading in this chapter three accounts of people *being saved through faith in Christ, they and, at least in two cases, their families with them*.

And the two great facts this chapter shows us about salvation in flesh and blood is what the Bible everywhere teaches us about salvation.

I. In the first place, lying behind and beneath the salvation of any human being lies the plan, the purpose, the choice, and the power of God.

Luke has already drawn our attention to this bottom fact about salvation when, in the middle of his account of Paul's first missionary journey, Luke explained that among the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch, "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed," a statement Luke obviously intends us to apply to the progress of the gospel everywhere, not just in that one city. God grants his salvation to those he has chosen to save.

And so it was on the second missionary journey, the Lord was himself granting salvation to the people he intended to save: to this one and then to that one. We see that sovereign orchestration of salvation throughout this narrative. As Paul and Silas moved westward through Asia Minor the Holy Spirit steered them away from the obvious routes and then gave Paul a vision directing him to Macedonia. They would have stayed in Asia; the slave girl would have remained as she was had the Holy Spirit not sent them across the sea to Macedonia. They stopped in the first substantial city they came to. And once they arrived and began to speak salvation began to spring up here and there. We are given an account of three episodes, but the reference to "the brothers" in the last verse of the chapter suggests that there were perhaps a good many other Philippians who were saved during those days.

And how did salvation come to them. Well, Luke leaves us in no doubt. "The Lord opened Lydia's heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." She'd never heard this message before. It was profoundly different from what she had been taught of the Jewish faith. She was a Gentile herself, but had been attracted to Judaism and had begun to practice it. That is what "worshipper of God" means in v.14. Paul was a complete stranger, bringing an unfamiliar message. Why did she believe it; why did she hear the bell-like tone of truth in everything he said? Why did she know, as she listened, that she needed the salvation that only Jesus Christ could give her? Because the Lord opened her heart. The Holy Spirit shed the light of the truth in her heart and convinced her of Jesus and the gospel. There were other women at that place of Jewish worship that day who did not respond in faith and gratitude. They heard what Paul was saying but remained unmoved. Lydia's life was changed, and that of her whole family, because the Lord opened her heart.

In the case of the demon-possessed servant girl it was the same. She was captive to this evil spirit. She could do nothing to escape its clutches, though, no doubt, she desperately wanted to do so. Hers was a miserable existence and she was helpless to change it. She was being used by the demon and by her masters. They had no interest in her as a person; she was nothing but a money making machine. And so it would have continued; but Paul, irritated by the big-mouthed demon, ordered him out of her in Jesus name. And so she was delivered, not because she had done anything, but because Jesus had done something for her and had returned her to a sound mind. The Lord's initiative, his divine power, and his divine kindness had changed her life. But take note. The owners of this slave girl saw what had happened. They witnessed her liberation from bondage. They saw what Paul had done in Jesus' name, whoever this Jesus was. But her happiness made no impression on them. They had taken a financial hit. We might have supposed that they would want to know how it happened that the demon had been exorcised from the girl, but they were too angry over their financial setback. We might have expected that it would have dawned on them that what they had just witnessed was something far more important and pointed to matters far more crucial to themselves than their income, but that thought apparently never occurred to them. It often doesn't still today!

And so it was with the jailer. The earthquake – God once again; Luke doesn't have to tell us that! – and its aftermath, and especially the fact that somehow the two prisoners, though now loose were still accounted for, had shaken this man to his foundations. What he meant by what he asked – “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” – probably he himself could hardly have explained. But somehow he interpreted the extraordinary events that had occurred in terms of his own condition before God. Why? Many others did nothing of the kind and today many can live through all manner of things and never once think of God and salvation. But this man did because the Holy Spirit was at work in his heart. And then to his desperate question he got in reply the information he not only desperately needed but had been prepared to believe. And so he became a follower of Jesus and was baptized. Salvation came to his house and there was great rejoicing. He went to bed that night a different man.

What a hodge-podge of people formed that infant church in Philippi! An urbane business woman, a slave girl, and a rough-hewn jailer, three people utterly unlikely to be friends or even acquaintances, but now brothers and sisters in Christ. How did that happen? What had brought them together into that new fellowship of love? It was the decisive action of the Holy Spirit, opening their hearts and drawing them to faith in Christ.

That is the first fact about salvation, about eternal life, about the forgiveness of sins, about the knowledge of God. It is God's gift given to those to whom he has chosen to give it. Throughout the Bible this is the truth about salvation. Human beings are helpless sinners, spiritual rebels who would never and could never turn to God by themselves, but in the case of multitudes God himself overcomes their darkness, their blindness to the truth, their hardness of heart, their defiant wills, and draws them to himself. It is this divine initiative and orchestration of salvation that explains why there should suddenly have been a burst of salvation in Philippi but not in the town where Paul and Silas might have gone had the Holy Spirit not directed them otherwise.

There are great questions here. We understand that; questions we cannot answer. It is a truth that can trouble the mind – that God opened Lydia's heart but not some of the other women there; that he delivered the slave girl but not her masters; that he drew the jailer to salvation but not the Roman magistrates – but it is the truth about salvation not only everywhere in the Word of God, but in the observation of life. Why this one, why that one? Why not he or she? Who can say? But that God has appointed some to salvation is the Bible's ultimate explanation of salvation. God's ways are far above ours and past our finding out. But that salvation is his gift, of that there can be no question. However, that is not all that we learn about salvation here.

II. At the same time we see women and men responding to that grace.

When the Philippian jailer asked Paul what he must do to be saved, Paul did not reply, “Well, you don't have to do anything. God must do everything and he has and he will.” The Bible *never* says that. Instead Paul told the man, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.” And that is what the man did. He believed. That is what Lydia had done before him. She paid attention to Paul's message, which is Luke's way of saying that she embraced Paul's message for herself, believed what he said and responded in faith. And both were accordingly baptized. The same is not said in so many words of the slave girl, but we may

assume she believed as well and was baptized. Sticking her in the middle, between Lydia and the jailer is Luke's way of identifying her with the other two as a new believer in Jesus.

God does not save sinners apart from their response to the good news, apart from their faith in Jesus Christ as the savior and *their* savior, apart from their identifying themselves with the followers of Christ, in baptism and in Christian assembly, worship, and life.

It was this way through Jesus' own ministry in the Gospels, throughout Acts, and so it has been ever since: The Lord opening hearts and those hearts responding in faith, love, gratitude, and obedience. *That is salvation in the Bible and that is salvation in the experience of human beings.*

In fact the thousands upon thousands of stories of salvation that have been told ever since, in the ages since those days in Philippi, all are in these two ways like these three stories. The details vary, of course, but the working of God – *every new Christian knows very well that God himself has done something for him or her and in him or her* – and the response of the person is the same. God opens the heart, and the person responds in faith, in obedience, and in the living of a new and radically different life.

There is a little known episode in the life of Robert Murray McCheyne, the celebrated 19th century Scottish pastor. It was a time in Scotland when God was drawing many to himself, as in those days in Philippi. McCheyne happened to visit relatives in August of 1842. In that family were his four female cousins. And as a result of his short visit, the words he spoke, the example of his life, three of those four young women became Christians almost simultaneously. One of them, Maria, wrote shortly afterward to her cousin,

“I feel, indeed, awakened from a long dark dream, and I earnestly pray that I may be still more awakened and enlightened.”

The slave girl in Philippi would have said the same thing in the days that followed their encounter with Paul.

What makes the story more interesting and more instructive is that there was a fourth sister who did not embrace the gospel. So little did she become a believer when her three sisters did, she thought that what happened to her sisters was highly unfortunate. She found their new interests and enthusiasms distasteful.

“I cannot make my sisters understand that they are far too young to be encouraged prowling about the Parish, talking to all the ploughmen and women on religion and conversion. The sort of feeling of equality there is too much of in Scotland is hateful to me. The lower orders are very well in their way, but should be kept in their proper place... I...fear having some brothers-in-law in the shape of pious tallow-chandlers, or tinkers, or ploughmen, presented to me, and then told they were Christians and therefore far better than my unconverted self.” [Smellie, *Bio. of R.M. M'Cheyne*, 139-141]

The Lord had opened three hearts but left the fourth shut tight. Remember what Jesus himself said about this: “The wind blows where it will and who knows where it comes from or where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit of God.”

That fourth daughter would not have liked the congregation gathering in Philippi: its charter members included a formerly demon-possessed slave girl with an understandably checkered past, a business woman, a jailer. They must have had interesting congregational meetings! Rich and poor, some from the upper echelons of society, some from the lowest, masters and servants in the same households now brothers and sisters of one another. That was God again. Why those people and not others? He knows; we do not.

But those people didn't become Christians because it seemed to them a good thing to do at the time. They became followers of Jesus Christ *because they couldn't do anything else*. They were overcome by the power of God and drawn to faith in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. They were made to see things they had never seen before. And so is every Christian, no matter the circumstances of his or her life, no matter the way in which he or she became a Christian, at what age, by what human instrumentality, in what condition, however quietly or violently, gradually or suddenly.

Not every Christian becomes one so suddenly or under circumstances so striking or unexpected as did these three. But in them every Christian ever since has seen himself or herself. A power over which we have no control, a change we neither planned nor produced, a love and a joy that comes unbidden up from deep within ourselves. *That* is God saving sinners. Apart from the intervention of God, those three lives would have continued as before, utterly unaware of this other world, this other life, this other future that now was theirs. They would never have got there by themselves. But it was a salvation for them to embrace, a savior for them to believe in and follow, a divine gift for them to receive with joy and thanksgiving.

Is it so with you? Search your heart, answer honestly. Is it so with you? And so it has been ever since, the beginning, the middle, and the end of the Christian message: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household.”