

2/25/24 - Acts 16:11-40 - "Pay Attention to the 'Why' "

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[0 : 00] The passage today will be Acts 16, verses 11 through 40. Starting in 11.

So setting sail from Tros, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Nap-Neopolis, and from there to Philippi, which is the leading city of the district of Macedonia, in a Roman colony.

We remained in this city some days, and on the Sabbath day, we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer.

We sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira. A seller of purple goods who was a worshiper of God.

The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.

[1 : 14] And she prevailed upon us. And as we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.

She followed Paul and us, crying out, These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation. And she kept doing this many days.

And Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, I command you, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out of her. And it came out that very hour.

When her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the marketplace before the rulers. And when they brought them to the magistrates, they said, These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city.

They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice. The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore their garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods.

[2 : 22] But when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. And the prisoners were listening to them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken.

And immediately, all of the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer awoke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

But Paul cried out with a loud voice, Do not harm yourself, for we are all here. And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas.

Then he brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.

[3 : 27] And they spoke the word of the Lord to him, all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. And he was baptized at once, he and all his family.

Then he brought them up into his house and set foot before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household, that he had believed in God. But when it was day, the magistrates sent police, saying, Let those men go.

And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore, come out now and go in peace. But Paul said to them, They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison.

And do they now throw us out secretly? No. Let them come themselves and take us out. The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid.

When they heard that they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them, and took them out, and asked them to leave the city. So they went out to prison, and visited Elidia.

[4 : 38] And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them, and departed. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Well, welcome to Steel Valley Church. My name is Pastor Brent. It's not the name on my birth certificate, but more so Brent. You can call me Brent.

And I shepherd here, so they call me pastor. Some call me lead pastor, which just, I found out, adds more responsibilities onto my plate. But it does keep me in shape.

But for some reason, I just can't get out of this rounded shape. But I'm in shape. It's great to be with you, to be opening God's word, and to be looking upon God's word, to be guiding our lives, to be challenging us, to be encouraging us, and everything in between.

And we're continuing through our series in Acts today, which has finally led us to Paul's second missionary journey.

[5 : 48] And this is where we arrive today in Philippi. And it's worth mentioning that Philippi is quite an important city in this area.

It was as verse 12, which Lewellen just read, is the leading city in Macedonia in a Roman colony. This was a Roman subdivision.

If you catch that reference, you know what I'm talking about. It's a Roman subdivision. And the city was wealthy. It was positioned right along a trade route so that anybody going to Rome to trade would stop in Philippi and do business there.

And so it was healthy. It was wealthy. It was strong. Its citizens were protected by Roman government. They had privileges.

This was a very significant city. It was a leading city in the district of Macedonia, as verse 12 says. Now, Paul was led here because of a vision that he had previously.

[6 : 53] We saw that last week, that he was interpreting that vision, that dream, I believe it was, a dream of a man calling out from Macedonia to help them. And we saw that last week.

So he's on that trip. And what I want us to find in these certain events, these separate events that are all tying together, is that there is nothing that is coincidental in this trip.

There's nothing coincidental that is unraveling and unfolding for Paul, Silas, and his men. Now, coincidences are simply circumstances that are kind of apparently unrelated.

It's coincidences. We're going to contrast that with providence today, where that's God's governance over things, by directing all things purposefully.

So you got coincidental, you got providential. You got coincidences, you got providences. We're going to be looking at that because since Jesus Christ's ascension in Acts chapter 1, since Jesus left His disciples behind, the plan of God was to spread the gospel, starting in Jerusalem, breaching the walls of Jerusalem, leading to Judea and all Samaria, breaching the walls of that region to spread throughout the end of the earth.

[8 : 28] This is Acts 1.8, which was a promise of Jesus Christ of what would unfold according to the providence of God. And today we enter a city among the end of the earth, Philippi, a well-leading city.

And this is all along a path God was providentially guiding. And I want us to see a main point today, that there is no coincidence along God's path for us, only providence.

And so let's be encouraged today as we break down the text into two different sections. I have a sermon title today, titled, Pay Attention to the Why.

Pay Attention to the Why. And I'd invite you to join me in prayer as we don't take this act of opening God's Word lightly.

And so let's turn to Him and the Holy Spirit to guide us. Let's pray. Father, we come to You humbly to submit ourselves to Your Word, myself included.

[9 : 38] Father, we pray that as we look upon the significant stories unfolding within the pages, that we see real life and real providence occurring, no coincidences at all.

And help us to see our lives in a different light after we leave church today. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

And so the first section, the first of two sections is providence outside the prison walls. Providence outside the prison walls. So these men, this ministry, missionary team, whatever you want to call them, they set sail.

They arrive in Philippi. And obviously we just talked about verse 12. It's a leading city. And they remained there for some days. They were there for a significant amount of time, enough time to stir the pot up a little bit in Philippi.

And on a Sabbath day, one of the days being a Sabbath day, they went outside the gate to the riverside where they supposed there was a place of prayer.

[10 : 55] And they sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. And so the narrative begins setting up the first of two contrasts in this section.

We see two contrasting encounters with God. In this first section, we meet a bystander named Lydia who heard Paul's crew leading a group in a Bible study, a women's Bible study.

And God worked miraculously in her heart and opened it in verse 14. Now, obviously, our author, Luke, he wrote the book of Acts.

Obviously, Luke has spared much of the details regarding the content of what was being taught in this group. But based upon her response, and we would say a conversion experience, she was baptized in verse 15.

She was baptized and responded. And it would also appear that she overwhelmed, it's funny to think, overwhelmed Paul's crew with hospitality.

[12 : 06] Reminds me of, you know, an Italian mother just warmly welcoming, not letting you leave unless you take food with you. Not letting you leave the table until you've had seconds.

This was Lydia's conversion experience. And now a side-by-side conversion, or a comparison, sorry, Luke brings us to a contrasting situation in Philippi where he is followed and mocked by a trafficked witch, we'll call her, who's described as kind of like a gnat of sorts, following Paul around, saying, behold his message.

He brings the message from the high God, the way of salvation. And he's sort of mocked in these efforts of spreading the good news.

Obviously, Paul and Silas, who do they think they are? They're outsiders. They're breaking into her market that she's controlling, of whom she has slave owners who are just counting their dollar signs over the trafficked fruit that she's bringing to them.

And so, Paul and Silas are basically stepping on outside territory here. And after many days of this happening, if you could hear that nuisance, I got kids following me around all day long.

[13 : 39] I know what that sounds like. And they're just annoyed. Paul's annoyed by it, by her following in verse 18 and mocking their message.

And Paul confronts her and said, enough's enough. He casts the demonic control out of her and instantly oppression leaves her.

And church, between these two contrasting interventions of God, between Lydia and this slave girl, between working subtly through Lydia's life and miraculously through the slave girl, these two women had a story that God began to write upon the providential road that God was leading.

And Lydia, if we kind of lay these contrasts out, they're literally the antonym of one another between Lydia and the slave girl. Lydia's wealthy. The slave girl's poor.

Lydia has high standing. The slave girl was abused. Lydia is religious and moral. And the slave girl is broken and tormented.

[14 : 55] Lydia comes to faith through a quiet Bible study. And the slave girl gets transformed miraculously. What's the common denominator?

both were brought to faith in Jesus Christ by the power of God alone.

God's intervention. And truly, we can lay our preconceived notions that Christians, in order for you to come, you have to have wealth or you have to have status.

No, Jesus calls Christians to come as you are, to be changed by the gospel. You see, most of all, God's word truly changes us.

Does it not? God's word does. Whether it's hearing and overhearing a Bible study, a word from a Bible study, or hearing Paul confronting you in a miraculous intervention for a demonic force to leave.

[15 : 58] It is God's word that truly changes us. and it meets us casually along the roads of life, but with the formal intent to charter a new course.

Yes, come as we are, but Jesus loves you enough to not leave you in the state of which you came. For Lydia, the wealth that she gained from selling goods, she was wealthy.

And that would lead a trajectory of generosity, of sharing, similar to Barnabas back in Acts 4, verse 36-37.

It led her down a trajectory of hospitality, of overwhelming these men to take some leftovers with them. Right? Similar to Cornelius' house in Acts 10, verse 48.

There is fruit of the gospel for the trafficked witch, though, this slave girl. She was the antonym of Lydia. How did God leave her?

[17 : 10] She was left with absolutely nothing. Her divination was her income. And I could only imagine, it's not stated in this text, but I could only imagine, that this delivered witch found refuge through Lydia's provision, through Lydia's generosity.

And you see, church, whether the power of the gospel leaves us with much or with little, it far surpasses anything that we hold in our hand because we know the one who holds our hearts, that being the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church has always been sustained by those who have wealth, whom generously sustain others in need. And in so doing, we follow together Jesus Christ, together as a united organism that assembles, like no other, a family, an assembly of a family that carries one another in need, in trial, in hardship.

And this is playing out as no coincidence at all. And so Providence leads us, and it continues to lead us, following the story of the slave girl, and we see Providence inside the prison walls.

And this is a larger chunk from verse 19 to verse 40. And in verse 19, Luke focuses attention now upon the fallout of this slave girl as it directly affects Paul and Silas' cost of followership as they were dragged by the angry slave owners into the marketplace.

[19 : 09] Simply in Agora, it's an open area, public display, and they're set before the rulers for all to see. And Paul and Silas find themselves falsely accused by the Jews, falsely accused as Jews.

Remember the subdivision of the Jewish nation weeks ago? They're the outsiders here. And they capitalized upon what they thought of who these men were.

That they were the outsiders. Those who don't have Roman protection from the government. They don't have rights. They don't have privileges. And that their behavior, specifically, is starting a revolution in the city.

And they cast them before the magistrates because they accused them of disturbing the city by advocating all that outsider stuff, circumcision stuff, dietary restriction stuff, Sabbath observance stuff, all that Jewish stuff, all the stuff that's unlawful customs that are against Romans.

These slave owners lost their most popular act by the power of God. This slave girl was delivered free of her bondage, not only from the power of darkness, but the power of slave owners.

[20 : 44] And it's important to see something here. Because Luke details little resistance of Paul and Silas and his men against the state.

And simply trust in God's plan for them. Trusting providence. Which makes me want to ask a question even to myself. Do we trust God enough to walk in obedience into a prison cell?

Even having been falsely accused, falsely obtained. Do we trust God enough to accept his plan, which includes quite a bit of pain along with it?

Can you feel the weight of discipleship? This discipleship in this privileged Western culture that we live in? Do you feel the weight of true discipleship?

Because we should as it plays out. Verse 25 indicates that the state's power cannot bind God's power.

[21 : 59] And in fact, the state would providentially lead Paul and Silas down a road of blood, of bondage, to seek out another slave slave that is behind closed doors, deep within a prison, of the confines of a prison wall.

And God sees a jailer. And I want you to see this narrative unravel. I'm going to slow down on verse 25 here and read this. Look with me, turn with me.

Verse 25, about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake so that the foundations of the prison were shaken and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's bonds were unfastened.

When the jailer awoke, saw the prison doors that were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

Church, it's safe to say this jailer, this jailer who lived his life as a slave in this prison was just as imprisoned as the men behind bars, shackled and chained to the floor.

[23 : 38] It's also safe to say that this metaphorically can represent the condition of this jailer before this miraculous night of God entering that prison.

A night of freedom that was given by God, similar to Lydia, similar to the slave girl. And in verse 28, Paul cries out, do not harm yourself, for we are all here.

So I believe to Luke's audience intending to build credibility to those false accusations of Paul. He's not trying to rebel and start a revolution.

That would be the time to do it, wouldn't it? Paul says, stop, don't kill yourself because we are all here. The penalty for this jailer, if that kind of thing would have taken place under his watch, he would not live to see the light of day the next day.

He would be killed and tortured for that matter. And the jailer, in verse 29, called for the lights and rushed in. Trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas.

[24 : 56] then he brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

And they said, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. You and your household.

Amen. Amen. Wow. Wow. The path of God trailed by drips of blood from Paul and Silas led to seek out a jailer and his family, all slaves to this prison, to hear the gospel and believe.

See, God's love is so precise that it seeks out those in max level security prison cells.

Like, no daylight prison cells. And God's love is so powerful to transform those who seem most distant from him.

[26 : 18] is the power of God's love, the power of the gospel, seeking out sinners and saving the lost. Maybe you're not in Christ today.

You doubt that maybe God sees you today. Maybe you're that middle child where nobody has seen you your entire life.

And you kind of just continue in the status quo of being forgotten about. And maybe you, spiritually speaking, are found in darkness, no light, kind of unseen.

Does God see you? Does God hear you? Does God even care about you? Well, I'm here today to tell you and share the same opportunity for you to see your bondage and find hope and freedom in Jesus Christ.

How? Following the jailer. Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And Paul and Silas said to him, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

[27 : 34] You and your household. The power of God through the gospel saves, it seeks, and it transforms those whom God desires to transform.

How? By your faith. This is good news. This is why this is good news. For this jailer and his family, they responded similar to Lydia and all who responded to the gospel in this prison area.

You can only imagine how big this place was. They were all baptized who responded and immediately expressed hospitality in these prison walls.

And the ones who were washed by the water of baptism, then washed and cleansed Paul and Silas' wounds and provided food.

And look, they rejoiced. God sees you today, all of you, even if you are distant from him, even if you can't even wrap your head around a holy, perfect God caring about a sinful person like you.

[28 : 58] He will pursue you, and so I invite you to pursue him today by your faith. And so as we reach the next day after this wild night, let's call this a prison revival.

we recall how Paul and Silas sort of meekly entered prison quietly. They didn't raise too much of a stink.

They didn't raise their voice. They didn't fight at this time. But they left with quite a different demeanor. Something changes upon their way out that was absent on their way in.

And after the magistrates ordered the release of Paul and Silas, Paul speaks up. What does he say?

He says in verse 37, they have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are, ding, ding, ding, Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison.

[30 : 09] And do they now throw us out secretly? No, he says. Let them come themselves and take us out.

In verse 38, the police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens.

citizens. A little oversight for an emotionally charged sentencing. There's a big uh-oh indeed. This could throw this city in Philippi completely upside down in citizens' revolt against the government.

There's no due process, no formal trial, just the state acting outside its authority, and citizens just because the citizens are raising a loud noise to coerce the state to do their bidding.

This is definitely a big uh-oh indeed. And church, we should see something as the cliché saying goes, don't mistake meekness for weakness.

[31 : 21] weakness. Yes, Paul surrendered, he meekly surrendered to the state, but wisdom would reveal when it's appropriate to stand against injustice.

I mean, imagine for a moment why this matters for Luke to include this in here. Imagine what this proclaimed to Lydia, the slave girl, these new converts, this jailer's family.

Imagine them seeing Paul just secretly going out and the state giving the impression that they can throw whoever they want in jail. Well, Paul was definitely not looking out for himself and vindicating himself.

He's looking out for those around these new churches in this prominent city that are establishing themselves. You see, when the church faces injustice, it's not a matter of if the church speaks up, but it's a matter of when.

It takes wisdom of when to speak. Paul and Silas were wrongly accused. They were beaten. I mean, this is like bloody beaten, bloody, drips of blood, literally flesh ripped, and they were imprisoned with no food, starved.

[32 : 42] And while they were to have protection from the state, they did not. So in other words, sometimes we need to let God's providence sort of play out in life, but be ready to know when to speak.

Right? But what if obedience sometimes asks our flesh, might God be leading to an uncomfortable path to reach a providential end?

I want you to really wrestle with that as we start to wind down this morning. Nobody likes to be uncomfortable in life.

We kind of want smooth sailing if we want to be honest. We're an honest church. You can be honest. You don't want hardship. You don't want blood. You don't want all of this stuff.

You don't want to have to raise your voice and start a revolt against the government. We just don't want that. We just want easy. But what if obedience asks our flesh in those times, might God be leading to an uncomfortable path to reach a providential end?

[34 : 01] Do you see where God might be leading you? In other words, what we see is jail ahead of us, but what God sees is a jailer.

You understand? Might he be leading in an uncomfortable path to reach a providential end? And so this kind of wraps up in verse 39.

So they came and apologized to them, and they took them out and asked them to leave the city. they went out of the prison, they visited Lydia on the way out, and lo and behold, look, and when they had seen the brothers, there's a group of people meeting at Lydia's house.

They encouraged this little church, and then they departed. I could only imagine what encouragement it would have been for Paul and Silas to meet these brothers at Lydia's.

And how profound is the providential plan of God. Amen? So as we kind of wrap up and reflect on this, I want us to see that there are so many apparent, so many apparent coincidental things that occur in our lives.

[35 : 34] life. But don't you see that there is no coincidence at all? There is no coincidence. There's no coincidence that you may feel like you're slaving away at a nine-to-five job five days a week.

I mean, you know, guys who are working a lot of hours call nine-to-five part-time 40 hours a week. week. But there's no coincidence that you're there at nine-to-five or nine-to-nine for a thankless boss for little pay.

There's no coincidence that you're pushing papers 40 hours a week behind a desk, paper cuts and all. There's no coincidence that you're instructing students at a university or even a high school for thankless students.

There's no coincidence that you might be a student at a university or high school or middle school or elementary school. There's no coincidence that you're bound to nine periods throughout the day, if that's still a thing in high schools and middle schools.

Surrounded by weird people, to say the least, and germs. It's no coincidence. that you're selling goods and services and lands and houses, properties, for people who just want discounts and price deductions.

[37 : 07] There's no coincidence that you might feel stuck at home all day with needy kids. And yes, germs and all.

There's no coincidence that you might be even right now stuck in a hospital bed. or maybe soon to be stuck in a hospital. Might we sense that there is no coincidence after all?

And that the apparent coincidental things that occur in life are the very opportunities that God has led us to pay attention to the why of our situation.

Why was Paul and Silas led to speak to that group of women? Lydia, why was Paul and Silas led to be followed by that witch?

Her salvation. Why was Paul and Silas led to be beaten, bruised, and broken, and imprisoned? the jailer?

[38 : 18] Why are you where you are today? Who does God want you to see in your situation? You see, along God's path, what we see as coincidental, God sees as providential.

Whether your situation is outside or inside the walls, none of us are confined, but all of us are commissioned to God's providence.

Church, don't waste your life ignoring God's providence. Ask why. Let's pray.