

WINSOME WITNESSES

Acts 16:11-40

In our study of the book of Acts we're learning a lot about being witnesses for Jesus. Jesus said to His disciples in Acts 1:8, "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be My witnesses.*" As born-again Christians who've witnessed the power and the difference Jesus can make in our lives, we understand that if there's one thing this world needs more than anything else, it's Jesus. Jesus can transform and bring healing and hope to our lives, our families, our relationships, our communities, and our nation. I don't think any of us here who knows Jesus who doesn't want that for everyone. However, maybe because the gospel does come with so many personal and social implication, we struggle when it comes to sharing Jesus and make it more complicated than it needs to be. So, as we continue Paul's **2nd missionary journey** over the next few chapters, I want to point out some simple and **winsome witnessing principles** as Luke highlights the way the outside world perceives the Christian mission, the effect it has on Jesus' witnesses,¹ and how we should respond to it. Today we're in chapter 16, in Philippi, where Paul has **4 personal encounters**.

I. ENCOUNTER #1: LYDIA. (VV. 11-15)

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

So Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Dr. Luke (the author), sail about 150 miles to Neapolis. From Neapolis, they hoof it 10 more miles northwest up a Roman road, the **Via Egnatia**, to **Philippi**.² And Philippi is a name we're familiar with because Paul will write one of the NT letters to the Philippians. Even though the missionaries didn't stay here long, it was very eventful, and Luke records more detail about Philippi than elsewhere. Because of his detailed account, the prominent medical school there, and how Luke presumably stays here when Paul and Silas leave, many Bible students think this may be Luke's home.

As he states, Philippi was an influential city, named after Alexander the Great's father, Philip of Macedon. It is a **Roman colony** which meant it was like a little "*Rome away from Rome.*"³ You could call it a "*little Rome*".⁴ Supportive of this is the fact that an extraordinary amount of inscriptions found at Philippi, 80%, are written in Latin.⁵ As such, citizens had identical **civil**

rights as citizens living in Rome, which is going to play a significant piece by the end of the chapter. It was also home to emperor worship (the imperial cult) and other false deities.

But you'll notice that the missionaries are staying in the city for a few days before they preach on the Sabbath. He probably works, does some tentmaking, makes some observations about the city and its people, and finds out if there's a synagogue to preach in first. This is what Paul does. Wherever he goes, he gets to know the people in the city and what they believe and will use something relevant to them as a springboard for sharing the gospel. I find in that a simple and winsome principle.

Winsome witnesses are observant.

When we go to share the gospel with someone, especially in our culture, it's important just to get to know them and what they believe. That means we have to ask questions and listen. I remember being a young Christian, driven by the *guilt* that sharing the gospel is something "I have to do", getting all worked up inside, unloading it on someone without their permission and in a way they're not ready to receive it, leaving us both in a forced and awkward situation. Then thinking, "*I never want to do that again!*"⁶ In our unchurched culture today, especially with someone I'm around regularly, witnessing may require many conversations where I simply lend a compassionate and encouraging ear before they ask or I might ask them if they've ever heard the gospel. Listening first usually allows you an open door to weave the hope of the gospel into their situation in a way that's winsome.

Now in order to establish a synagogue (which was like a local church for Jews), it required 10 Jewish men, which Philippi apparently didn't meet. If you didn't have a synagogue, Jewish custom said to congregate outdoors near running/living water like a river so you could perform the ritual washings.⁷ So the missionaries go down to the river and find several God-fearing women having some sort of prayer service. They feared the God of Israel but hadn't heard the good news of Jesus yet. So Paul shares with them and a key woman named Lydia gets saved.

Lydia is a wealthy merchant from Thyatira in Turkey, as evidenced by her costly purple fabric business that Thyatira is known for. She becomes the **first convert in Europe**. **She and her family respond in faith** to the good news and are baptized. But you'll also notice that Lydia is described as having **her heart opened by the Lord** to respond favorably to the things spoken by Paul. The Lord worked through his sharing the gospel. It gives us another simple and winsome witnessing principle.

Winsome witnesses are dependent.

Luke is communicating that not Paul, and not us, can win people to the Lord in our own strength. We have to rely on God to work in their hearts through the Holy Spirit as we share the gospel. That to me takes the stress and worry out of witnessing – "*What if they ask a question I can't answer? What if I mess up or forget something?*" – that goes away when I understand it's not totally up to me. I'll do the best I can to share the good news with them in a way that is relative

and helpful and trust God to do His part. I can plant the seed, and I can water the seed, but it's up to God to make it grow, convicting them of their sin and need for a Savior.

II. ENCOUNTER #2: SLAVE GIRL. (VV. 16-21)

“16 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. 17 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.” 18 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.

19 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, 20 and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, “These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, 21 and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.” 22 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. 23 When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; 24 and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.”

So this is more than an encounter with a slave girl, isn't it? There was also a dark spiritual force behind her fortune-telling powers. You have to think how different she is from Lydia. **Lydia** was a wealthy woman with a significant business. This is a poor **slave girl** who is in control of nothing—not even herself—she is someone's business. Her state is truly heartbreaking. She is in **spiritual bondage** to a demon and **physical bondage** to careless masters who care more about money than about her dignity and welfare. She is described in most of your Bibles as having a “*spirit of divination*”. A literal translation of this would be “*a spirit of Python*” or “*Python spirit*”. A spirit of Python would have made perfect sense to the original audience in the Greco-Roman world. Python was a giant, serpentine goddess (eventually killed by Zeus's son Apollo) who had a temple not too far away from Philippi in Delphi. It was about 100 miles northwest of Athens and a 6-hour drive from Philippi, and was considered the center, or navel of the earth. It is a historical site you can visit today.

Well Python always had a high priestess named **the Pythia** that would be occupied by hundreds of women for nearly 2 millennia from 1400 B.C. – 381 A.D.⁸ People would flock to Delphi to hear an oracle from the Pythia and to find out anything from whether a farmer should plant his field or a king should go to war. She drew rulers, princes and generals like **Alexander the Great** or **King Croesus of Lydia** (where Lydia is from). He asked the oracle if he should war against approaching **King Cyrus of Persia** and she said something like, “*If you go to war with King Cyrus, a great empire will be destroyed.*” What she didn't tell him was that it would be his own, proving you can't trust the oracle.⁹ He defeated at Sardis.

She also drew in a lot of **wealth** with her fortune telling. What Pythia would do is she would sit on a tripod stool over a deep fissure in the earth that emitted narcotic vapors and she would go into a trance and make prophetic babbles. Today scientists have discovered that there are two fault lines under the oracle's temple that created a passageway for Ethylene, a sweet-smelling gas once used as an anesthetic, to come up. And this makes sense doesn't it because we know drugs often open the door to the demonic influence. I always think when someone loses control it's easier for them to take control. But this is who this girl is associated with. She's probably making a fortune with her fortune telling for her masters in the military and agriculturally rich community.

For whatever reason, she starts to follow the missionaries and starts vaguely endorsing them. She's making true statements about their identity and message—they are from God and they are proclaiming the way of salvation—but her statements are so vague that she could change the God to Zeus the next day or say the way of salvation to be by giving her money. You can't trust her—as we learned from King Croesus! So in Jesus-like fashion, Paul rejects the testimony of his demon and casts it out. I thought this gave us another great principle:

Winsome witnesses are consistent.

What I mean by consistent is that as witnesses, we need to make sure that our lives match our message. Here this slave girl is preaching the way of salvation while being in bondage to spiritual darkness, discrediting the message. Her life doesn't match her message. How relevant for us today who are preaching the gospel. Do our lives support or supplant the gospel? Many Christians preach the gospel well, but do their lives back it up? If I come to you and tell you that I have a hair cream that will restore your hairline, my head better not be bald or you're not going to believe me. In the same way if we try to point people to a Redeemer who can restore lives and give hope, there should be some evidence of that in my life.

While we're here, I want to just put in a word of thought that might get me in trouble. But one of the areas we're losing some consistency in today is in relation to spiritually dark powers like fortune tellers and magic and all that. As one commentator pointed out, I think the entertainment industry has made us ignorant or reluctant to call things what they are. Books and movies and Halloween are filled with dark powers or magic and they make it look friendly or sympathetic, but folks if it ain't from Jesus it ain't good. I remember a show called Sabrina the Teenage which which seemed innocent and harmless but so did all of the young, beautiful witches in Paul's day. I'm just saying I think we have to exercise a little more caution here sometimes. I can't help but be exposed to the dark powers sometimes like Paul, but when I am I want to penetrate that with light, and be careful not to dabble in it or think it friendly. As a pastor, I've had my run ins with them and I know they don't like me. They want to steal, kill and destroy what God is doing here.

Anyway, Paul casts the demon out. Her masters get angry because their income has flown away. They bring Paul and Silas before the court where they are accused of disrupting the peace with

their “Jewish” beliefs (note the anti-Semitism or anti-monotheism), are beaten by a mob, and thrown into the innermost cell of the prison with with stocks fastened to their legs.

III. ENCOUNTER #3: JAILER. (VV. 25-34)

“25 But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; 26 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. 27 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. 28 But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!”

You have to love this account. Though their bodies are broken, their spirits were not. Instead of complaining and calling down curses, they are praising God and rejoicing in their opportunity to suffer for the gospel. I think we could look at this episode as another aspect of what it looks like to represent the gospel well and be consistent. We have real hope, but does that hope change our attitude so that people think, *“What do they have that I need?”* **Psalm 42:8** says, *“The Lord will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; and His song will be with me in the night.”* Spurgeon said, *“Anyone can sing in the day... but songs in the night come only from God; they are not in the power of men.”* Well, their song is soon extraordinarily interrupted by an **earthquake**, which many in Philippi would’ve interpreted as **a work of a god**—just like your insurance would describe it, right? It sets the city trembling with fear, including the jailer who fears he has angered the gods and as a punishment for losing prisoners, feared his own life would be taken from him. Before he can take his own life, Paul stops him.

29 And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, 30 and after he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” 31 They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. 33 And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. 34 And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.”

Winsome witnesses are clear.

Notice how simple and clear Paul’s message is. When the jailer asks how he can be saved, Paul doesn’t say become a member of a church, tithe, get baptized, start a Bible study, do some good deeds and we’ll see if you’re really saved... No. **Just believe in Jesus**. Verse 32 says they explained it a little further later that Jesus died for his sins and was buried and rose again so that all who believe have everlasting life (1 Cor. 15:3-4). When we go to share the gospel, let’s keep the message clear: we aren’t save by our works but by Christ’s work on the cross. Everyone I’ve witnessed too doesn’t struggle with works—they want to be told what *to do* to be saved—we have to be clear Jesus did all the work and we simply trust in what He did for us. And this is

really neat too: his whole family believed and was baptized too, just like Lydia's. Look, **the gospel is transforming individuals, families, and now the whole community** in verses 35-40.

IV. ENCOUNTER #4: MAGISTRATES. (VV. 35-40)

“35 Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, “Release those men.” 36 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.” 37 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.” 38 The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, 39 and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city. 40 They went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.”

You have to laugh here at the way the tables have turned. The magistrates to attempt to release them quickly and stealthily, as if it never happened. Why? For one, the earthquake. Two, because as Cicero said, *“It is a crime to bind a Roman citizen; to scourge him is a wickedness.”* The historian Livy notes heavy penalties for flogging or killing a Roman citizen without full hearing.¹⁰ If this is taken to court in Rome, they might never serve in such a role again.¹¹ And it's interesting, instead of going along with it, Paul insists the magistrates themselves come and walk them out themselves.

Winsome witnesses are confident.

The big question is, *“Why does Paul invoke his rights now? Or at all?”* And I think the answer is that it's not really about Paul's rights. This isn't his way of getting revenge. By making this injustice a public spectacle he's safeguarding the church he's leaving behind. Think about this: Paul didn't avoid persecution by referencing his Roman citizenship and leaving the Philippian church exposed to it but joined in suffering with them and then made a public case of out of the injustice so as to leave them the mission at Philippi with integrity and some social merit in the eyes of the community. If he'd left secretly, everyone would wonder who the visitors were and what happened to them. Now, instead, this little flock of believers in a city hostile to their faith isn't going to be as easy to bully. God is with them. The message to them is simple: don't mess with Christ's church. The message to us is simple: winsome witness can be confident in Christ because He will build His church and the gates of Hell won't overpower it.

In sum, this whole passage reminds of the 3 biggest themes that run throughout the entire Luke-Acts narrative.¹² The witnessing principles are great but this is what Luke is really teaching.

1. **Salvation: The universal scope of the gospel.** The gospel is for everyone. It's universal. Jew, Samaritan, Gentile. Christ came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), especially the disenfranchised like women, children, Gentiles, tax collectors and sinners. The

Lydia's, the slave girls, and the secular jailers. People gave Him a hard time for associating with these social outcasts. Not only is it for everyone, Luke emphasizes individual personal responses. We must respond to the gospel individually.

2. **Sovereignty: God's active role in salvation history.** The Church throughout Acts is overcoming obstacle after obstacle, from within and from without, taking the world by storm because God is driving it. Even jail cells prove to be platforms for the gospel. You can't stop the Church and you'll die trying. God is the architect of human history, and his sovereign plan continues to unfold and His will is fulfilled. It's a movement of God and one that He is involved in every step of the way.¹³ We humbly obey and depend on Him.
3. **Savior: Jesus lives and works through the Holy Spirit.** Luke describes the ministries of Peter and Paul in such a way that it is clear they are **paralleled to Jesus' ministry**. Acts is the continuing acts of Jesus by the Holy Spirit through the apostles. You know what that means? We have a risen Savior! Only a risen Savior who died for our sins, was buried and rose again can explain the Church's success. Jesus is alive and He is still changing lives, families, communities, and nations!

There is nothing I can say to you today that is going to encourage you to share the gospel quite like those 3 theological underpinning Luke is communicating. It's practical theology. What a privilege we have being a part of this godly legacy, serving the same Savior and sharing the same life-changing message. Who is the Lydia, the child, and the jailer, in your life whom God is preparing for you to share the gospel with? Pray for God to open their hearts and find creative ways to show the love of Christ to them.

¹ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 458.

² Steven Charles Ger, *Acts: Beginning in Jerusalem...*, 209.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 533.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Bryan Clark, *Daring to be the Church* sermon series, http://s3.amazonaws.com/LBC-Sermons/2021-10-03_Transcript_DaringToBeTheChurh_IWillBuildMyChurch.pdf

⁷ Ger, 210. "According to Jewish custom, in the case there is no building in which to meet, the Jewish community is to congregate outdoors, preferably near a body of water to facilitate mikvah, Jewish ritual immersion."

⁸ Dave Stotts, *Drive Thru History: Ancient History, Episode 4 – Roots of Democracy*

⁹ Dave Stotts, *Drive Thru History: Ancient History, Episode 7 – East Meets West*

¹⁰ Livy, *Hist. Rom.* 10.9.4

¹¹ Dio Cassius, *Rom. Hist.* 60.24.4

¹² Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown, An Introduction to the New Testament, Second Edition* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009, 2016), 431.