

## Lesson 24: Acts 16:6-40 The Holy Spirit and the Powers of Darkness

### Introduction

The Gospel Mission Confronts the Pagan Worldview			
16:6-40 The Holy Spirit and the Powers of Darkness	17:1-34 God's Messiah and Gentile Philosophy, Politics and Religion	18:1-28 God's Messiah and the New People of God	19:1-19 The Holy Spirit and the Name of the Lord Jesus
16:6-15 From Phrygia to Philippi (Introduction)	17:1-15 Thessalonica and Berea (Introduction)	18:1-11 Paul's Stay in Corinth (Introduction)	19:1-10 Paul's Stay in Ephesus (Introduction)
16:16-40 In Philippi (Problem Resolution Follow-up)	17:16-34 In Athens (Problem Resolution Follow-up)	18:12-28 In Corinth (Problem Resolution Follow-up)	19:11-19 In Ephesus (Problem Resolution Follow-up)
19:20 So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.			

David Gooding, *True to Faith*.<sup>1</sup>

The Part IV summary statement of Acts 16:5 concludes, “the churches were strengthened in their faith and were increasing in number daily.” As one of Luke’s part-ending summary statements, we are supposed to think of the whole Church of Christ being strengthened and increasing, all the local churches established up to this point. And we are also to think more specifically of the churches established on Paul’s missionary journey into Asia Minor. Those are the churches he and Barnabas planted at the beginning of Part IV, and the churches that Paul and Silas returned to at the end of Part IV. They are strengthened by the continual ministry of Paul who has come to be with them, and also by the resolution of the Jerusalem Council that affirmed the Gospel message they had already received.

Now, beginning Part V of Acts, we make an almost complete shift away from the Jewish context of the letter. Parts I-III focused on the ministry of Peter and the growth of the Church in and around Israel. Then even in Part IV where we began intentional missions to Gentiles, clarification of New Covenant theology was still being worked out against the backdrop of Jewish concerns. The question of the Council was whether or not Gentiles needed to be circumcised to be saved and whether or not good Christian Gentiles should follow any of the Old Covenant ceremony as a way of honoring God. And these important questions were forced on the body of Christ as Jewish Christians sought to understand what it meant for the Gospel of the Messiah to include Gentiles. The conflict of theological understanding regarding Old Testament truth led to important clarifications and, ultimately, a strengthening of the churches. So, in part IV we saw an expansion of the Church among Gentiles with a working out of the Gospel in light of Jewish theological concerns.

As the Gospel continues to move out into Gentile territory, other questions will be forced on the growing Christian community. In Part V, these questions do not come from the Jewish background of the Gospel, but from the backdrop of Pagan thought. The one major speech from Paul given to us Part IV occurred in the Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. Jewish context. The emphasis was on Jewish thought. The one major speech that’s going to come to us in Part V occurs in the Areopagus of Athens. The emphasis is on Gentile thought.

<sup>1</sup> David Gooding. *True to Faith*. (Coleraine, N Ireland: Myrtlefield House, 1990) 300-303.

Observing this interaction with Gentile thought, David Gooding describes three major issues that Luke develops as the Gospel messengers interact with the polytheism, philosophy, and politics of the Gentile world. These three issues relate separately to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in that order. The issues are these.

1. “Christianity’s proclamation of the existence and nature of one true God and of man’s relation to him” challenges pagan religion and philosophy.
2. “The meaning and significance of the Christian Gospel’s assertion that Jesus is the Messiah, king, and judge of this world” challenges pagan politics and morality.
3. “The importance of the Christian experience of the Holy Spirit” challenges pagan spiritism and occult practices.<sup>2</sup>

Now, there are four movements in Acts Part V, each addressing one or more of these three issues. Each movement follows a consistent pattern. The pattern begins with a two-part introduction, and then reports a problem encountered by Paul in his Gospel witness, God’s resolution of the problem, and some follow-up after the problem is resolved. In chapter 16, there is a problem in Philippi. In chapter 17, there is a problem in Athens. In chapter 18, there is a problem in Corinth. And in chapter 19, there is a problem in Ephesus. The outer two problems in Philippi and Ephesus address the issues of the Holy Spirit versus pagan spiritism. The inner two problems in Athens and Corinth address the issues of God and his Messiah encountering pagan religion, philosophy and politics.

We begin in this lesson with the problem encountered in Philippi, which provides a contrast between the Holy Spirit and the powers of darkness. We will address the introduction first and then we’ll consider the problem. So, this is the introduction to the first movement in the fifth part of Acts, the Holy Spirit and the powers of darkness, Acts 16:6-15.

### **From Phrygia to Philippi (16:6-15)**

<sup>6</sup> They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; <sup>7</sup> and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; <sup>8</sup> and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. <sup>9</sup> A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” <sup>10</sup> When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

<sup>11</sup> So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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.

#### *Phrygia to Troas and the Macedonian Man (6-10)*

The first part of this introduction explains why Paul decides to go to Macedonia. The second part tells us how Lydia came to believe in Jesus. God led Paul back to the churches of the Galatian province to

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<sup>2</sup> Gooding, 293.

see how they were doing and to encourage them to stay true to Jesus. After strengthening those churches through further teaching, Paul re-engaged his strategy to spread the Gospel by establishing communities of believers in urban centers in various regions. The southeast of Asia Minor, the provinces of Galatia and Cilicia have churches. Using the strategic mind God gave him, Paul stayed on the east-west road in Galatia, planning to move on into the province of Asia.

That did not work out, so instead Paul took the Roman road network north, planning to by-pass Mysia for the moment, going first to Bythynia, the region in the northwest corner of Asia Minor, diagonally opposite his home province of Cilicia. Maybe he intended to go as far as the Bythynian city, Byzantium, which would later become one of the most famous cities in the world for centuries. Byzantium would be designated as the eastern capital of the Roman Empire. Emperor Constantine would rename it, Constantinople. Becoming one of the largest cities in the Western world, it would grow to span both sides of the Bosphorus Strait, connecting Asia and Europe in one city. Byzantium would serve as the capital to Orthodox Christianity after the division of the Roman Catholic Church. It would eventually be captured by Muslim Turks in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it would be renamed, Istanbul. That's what you'll see if you look on a map today. Six of the seven ecumenical councils of the Roman Church would take place in Bithynia, in Constantinople, and in couple other towns that might sound familiar: Nicaea and Chalcedon. Those are Bithynian towns.

But all of that is part of a later Christian story. Here the story gets stopped before it starts. Unable to enter Bithynia, Paul and his band traveled west through Mysia to Troas, which is on the western coast of Asia Minor. In Troas, the narrative shifts from "they" to "we", indicating that Luke has now joined Paul's band. And so, now we're getting the story first-hand. Now, when Luke says, "Paul said," or, "Paul did," he actually saw Paul do and he heard Paul say. Sadly, we have absolutely no record of Luke's conversion. We do not know how he and Paul met. But the story of Acts is not about Luke. And so, he does not insert his testimony into the narrative. We do not even know how long Paul's team stayed in Troas. Paul may have stayed longer than the text indicates. Sometimes in the text he just seems to move on, but still, he could be weeks in Troas. We don't know. In chapter 20 on his way back to Jerusalem, Paul will stop to preach through the night to believers in Troas. That's where the boy falls asleep and tumbles out the window, if you remember that story. So, by that time, by Acts 20, there is a church in the town. Maybe the church was planted now at this point and Luke, being in the city, came to believe and joined Paul. But that's not a story told here. It's one we'll have to wait in Heaven. We'll ask Luke when we get there.

Paul does not stay in Troas but determines to cross over the Aegean Sea to the province of Macedonia, a move that will take him from Asia, not just the province but the continent, to Europe.

That's the route Paul took from Pisidian Antioch up and around to Macedonia. That's where he went. Now let's consider why he went where he went. And this is interesting. The combination between Paul's use of the strategic mind God has given him and the leading of the Holy Spirit gives us a glimpse into how the Spirit of God guides us. And later in this lesson, we will consider the contrast between the Spirit's guidance of Paul and the work of an evil spirit in a slave girl of Philippi.

Paul has a strategy that guides his missionary work. We considered that strategy in a previous lesson. Paul targets significant urban centers; he preaches the Gospel, first to Jews and then also to Gentiles; he relies on the Holy Spirit for guidance and power; he organizes fellowships of believers; he appoints elders; he strengthens the disciples; he goes on to new territory. That strategy was developed through Paul's understanding of his calling, through the working of his own mind as he is led by God's wisdom in the Word, in the Spirit, in prayer. Paul has a strategy that he is following as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

It would seem that Paul did not wait for the specific direction of the Spirit each time he moved from place to place. He may have a sense. Now it's time to go and the Spirit might be leading, but it's not clear that the Spirit is saying, "Now you need to go to Ephesus." He appears to have followed the strategy that he had already worked out through prayer, and thought, and practice. I am sure he prayed as he considered each move from place to place. And I am sure he prayed along the way. But it does not seem that the Spirit said, "Go from Pisidian Antioch to Asia." Based on his strategy and his trust in God, Paul left Pisidian Antioch, he is right at the edge of the province of Asia, and he continued along that Roman road, again, probably towards Ephesus, but something happened on the way. Luke simply says that Paul and his band were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." I'd really love to see what does that mean. How is he forbidden by the Spirit? That sounds like a direct experience with the Holy Spirit. I think it may or may not have included some outward circumstance. It is possible for God to use a storm, or Romans, or bandits, or sickness, or any number of barriers or problems to redirect Paul. Through whatever circumstances may have been involved, Paul had a sense of the Holy Spirit's guidance. And it may simply have been that. Paul could have received a direct prophecy from the Holy Spirit forbidding him from going further in Asia.

Interestingly, though, Luke does not report speech from the Holy Spirit, which he does in other places when the Spirit speaks to Paul. Also interestingly, the Holy Spirit does not give Paul a complete directive. Paul knows where he is not to go, but he does not seem to know where he is to go. This is one of the ways God guides us. It requires trust on our part to turn our steps away from something when God closes the door. We may know we're not supposed to go that way, but we don't know where we're supposed to go, but since we can't just stop in the road of life and sit down where we are, we have to make some choices. So, we agonize, and we pray, and we try to figure out, and we trust by going. And that place we go, whether it is another job, or another school, or another home, or another country, may not be the place God wants us to end up. As much prayer we put in and we have a sense of peace, so this is where I'm going, maybe God just wanted us to set out, not knowing if the next place is the place we are supposed to end up in or if that place is simply a stepping stone to get us where God intends to take us eventually. And that's what's happening to Paul here.

Forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the Gospel in Asia, Paul again makes a strategic decision to enter the province of Bythnia-Mysia. Maybe that's the province I should go to next in Asia Minor? We confidently assume that Paul prayed before he turned north, and he prayed along the way. This is not a lack of prayer. But even with the prayer, the Spirit did not intervene until Paul got to Bythnia. And they could not enter that region because the Spirit of Jesus would not permit them. Again, we do not know whether that was purely the guidance of the Holy Spirit or whether some outer circumstance was also involved, such as opposition from a Roman official or something else. And we do not need to assume any outward circumstance. Maybe God simply communicated His will but maybe there was some kind of barrier. We don't know but the Spirit of Jesus doesn't let them go to Bythnia.

Luke does not tell us that the Spirit said, "Go to Troas." Again, I assume Paul is acting on the strategic calling he has understood from God, and I assume he is doing so filled with the Spirit, trusting Jesus, praying as he goes, but he still doesn't know if he is headed in the right direction. Or we might say it is the right direction at the moment because he is headed there in faith, acting on the best information he has at the moment. So that makes it the right direction. But just because it is the right direction at the moment does not mean the direction may not still change as God leads.

Paul arrives at Troas. He does pick up Luke here. That is a hugely significant event. As quietly as Luke inserts himself into the narrative, just the shift from the "they" to the "we," who knows whether all the moving around was not designed by God to make sure that Paul and his band arrived at just the right time and under just the right circumstances to make sure that Luke came to faith and joined the

team? God wanted Paul and his band in Troas at this moment, and being a port city, it could fit Paul's strategy of preaching the Gospel in urban centers where a new Christian fellowship could influence the surrounding region. Paul's mind might be to plant a church in Troas.

But Troas is not the landing spot God had in mind. It's another stepping-stone. It is the place where God decides to give Paul a direct message of speech conveyed in a vision through the mouth of a Macedonian man. The man appeals to Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul is mature in his discernment of God's communication. He recognizes the source of this vision. This is not just a dream. This is God. The nature of the vision fits with very well with Paul's calling and strategy. It sounds, it feels like God. Though it does require him to give up the way he thought best to execute the strategy. This is not Paul's idea. Why skip over to Europe, leaving the western and northern parts of Asia Minor unreached? It's a bit untidy? Why do that? Well, because God intervened. And God is in charge. Paul may be executing the strategy, but it is not Paul's strategy, and it is not Paul's mission. Paul is a servant in the mission of Jesus Christ, engaged in a strategy that he believes is from God. And God can certainly redirect his servant anytime God so chooses as long as God's servant keeps remembering that he is God's servant, and this is not all about him. Walking in faith, Paul is able to do that. He is able to be redirected because his mind and heart are focused on God's agenda, not his agenda.

There is an intriguing interaction here between Paul's mind and the will of God. One of the things I notice is that the will of God is expressed in terms of the whole Trinity. That's the language of the three interactions described here. The Holy Spirit forbids. The Spirit of Jesus does not permit. And then a vision causes Paul to conclude that God called his band to preach to the Macedonians. I am understanding the reference to God as God the Father. So, who is guiding Paul? Spirit, Son, and Father.

We also notice that Paul does not simply stay put when the ultimate direction is not specified clearly by God. He keeps acting on the wisdom he has. He may have stayed still for some time along the way. Luke does not give us a moment-by-moment: this is not a minute-by-minute report. We know Paul would have prayed and waited on the Lord. He could have been many days in Asia before turning north. Still, he does eventually make three decisions that lead him to places he is not supposed to stay in: that's Asia, Bithynia, and Troas. He seems to be using his mind in the Spirit to follow the strategy God had given him.

What I see here is relational guidance from God that requires relational trust from Paul. The will of God is not a magic 8-ball that we shake up in order to get direction. God is not a tool we use to get direction. Paul is not a tool God uses to accomplish His will. This is relationship. So, when I say relational guidance from God, I mean that God does not simply use Paul as an instrument. God communicates to Paul, treating him as an autonomous moral being. God provides an offer. Paul must choose whether or not to receive that offer in obedience. The relational trust on Paul's side includes both a sensitivity to spiritual experience and a wise use of his mind. Paul does not follow the stars, or the flight of a crow, or the entrails of a sacrificed goat. That's pagan divination. It's fortune cookie guidance, a horoscope. Paul is in relationship with God through the person of the Spirit. He must pay attention to his feelings, his experience of the Spirit, but he must also not be driven this way and that by feelings. He must also use the wisdom God has given him through the Word and in his calling. Paul's response is consistently along the lines of the ministry strategy that God gave him to fulfill his calling. Paul is able to leave that ministry strategy if God calls, if God makes it clear. We will see that later in his life when the ministry strategy says, "Go to Spain via Rome," but God says, "First, go the opposite direction, back to Jerusalem." So, Paul is able to put the strategy aside for a moment if he has clear direction from God. Paul is also able to adjust the strategy as he is executing the strategy. More than once, God's guidance redirects Paul without a lot of information, requiring Paul to trust

God as he is going. Mind and Spirit are both in play for Paul as he walks in this trusting relationship with his Lord Jesus; the One who is in authority, the One whose mission it is.

*From Troas to Philippi and the Salvation of Lydia (11-15)*

Moving into the second part of the introduction, we cannot begin to consider the millions of factors that God interacts with as he sovereignly guides. Sometimes it is helpful enough just to consider one factor. Why lead Paul to Troas to arrive there at that specific moment in time? It may be enough to recognize that, at that place and time Luke, the eventual writer of Luke and of Acts, joined their team. That is a pretty good reason to get Paul and his band to Troas at that moment. Why lead Paul over to Macedonia at that particular moment in time that he was lead there? Well, the salvation of Lydia and her household may be enough of an answer. That's why Paul arrived there at that time.

From Troas, the team boarded ship to the Macedonian town of Samothrace, then on to Neapolis and from there to the influential city of Philippi. In the text that Luke calls it an "influential city", that's fitting with Paul's strategy of going to urban centers, where a planted church can help reach the region. Now, Paul's strategy in a new city consistently involves visiting the local synagogue on the first Sabbath that he is in town. Apparently, there is no synagogue in Philippi. The text describes a place of prayer on the Sabbath, that would be a gathering of Jews and God-fearers meeting to worship Yahweh. And this text says it's out of town. So, there is no place in town where there is a Jewish gathering. According to the convention of the language, if there had been just men, or if men and women were present, the text could have said that Paul spoke to the Jews, or Paul spoke to the men gathered. But since the text says he spoke to the women it is unlikely that any men are present at all. And this could explain why there is no synagogue, since an official synagogue required ten men.

Lydia represents the people of Thyatira well. We are told that that's where she is from. Before the region was conquered by the Romans, Thyatira was a leading city of the kingdom of Lydia. Same name. And maybe her name was not originally "Lydia." Lydia could possibly be a nickname she received in Philippi as traders with her in business recognized her as a woman from the Lydian people group. So, she's, "the Lydian," or just, "Lydia." Also, the skill of dying purple cloth was a trademark of the region, you know, further explaining why she woman might appreciate being called, Lydia. That's a good, positive brand for her business. Who are we going to get our purple cloth from? Well, the Lydian. Get it from Lydia. With reference in the text to her home and the people of her household, but no reference to her husband, Lydia was successful in business in her on right. And she was interested in Yahweh spiritually on her own. We don't know if she was married or not. But the emphasis is on Lydia's own abilities, Lydia's own interests.

Paul does not convert Lydia. Paul faithfully preaches the Gospel of Jesus Christ and as Luke tells us, "the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." Evangelists preach. God converts. God then works through Lydia her conversion, and Paul in his message, to bring the members of her household to salvation. The fruit of hospitality urged on Paul by Lydia suggests the sincerity of her new faith. This is like the Samaritans urging Jesus to stay with them longer.

The story of Lydia's conversion adds to our understanding of the working of the Holy Spirit here in this introduction. The Spirit that is guiding Paul is the Spirit who came to glorify Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel. Paul, in his preaching, does not urge on an experience of the Holy Spirit. His Gospel message is not about feeling the Holy Spirit. That is not evangelism for Paul. It's not recorded in Acts and not in his letters. Paul's message is a proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How do we come into relationship with God through Jesus Christ? And we can look back to the sermon in Pisidian Antioch or we could look ahead to his letters. Paul preaches forgiveness of sin that comes when we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ. He will eventually write to the Philippians, "[I

count my works] but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (Philippians 3:8-9).” That is the consistent essence of Paul’s message, but not only Paul’s message. That is the message of the Holy Spirit who led Paul to Philippi. The message of the Holy Spirit is not about the Holy Spirit. The message of the Holy Spirit is about Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit works to open hearts, like with Lydia, to see Jesus.

This is our introduction. That is how the Holy Spirit led Paul to Philippi and empowered his Gospel message, so that the heart of Lydia was opened and her household, as well. The rest of the text is going to speak of a problem, resolution, and follow-up. The particular problem is going to show us a pagan contrast to the Holy Spirit in a slave-girl possessed by an evil spirit. This is Acts 16:16-40.

### **In Philippi (16:16-40)**

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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.” <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, “These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, <sup>21</sup> and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.” <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; <sup>24</sup> and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. <sup>25</sup> But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!” <sup>29</sup> And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, <sup>30</sup> and after he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” <sup>31</sup> They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” <sup>32</sup> And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup> And he took them that *very* hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his *household*. <sup>34</sup> And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household. <sup>35</sup> Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, “Release those men.” <sup>36</sup> And the jailer reported these words to Paul, *saying*, “The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace.” <sup>37</sup> But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out.” <sup>38</sup> The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, <sup>39</sup> and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging

them to leave the city. <sup>40</sup> They went out of the prison and entered *the house of* Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

### *1. Problem: A False Accusation*

The problem in Philippi Luke writes about is a false accusation made by some very angry businessmen. They accused Paul and Silas before the town magistrates of “throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.” Is there anything true about that accusation? Well, Paul and Silas are Jews. Anti-Jewish sentiment might be at the core of the accusation. Also, these people are Romans. Philippi was a Roman colony. So, the ex-military had established the city. So, this is not just, like, Thyatira would be a city of Lydians taken over by Rome. You would say it’s Roman in the sense that it’s owned or controlled by Rome. But Philippi is Roman in the sense that the founders of the city are actual Romans. They’re proud. And I mentioned this before, in my own experience sometimes the Diaspora peoples or people who live outside of the homeland can be even more proud about the customs of the homeland. Croats living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Albanians living in Macedonia may fiercely or strongly hold on to religion, idea, the customs that they believe truly to be Croatian or Albanian or, in this case, Roman. You know, we are Romans. It may be suggestive that the Jews and God-fearing women were meeting outside of town at a place of prayer. Perhaps the reason they drew away from town is that their commitment to the Jewish God Yahweh was considered suspect in Philippi. Jewish credibility rose and fell in different times and different places throughout the Roman Empire. Without enough men to establish a synagogue in the town, Philippi lacked Jews in the business community who could have developed relationships with influential men and women in the city. Jewish religion sometimes created a sense of hostile wariness in Romans because of the Jewish insistence on only one true God, and their separating cultural practices, and their moral convictions. These men play on suspicion and ignorance in their charge that Paul and Silas are “proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.”

The motive for the accusation appears to be angry bitterness at their loss of income. When Paul casts the spirit out of the slave-girl, her owners lose the money she brought in as a fortuneteller. These men were not like the charlatans in a cowboy movie or a Mark Twain story, conning townspeople out of a few dollars, you know, while they’re hurriedly passing through. No. Considering their influence with the magistrates, these men seem to have been established and respected. There is more concern in this city about those people who are meeting outside of town in a prayer meeting than there is about these men charging citizens money to receive an ecstatic utterance from a slave-girl controlled by some spiritual power. And that’s the way of spiritual darkness. Sometimes that which is truly good gets vilified and that which is obviously destructive gets embraced.

Luke uses a suggestive word to describes the distinctive quality of this slave-girl. My English version says, “[she] had a spirit of divination.” Another version says, “[she] had a spirit by which she predicted the future.” Those are both valid interpretations of the literal Greek which says, “[she] had the python spirit.” That’s interesting, isn’t it? That word, python, does refer to a snake, but not kind of snake. It refers to the great snake demigod that spoke through the famous oracle at Delphi. That is, until Apollo killed the snake and took over the Delphi for himself. But even after Apollo took over, the high priestess at Delphi was still called, Pythia, from the term, python.

The importance of diviners was well established in the ancient Mediterranean world. Before going into battle, commanders sought to discern the will of the gods from any number of means. A diviner could read signs to determine the will of the gods and predict where attacks should be made or if you shouldn’t attack. The practice goes way back. Balaam’s failed attempt to curse Israel in Numbers 22 is an example. He was a diviner.

The Delphic Oracle existed as a respected Greek religious institution for centuries. In 480 BC, before the 300 Spartans faced Persia in the famous stand at Thermopylae, the Spartans supposedly received from the Delphic Oracle this message, *“The strength of bulls or lions cannot stop the foe. No, he will not leave off, I say, until he tears the city or the king limb from limb.”*

Over 500 years later, the Roman Emperor Nero, who had previously executed his mother, supposedly received from the Oracle the message, *“Your presence here outrages the god you seek. Go back, matricide! The number 73 marks the hour of your downfall!”*

A slave-girl considered to have the python spirit would utter similarly cryptic messages, supposedly giving insight into paying customer’s future. This slave-girl was not simply a talented impostor. There was something spiritual going on in her. Her ecstatic utterances were otherworldly. When she was overcome by a strange voice, the Philippians interpreted the experience as a message from Apollos. Paul interpreted the event as demon possession.

The Holy Spirit gave Paul guidance as one person leads another. It is not a friend-to-friend or partner-to-partner relationship. It is a relationship of authority between king and subject. Paul submits to the Holy Spirit as one who holds authority over him. Still, it is a willing submission. God does not overwhelm us by the Holy Spirit so that we’re forced to act, forced to speak. We saw in the previous text how Paul continued to use his own mind. When he did not have specific guidance from the Holy Spirit, he acted on the strategy he already understood as being from God. When he did receive guidance, he had to interpret that guidance. And the result of Paul’s submission to the Holy Spirit is the fruit of new life in Lydia and her household.

The slave-girl receives no personal guidance from the spirit that possesses her. She is a tool or a receptacle, used by the spirit to communicate. Her will is overwhelmed. Her mind is restricted. There is a sense of disorder and unruliness about her. She has no control over the filling of this dark spirit. When it takes over, it takes over. We see this as, day after day, she follows the Christians going out to prayer and she cries out, *“These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.”*

And Paul is not impressed. Though the words are true, Paul, like Jesus before him, did not put any stock in the value of words uttered by a demon. The girl’s words may have developed credibility for Paul’s message in the minds of the pagan Philippians, but that is not a kind of credibility Paul wants to have anything to do with. Luke tells us he was annoyed. And so, he commanded the demon, *“In the name of Jesus Christ, come out!”* And the fruit of anything that comes about through the work of the demonic is suspect. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul frees the girl from enslavement to the powers of darkness.

As Christians, let’s think about this, we may be overwhelmed emotionally at times in our worship, overwhelmed by a sense of awe at the glory of God, a sense of joy at the love of God, a sense of gratitude at the grace of God, but even then, if it is of the Holy Spirit, we retain the use of our mind and will. That was an important point for Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, who had become unruly in their worship. He wrote to them in 14:15, *“I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.”* And because we retain the use of our will and mind when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul assumes that those gifted with tongues or prophecies can choose, and this is an important point, we can choose to not speak or to speak. If you have the gift of tongues, you don’t have to speak. You can hold it back or you can let it out. Paul says if there is no interpretation, don’t speak it out loud because that’s not helpful for everybody. He also says if one person is speaking, then wait your turn. And if somebody else has a prophecy and you’re speaking, then you be quiet and let them speak. You’re in relationship with the

Holy Spirit, you're not taken over by Him. Possessed by the demon, the slave-girl could not help but cry out. Filled with the Spirit, we can choose the timing of our speech.

Spirit-filled worship is very important also to Paul. At the same time, while communicating to the Corinthians he gives them this rebuke, "But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner." There is no orderly manner when we lose the possession of mind and will. That's the difference between being possessed by an evil spirit who would control us, and the Holy Spirit who will enable us to focus on God and to be alert and aware of God.

In his later letter, Paul will remind the Philippians of the kind of fruit God desires as our minds work in harmony with the filling of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual fruit comes from knowledge and discernment in accord with the Spirit. Paul writes in the beginning of his letter in 1:9-11,

<sup>9</sup> And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, <sup>10</sup> so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; <sup>11</sup> having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

And then Paul re-emphasizes the importance of our mental engagement at the end of the letter in 4:8,

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

The slave-girl is set from bondage to the powers of darkness so that she might become willfully obedient from the heart to Jesus Christ, that she might be enabled to set her mind on things that are excellent and worthy of praise, that she might be in relationship with a loving master who desires her full personality, her heart, her mind, and her spirit to be engaged in relationship with Him through His Spirit.

God's display of spiritual power through Paul provokes a backlash. The extreme response of the slave-girl's owners matched by the crowd raising up against them and the magistrates tearing their robes, depicts an unreasonably intense response suggestive of demonic influence. There is more behind this than just the humans. The powers of darkness resist this incursion on their territory and they fight back. Paul and Silas, seemingly powerless before the Philippian authorities, are beaten and thrown into prison. Paul and Silas may have saved this one slave-girl but it looks like the powers of darkness have won the battle. That would certainly be the majority opinion coming from a worldview that interprets failure as the displeasure of the gods. Apollos has flexed his muscles to beat down Yahweh.

## *2. Resolution: God's Vindication of Paul and Silas*

The problem in this text was a false accusation leading to imprisonment. The resolution comes next through God's vindication of his servants.

<sup>25</sup> But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; <sup>26</sup> 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.

God vindicates his messengers through a major act of power - earthquake - and also through His internal working to provide in them the strength of character they need to glorify Him throughout the incident. The vindication of Paul and Silas begins with their initial response of prayer and song. There is something very different about these men.

Paul will later write to the Philippian church urging them to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel, telling them to "stand firm together because this will affirm to you your own faith and it will be a sign to your opponents. Do not be alarmed by them." He goes on to write in 1:29-30,

<sup>29</sup> For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, <sup>30</sup> experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear *to be* in me.

Living according to the Gospel is a sign to their opponents of the truth of their message. Throughout the letter Paul calls for joy in spite of suffering. He says, "You saw that in me." When did they see it? The jailer saw it and heard it as Paul and Silas, beaten and imprisoned, pray and sing. Their joy was a vindication of their message, revealing the truth of new life that was in their souls.

They are further vindicated by their release from prison, by how they acted when they were released and by the fruit of salvation born out in the jailer and his household.

<sup>27</sup> When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> (*But what did Paul and Silas do? Easy to escape.*) But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" <sup>29</sup> And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, <sup>30</sup> and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup> They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup> And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup> And he took them that *very* hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his *household*. <sup>34</sup> And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

It's that same response of hospitality that Lydia expressed, this gratitude. I will show gratitude to God, I will show gratitude to His messengers. The character of Paul and Silas counteracts the false accusation that they were throwing the city into confusion. On the contrary, they did not even flee from jail when they had the chance. They didn't create confusion. They created order. By their example all the prisoners were kept in one place, and they turn themselves back over to the jailer. They are vindicated in their allegiance to Jesus Christ through the strength of character shown in them by their singing and by their submission to the jailer. They are also vindicated in their allegiance to God through as He reveals power to save, both through the earthquake, and also power to save the jailer and his household. I love how in verse 33 the jailer washes their wounds and then the jailer and his household are baptized, receiving a washing by the Holy Spirit of their spiritual wounds.

### *3. Follow-up: The Magistrates Rebuked*

There is a follow-up to this story.

<sup>35</sup> Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, "Release those men." <sup>36</sup> And the jailer reported these words to Paul, *saying*, "The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace."

The magistrates have changed their minds about keeping Paul and Silas in prison. I imagine the earthquake has frightened them. They would rather just send Paul and Silas on their way. The jailer is more friendly, of course, and he wishes them peace as they go.

<sup>37</sup> But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out." <sup>38</sup> The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, <sup>39</sup> and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city. <sup>40</sup> They went out of the prison and entered *the house of* Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

The demand for the magistrates to appear is a demand for the magistrates to publicly admit their error, thus restoring the honor of Paul and Silas. And the magistrates do it because it is illegal to beat

Romans. They thought they were just beating Jews, but Paul and Silas are also Romans. And now the magistrates have done something illegal by beating them with no trial. Restoration of honor, I think, is not so important to Paul personally. This is not a moment of personal pride for Paul. It is important to him in combating false accusations that would detract from his witness to the Gospel. I believe he is also working for the credibility of the new Christian fellowship that he is leaving behind. Their position is enhanced by the magistrates' public admission of wrongdoing. They'll think again before coming strongly down on the Christian fellowship. The demand also allows Paul time to encourage members of the young church before he leaves. He doesn't have to rush out of town. He is going to go. They are still afraid of him, and they want him to go. He is going to go. But first he goes to Lydia's house, he encourages the believers, and then he departs.

And it is an interesting group of believers Paul leaves behind; a wealthy, foreign business woman and her household, a slave-girl formerly possessed, and a Roman jailer with his household. We do not know what words Paul used to encourage this diverse group but considering the importance of being Roman, of Roman citizenship in Philippi and of Roman customs, Paul's later words in Philippians 4:20-21, provide a good example of something he might have said as he exhorted them to stay true to Jesus. He might have taught them not to put great stock in their earthly citizenship, but to know that they now hold a far more valuable passport that confers a far more precious identity and calls them to life-giving customs. He writes,

<sup>20</sup>Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; <sup>21</sup> who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

The powers of darkness seek to enslave our mind and will to a false worldview and to a corrupt lifestyle that leads to death. God makes us citizens of His Kingdom. He guides us and empowers us in loving relationship through the Holy Spirit, so that even though we do suffer at times in our struggle against darkness, we continue to sing with joy as God works out his salvation in us (Philippians 2:12) as we press forward to lay hold of that salvation for which Christ Jesus has already laid hold of us (Philippians 4:12).

### Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 16:6-15. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Have you ever been led by God through a vision that might be similar to the call of the Macedonian man to Paul? (This seems to be a fairly unique form of guidance in the Bible and in the lives of Christians.) How do you confirm the vision is from God?
3. Can you relate to the way God led Paul by preventing him from entering Asia then leading him to Mysia before finally guiding Paul to Troas? (This seems to be a more typical form of guidance that includes prayer and reasoning and the guidance of the Spirit.) When have you been led one way only to discover that way was a stepping-stone to where God wanted you to go?
4. Read Acts 16:16-40). What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
5. What spiritual assumptions or practices seem to be involved in the Philippi as emphasized by the slave girl, her owners and the Philippians how paid for her services?
6. What are the assumptions and practices of the believers in Philippi?
7. There are two power encounters in this story between God and forces of darkness. How does God show his power in each case? What is similar and what is different? What are the results of each encounter – both negative and positive?