

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 38, Chapter 16 continued

The significance of Acts chapter 16 is that it is what scholars call Paul's 2nd missionary journey, and in it we see Paul extending the geographic and ethnic range of his Gospel message beyond the areas where Jews had substantial colonies, and into the more far flung regions of the vast Asian continent. This did not by any means indicate that he was no longer evangelizing Jews; but it did mean that he would be dealing with gentiles who had less familiarity with Jews and thus with the Jewish religion. A good way to think of it is that the gentile population Paul would now deal with was mostly pagan, while in his first missionary journey a goodly portion of gentiles he had spoken to were already God-fearers and so they had some knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, Jewish history, and Jewish Tradition and customs (*Halakhah*).

Paul was traveling with Sila, that Jewish representative of the Jerusalem Council who had been sent in an official capacity with the letter outlining the conditions by which a gentile Believer could become a member of The Way but without converting and becoming a Jew. After leaving Antioch and arriving in the area of Derbe and Lystra, Paul recruited a young man of unusual faith and maturity to accompany him. We discussed at length last week that while many Christian commentaries on Acts assume that Timothy was a gentile Believer and so Paul requiring Timothy's circumcision was either hypocritical or as John Chrysostom said, it was "Paul engaged in circumcision in order to abolish circumcision". But as I demonstrated to you, given the fact that we are specifically told that Timothy's mother was a Jew, then by the rule of matrilineal descent Timothy was born as a Jew, not as a gentile. It is only that because Timothy's parents were fully assimilated into the local gentile culture, and because Timothy's father was a gentile, that Timothy had not received the required circumcision on his 8th day of life as was the Torah commandment. So since Paul and Sila were going to be dealing with a number of different ethnic groups in their journey (some Jewish, some gentile), and since the subject of the Gospel that Yeshua was the Messiah and was also God was already controversial, they certainly didn't need to add any side issues such as this Jewish man (Timothy) not being circumcised. There is no hint that Timothy resisted this; but I can also assure you that he did not relish the procedure. At his age it was painful and dangerous; and no doubt many days passed afterward before he was physically able to go traveling with Paul.

As we saw in verses 4 and 5, Paul's first encounters were with synagogue congregations where he had already established a core group of Believers. This was Paul's custom to occasionally go back and revisit established groups; but no doubt it was also so that Sila could see for himself what the Spirit, through Paul, had already accomplished with the gentiles.

Verses 6 through 8 show a great deal of direct intervention by the Holy Spirit especially concerning where and where not the disciples should venture to spread the Good News. In fact we are told that the intervention "prevented" the group from going to the region of Bithynia and instead they found themselves at Troas, a port city.

Let's re-read a substantial portion of Acts 16.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 16:9 – end

At the port city of Troas Paul had a vision; it was not another contact with the Holy Spirit but rather it was the vision of a man from Macedonia beckoning him to come to Macedonia and "help us" (the "us" no doubt meaning Macedonians in general). Paul knew immediately that the disciples ought to go, and of course the Spirit-directed circumstances had put them at exactly the right place at the right time to catch a ship across the Aegean Sea to get to Macedonia. In modern day terms, they would be traveling into Europe; however in Paul's day the term Europe would not have been used.

I want to point out something that can have practical application for us all; and that includes the managers, administrators and business people among us. Paul's missionary journeys display a methodology of flexible planning. That is, his mindset is one of careful planning as well as maintaining an openness to let God move as He wills it. The balance between those two elements (planning versus divine guidance) will necessarily vary depending on the circumstance; and it will especially depend upon whether the activity is secular or it is ministry. Secular plans will tilt towards more human planning, while ministry will tilt towards more divine guidance. But either way, a Believer must incorporate both elements into all of our goals and endeavors. Any error usually comes in misunderstanding how to apportion these two elements; or believing that only one is necessary. For instance: in a secular business, long range planning and doggedly sticking to that plan is usually the best course for success. But applying that same determination and rigid planning to a ministry is a recipe for disaster, just as no planning at all will end in disappointment.

At Seed of Abraham it is common for people to ask me what my Five Year Plan is; and when I tell them that it would fit on a Post-It note they wonder how a person with a corporate management background could operate in such a way. I can tell you frankly that it is very hard to turn over things to God that you've been used to controlling. I've always had a keen interest in the Apostle Paul because I feel like we have kindred temperaments. Paul is a natural control enthusiast (I prefer that to control freak). He is strong with his words, sometimes rising to the point of being rash and needlessly offending people. Yet his words are articulate and thought provoking, full of facts and information. Paul can be defensive at times, but he is also always decisive; he doesn't fret over decision making. And when Paul makes a decision or a pronouncement there is no wavering; he is certain that he is right. Paul looks towards the future; he doesn't live in the past. He is a crusader; nothing energizes Paul like the cause of an underdog. And he is willing to take that cause to the bitter end, no matter the cost. Paul is dedicated and sincere; what you see is what you get. But he doesn't do well on committees; he makes a better dictator.

That sure doesn't sound like the kind of a person who is sensitive to the Holy Spirit or one that is suited to ministry for the God of Israel; yet here we see exactly that. Paul plans everything in advance; his missionary journeys weren't accomplished willy-nilly. And I see no evidence that any human could derail him from those plans. However he is ready and eager to alter his well thought-out plans in favor of God's direction anytime the Spirit confronts him. So the moral of

the story for Believers is, always plan but always hold those plans lightly. To wander through life like a feather blown by unseen wisps of turbulent air is usually not the best policy. But to make rigid plans and follow them through with a tunnel vision towards the goal is also not usually good policy either. That famous Beatle, John Lennon, once said in song: life is what happens while you're making plans.

On the other hand to say that our lives are God's responsibility, and then to shun planning in general and instead choosing to live moment by moment letting the future take care of itself, no doubt will eventually lead to deep regrets and bitter tears or even resentment towards God (and not a great deal of success either). We have our responsibilities and God has His as regards our lives; it is a co-operative venture. Paul is far from perfect; yet he shows an extraordinary ability, especially given his Choleric temperament, to balance intelligent and practical strategic planning with a sensitive and obedient attitude towards the Holy Spirit. That is very much on display here in these verses.

Verse 10 reveals something of a surprise; it turns out that Luke (the writer of the Book of Acts) is with Paul, Timothy and Silas in Troas. This verse is one of those "we" verses we discussed last time; that is notice how Luke says "**we** lost no time getting ready to leave for Macedonia". What is important then is that at least starting at this point of Paul's second missionary journey, much of what we read comes from an eyewitness and it is not derived from interviews or documents. Thus we'll see a bit more detail at times during the remainder of chapter 16 than we're used to seeing, because by being a party to the missionary journey what Luke saw was not filtered through someone else's worldview. I also think that we can reasonably deduce that Luke gives us the best insight into the historical Paul; that is, Paul the person. And this is most valuable to us as we read Paul's many epistles that dominate the New Testament.

Speaking of epistles: it is on the western shore of the Aegean Sea where Paul will plant a number of Believing congregations in places that we're more familiar with in terms of the New Testament books that are named for them. Because there we find the towns of Philippi (Book of Philippians), Corinth, (Book of Corinthians), and Thessalonica (Book of Thessalonians). Along with Berea (which Paul mentions but doesn't have a letter addressed to them as a Bible book), these places and their Believing congregations are like the spokes of a wheel that emanates from their hub at the center: Ephesus.

Since every commercial shipping vessel was wind powered, then it was the winds that would determine the length, and sometimes the route, of a sea journey. It was 150 miles from Troas to Neapolis, which the 4 disciples accomplished in only 2 days; so the winds were favorable. However those favorable winds worked against them in the return trip as we're informed in Acts 20 that it took 5 days to make the same crossing, only in reverse. From Neapolis the next stop was Philippi, a city name after the father of Alexander the Great. Philippi was a Roman colony; this term has a distinct meaning. A Roman colony is one that operates under Roman religion and Roman law. Philippi was a logical stop for the well-organized Paul because it contained a substantial Jewish population, as did Thessalonica and Berea. So after a few days in Philippi, on Shabbat the 4 disciples went to a place where they were told that people met for prayer. Obviously this was referring to prayer to the God of Israel for they would not have wanted to go to a prayer service to the pagan gods. Our CJB says in verse 13 that a **minyan**

met there. A **minyan** is a group of 10 or more; 10 people is considered the minimum for a proper synagogue prayer service. The word **minyan** doesn't actually appear here in the Greek texts and you won't find it in other English Bibles; yet in Hebrew terminology inserting the word **minyan** here makes sense. Especially in settings away from a synagogue, when it is time for one of the three daily prayers, Jews try to pray in a group and that group must be 10 (or more). And by the way, Jews won't necessarily demand that all the participants in a **minyan** are Jews. I have been invited by Ultra-Orthodox Jews, on a couple of occasions while flying to Israel, to come and participate in prayer with them in order to form a **minyan** (which I happily did), as there weren't enough Jews on the plane to muster up 10. And, yes, they full well knew I was a gentile and I was a Christian. So it should not be surprising that in verse 14 we find that many of the people at this prayer place in Philippi were women. One was named Lydia, a dealer of purple cloth.

Lydia was from Thyatira, and this region was well known for their fine purple cloth expertise. The issue in this craft was the creation of the purple dye, and for Jews especially the color purple played an important role in ritual items that involved threads and fabric. In fact this particular shade of purple was called in Hebrew **tekhelet**, and it was required for the cloth partitions that separated the inner chambers of the Tabernacle, as well as for the making of **tzitzit** and for **ephods**. It was also used for the fringes that hung from the hems of certain ceremonial robes. This particular color was not easy to obtain; the most desired source of it came from murex shellfish found along the eastern Mediterranean coastline. However in Thyatira the dye was made from the fluid of a plant: the madder root. So, all in all, it is not surprising that Lydia had formed an association with the local Jews as they would have been among her best customers.

Lydia believed Paul's message of salvation in Christ. Lydia was already a God-fearer so she had a good basis to understand Paul's teaching on Yeshua. Lydia must have been the head of her household as we are told in verse 15 that when she was immersed, so then was her entire household. Perhaps she was a widow, maybe divorced, we don't know. Let me explain something that will help you not only in understanding what is happening here, but also is customary to this day in Middle Eastern families. The head of the household is revered and powerful; they lead and can make binding decisions for household members, in a way that has become obsolete in the West. Therefore whatever religion the head of the house subscribes to, the remainder of the household automatically follows. So even in regards to Lydia's household being baptized, do not get a mental picture of all those people having a heartfelt and sincere belief in Yeshua as Lord and Savior. The head of the house was baptized and began to follow Christ, so it was customary that the remainder of those in the household were obligated to do the same. Let me say it in another way: whatever religion the head of household adopts automatically becomes the religion for the entire household. For a household member to refuse to conform is the height of rebellion and could cause an enormous rift.

In just a few more verses (in verse 31), understanding how this custom works will help us to understand what was actually taking place when we are told this:

Acts 16:31 CJB

31 They (meaning the disciples) said, "Trust in the Lord Yeshua, and you will be saved-you and your household!"

This verse has actually led to a Christian doctrine among some congregations that says that if the head of the house (usually a male) will accept Yeshua, then God will deem the entire household as saved as well. This is a misunderstanding; rather it is only that in some ancient and modern day societies, the household merely accepts whatever the leader of the home decides. It is more about social family dynamics than religion and actual belief.

Now a Believer, the gracious Lydia offers hospitality to Paul and his 3 companions. Hospitality was the supreme virtue not only in the Middle East but in most of the known world. Paul and his friends were not staying in convenient roadside inns as they traveled; they either slept under the stars or in the homes of folks who offered them hospitality. So we shouldn't be especially surprised that a well-to-do businesswoman would offer her home for a place to stay.

In Verse 16 Luke re-injects himself into the story as he says "**we** were going to a certain place of prayer" when suddenly the disciples encounter this slave-girl who had a snake-spirit in her. And her owners made good use of her occult abilities by charging folks to have their fortunes told to them. So Luke was eyewitness to this event. But before we continue with that story I'd like to make a point. Over and over we have been informed that it was on Shabbat that the congregations gathered at synagogue, and it was on Shabbat when the Torah was read. But realize that while Shabbat was the "big day" when most pious Jews went for communal prayer and worship, it was not the only day when prayer, worship, and teaching occurred. In the ***Mekhilta Vayassa*** we read this revealing report that upholds what is known from Tradition and other Jewish sources:

"It was for this reason that the elders and the prophets instituted the reading from the Torah for the Sabbath and for the second and fifth day of the week. How so? They read on the Sabbath, and they skip only one day after the Sabbath. Then they read on the second day, and skip the third and fourth. They again they read on the fifth day and skip the day preceding Sabbath."

Thus it is true that in Yeshua's day, those who were the strictest followers of the Torah went to the synagogue 3 days per week to meet and hear the Torah read: Shabbat, Monday and Thursday. Orthodox Jews today go daily to pray and read the Torah.

Now for the demon possessed slave girl. It seems like almost every English Bible translation translates this verse a bit differently. Some don't say anything about a snake-spirit, contrary to our CJB; many will just refer to a spirit of divination. But in fact the original text says that the girl had a ***pythona*** spirit. Translating that to snake is OK; leaving out any reference to a snake is not OK because we lose the impact. Further the Greek ***pythona*** most literally does not mean snake, it means python. So the best literal translation to English is "having the spirit of a python". Strabo, a Greek philosopher and historian who died about the same time Yeshua was born says that the python was the serpent that guarded the Delphic Oracle, whose name was Pythia. The Delphic Oracle wasn't actually just one person; it was a prestigious office held by a succession of Greek women. She would perform as a priestess at the shrine of Delphi, and

this priestess was probably the most powerful woman among the Greeks. In any case, what is being referred to here in these passages in Acts is a slave-girl who was said to have carried this same spirit of Pythia in her as did the famous and revered Oracle at Delphi; so she was quite the attraction to these Greeks and they paid good money to this slave-girl's owners to have her tell them their future. There is no doubt that this girl was demon possessed and what happened was quite real.

So knowing this helps us to understand what comes next. This girl kept following Paul and the disciples around screeching that "these men are the servants of God Most High and they're telling you have to be saved!" In other words, as annoying as she was, she was telling the truth. But after awhile Paul grew tired of this self-serving nonsense and never ending clamor and exorcized the offending demon in the name of Yeshua. Now needless to say, her owners were horrified! And they were furious....at Paul. All that profit just went down the drain. So the men grabbed Paul and Sila and took them before the local authorities who were quite understanding of these businessmen. And of course rather than accuse Paul and Sila of what really happened (ruining their business) they made some claim about Paul and Sila being Jews who were causing all kinds of disruptions and commotion and upsetting everyone (so far the only upset people seemed to be the businessmen who owned the slave girl). But the accusation to incite riots was a sensitive one in the Roman Empire, and taken very seriously. Jews were notorious riot starters.

What comes next derives from an incorrect assumption that the town magistrates made. Behind the accusation that Paul and Sila were Jews is that they are not Roman citizens. Paul and Sila were in a town of mostly gentiles where Roman citizenship was the norm. It was rare that a Jew would be a Roman citizen; so rare that such a possibility wasn't even considered by the townspeople. Early in our study of the Book of Acts we discussed that Paul's status as a Roman citizen (something that is regularly brought up in the New Testament) was indeed out of the ordinary; and that his citizenship could be traced to his father's family who apparently were Jewish aristocrats in a high enough position that some high Roman government official awarded them such status. So Paul was born into Roman citizenship and had led a privileged life. This is why he had little trouble standing up to local politicians, other aristocrats, and even kings. He knew how to handle himself and he knew the right words to say, and he knew his legal rights as a Roman citizen and how to demand justice. God had picked exactly the right man for the job as the lead evangelist to the gentiles of the Roman Empire.

For whatever reason Luke and Timothy escaped the notice of the authorities and weren't subject to being prosecuted. I suspect it is because Luke was obviously a gentile, and because Timothy probably looked like a gentile due to the physical features he inherited from his gentile father. Paul and Sila no doubt looked Semitic.

The crowd reacted as if in a feeding frenzy and the judges acted in accordance with the wishes of the crowd: Paul and Sila were beaten and thrown into jail. How dare non-Roman citizens tell Roman citizens what their religion ought to be! These men needed to be taught a lesson and so they were chained into stocks. But as is the pattern of the Lord, when He decides that human justice goes against His will, He overturns the rulings of men. Around midnight as Paul and Sila were praying, the earth began to roll and rumble and it was violent enough that the

chains fell off of Paul and Silas and all the others in prison with them. Even more all the cell doors flew open. The startled jailer was jostled out of a sound sleep to find that his jail was open; he decided to kill himself as the only honorable thing to do because he knew that was going to be his fate anyway. He figured that surely all the prisoners would have gleefully thanked their lucky stars and run off into the night. But instead he heard a reassuring voice from inside the darkness of the jail cells that told him not to harm himself, they are all still there.

The awestruck jailer fell down before Paul and Sila asked “what must I do to be saved?” It is hard to know exactly what was in the jailer’s mind when he spoke those words. Perhaps the jailer had heard Paul and Sila speak about “the way of salvation” as they roamed the streets of Philippi, and not knowing very much about what it even meant was so impressed with the countenance and courage of these 2 men that he wanted whatever it was that they had. Paul explains to the astonished jailor that faith in Yeshua will save him and all his household (we’ve already discussed what this meant in the context of the times we’re dealing with). Since we know that Luke wasn’t in jail with Paul and Sila, then he is summarizing whatever he has been told about this incident, and detail is no doubt lacking.

The jailor has few ways to thank Paul and Sila that doesn’t involve simply releasing them (which would result in the jailor’s execution). So he responds by washing their wounds and providing them as much comfort as the circumstances will allow. But we’re also told that right away the jailor and his entire household were immersed. It seems that the jailor took great personal risk and brought Paul and Sila to his own home; somewhere nearby Paul and Sila baptized them all. Following that, they ate a meal together. Notice that they had gone home with Lydia, the God-fearing gentile, and now they do the same with the unnamed jailor. Without the ruling of the Jerusalem Council and without Peter’s encounter with God and with Cornelius that made it clear that gentiles could be ritually clean, these two scenes with Jewish men eating in the homes of gentiles, and accepting their hospitality, would have been impossible.

The next morning after the earthquake event, the town magistrates sent men to release Paul and Sila no doubt feeling that these Jews had been put in their place. The scars of the flogging would be permanent, and the humiliation and pain of being in jail ought to have done the trick. Paul the crusader is not about to let this matter rest and just be happy that the ordeal is over. He wants the men who wrongly did this to them to own up to their offense and apologize in person. So now he also chooses to reveal that he in fact is a Roman citizen who did not get a trial, but instead was summarily flogged and put into jail. This is something that is strictly against Roman law.

The magistrates were startled and afraid when Paul’s words reached them; they themselves could lose their prestigious positions if the provincial governor heard about this injustice perpetrated upon a Roman citizen. So indeed they swallowed their pride and went personally to face Paul and Sila. What they said to the disciples isn’t disclosed, but they did ask them to leave the city. This matter had become too public for the townspeople not to know what was going on but that didn’t change anything; the people of Philippi were resentful that this Jew had deprived them of their special girl with the python spirit in her that told them the future that no doubt brought this city considerable pride and notoriety. The businessmen were still out

their profitable endeavor; forever. And there was still a bad taste in the mouths of the locals from being told that the religion of the Jews was right, and their own was wrong. So the magistrates asked (politely I imagine) that the disciples leave the city. Paul and company complied and afterward went back to Lydia's house probably to recuperate from their ordeal.

After meeting with many of the Believers there, they moved on. We'll follow the disciples to their next location in Acts chapter 17.