

## *A New Frontier*

Acts 16:1-19

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So where were we? We are now back in the Book of Acts and will be there until we finish, which will be this spring. And if you are visiting with us this morning, let me just say we are in the middle of the Book of Acts. We are in the part where it is the second of Paul's three missionary journeys.

And just by way of quick background before we look at the text, Luke is the author of both the Gospel of Luke and Acts. In fact, many historians and theologians see them really as two parts of one book and refer to them as Luke-Acts. He is a Gentile by birth, and he was born to free slaves in Antioch which is a part of Asia Minor. He was not only the writer of two of the largest books of the New Testament—outside of Paul he is responsible for the next largest chunk of the New Testament—but he was proficient in at least four things. Luke was definitely a world traveler. He was a physician—in fact, he was Paul's personal physician. He was a nautical master. As well as, he was a historian. And so even the portions where he was not traveling with Paul, he did much investigation to discern the historical facts surrounding not only the life and ministry of Jesus and his disciples, but also of Paul.

And so he traveled with Paul not during his first missionary journey, but in fact he joined Paul during his second missionary journey which is what we read about today. So this is an important part of what's happening because it is a new frontier for Paul in that now he's getting ready to begin sharing and preaching the gospel to those who are Gentiles but also to those who are God-fearing Jews. But it begins to go more into the realm of Gentiles, both those who were involved with the Roman Empire, who had power, who were part of the oppressive structure. And today we definitely see in this text, in Paul's missionary journey, where he shows us—we see that the power of the gospel brings change. When it does, it shows us great beauty. Also, in the spread of the gospel—also met with great threat. So we look this morning at Acts chapter sixteen verses one through nineteen. And then next week we will look together at verses twenty to twenty-four of Act sixteen.

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and 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, and 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." And she prevailed upon us.

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 this she kept doing for many days. 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.

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Lord, by your Holy Spirit as you worked in Lydia, work in us to make our hearts and our wills receptive to the beauty of the gospel that brings about change. But also, make us wise to the threat—the threat that not only comes from within us, but the threat that also comes from without—that we might be willing to humble ourselves and allow the gospel to change us. In Jesus' mighty name. Amen.

We look together this morning at this passage, and what I want to do—you'll see in your outline—is I want you to see that there is very clearly a strategy as Paul sets out on this second missionary journey. But there is also the beauty the gospel brings about in Lydia's life. And also great threat, as the gospel begins to threaten the structures and practices and the idols of that culture. And what might all of that have to do with us?

It's really wonderful, by the way, that we have Luke who was a committed historian, who's written for us a very detailed account. Not every jot and tittle, but definitely a historical account. And it is meant for us. Just as John would say of his gospel, these things are written that we might believe, that we might test it and see. That is what is before us. What Paul is putting before us as a testimony of what God was doing through him and meaning for it to also have that same effect in us—to test it and see, that it might also equip us with a call and vision to reach others for the sake of Christ. So let's look together at the strategy, beauty, and threat.

First, you should see the strategy that Paul employs. And it is very ironic, is it not, just coming out of the Jerusalem council where they were gathered to give instruction to the churches that were being planted in Gentile lands as well as in Jewish lands for the sake of following Christ. What in the world should they do with regard to circumcision? And isn't it interesting—very shortly after all of that takes place, Paul comes, as the text tells us, he meets this young man named Timothy who had been converted to Jesus Christ through his family. His mother was a converted Jew. His father was a Greek. And he was well spoken of, clearly—well known in the area where he was. This is the same Timothy who would be a church planter to whom Paul writes later in the New Testament.

So what's interesting, we see as a part of this strategy, is that Paul is willing to remove barriers. So isn't it interesting that while he notes that it is not necessary to be circumcised, to then be converted, and that that has nothing to do with one's conversion—and that forcing someone to be circumcised, which was the contention of some of the Jewish converts to Christianity; that any Gentiles who were brought into the faith needed to be circumcised—Paul said absolutely not. But here, why does he then go about the task of having Timothy circumcised? Is that a contradiction? No. In fact, what it is is a strategy for the sake of the gospel going forward. What he's willing to do is he understands that there is still both a religious significance for some Jews in regard to circumcision, and it's also become a part of their

religious culture. It has in and of itself, Biblically speaking, absolutely no religious significance in terms of—it's not required for salvation. So Paul understands that.

But he also understand something else. If he's going to be traveling during this missionary journey with Timothy, who's half-Jewish, half-Greek, well known—and they're going about planting churches and preaching the gospel, if it is asked and determined that Timothy whom Paul has with him is not circumcised, how will that build walls against the gospel? Paul says, "It's not worth it, so let me do everything I can that is not in violation to Scripture and following Jesus Christ to remove whatever barriers are necessary so that others might hear the gospel of Jesus Christ."

It's interesting, because this is something that every church and every Christian must at least consider as part of our following the Lord Jesus Christ. Do our practices, do our habits that we often so closely associate with ourselves, when we become Christian, do we bring into our identity as a Christian things that are completely culturally bound and have no religious or gospel significance? And yet when it becomes a part of us and our practice, we unknowingly and sometimes knowingly set barriers that we expect people to get over before they become a Christian. Now we don't say that, but in practice.

Oftentimes people believe, for example—I know as well as you know that there are many Christians today who are, politically-speaking, conservative. Who hold to what we call—unfortunately, a label—social issues, "I'm a conservative." And we use in social issues things like abortion. Now, we can find great Biblical warrant for being against abortion and being part of the culture of life, moving against the culture of death. But oftentimes because our Biblical beliefs find a safe home in one particular political party, that political party becomes associated with the Christian faith whether we mean it to or not. And so many people reject Christianity because they assume that being a Christian means I also need to be politically conservative. Now none of us necessarily would be so bold or so naked in our comments to say that one has to be politically conservative to be a Christian. At least, I haven't heard you say that—or, many of you. And we certainly don't say that from this pulpit. But how does our speech, how does what we represent about how we practice in the culture, become so identified with our faith that those who are outside the faith think of us that I must convert to a particular political agenda to be a Christian? Do you see?

And so we must be open enough to the gospel to understand that we need to be self-critical and self-evaluative—that's not a word but I'm going to use it—self-evaluative enough to be asking ourselves the questions. While I am completely free to hold what political views my country allows me to hold, I need to be careful that I do not associate my political beliefs—be they liberal or conservative, because Christians are on both sides—to be identified with my Christian faith, that others believe they need to hold to that also to be a Christian.

Said in a much more lower-shelf issue... When I was a church planter, I had a church planting coach who had gone around the country to work with particular church planters. And he was telling us this story, because he knew that I was traveling and moving my family from southwest Florida to metro New York. And he says, "Be careful of what cultural practices you bring with you." I was born a southerner, my wife was born a midwesterner. And he said this because he said there was one particular church planter they'd been working with in Arizona. The church planter and his family had been through a great deal of frustration. The church wasn't growing quite the way they had hoped that it would, and they were struggling. He felt anemic. He wasn't sure—he said, "Would you please come and visit us?" So he came to visit. He went to the church service. And after the church service, they invited him over to their house. So he went over to the house, and as soon as he walked in the front door of the pastor's house, he saw immediately what the problem was.

The church planter was from south Mississippi. And what he had done was he had taken his southern culture and heritage and simply transplanted it to the southwest of the United States. I don't know if you've been in Arizona, but it's nothing like southern Mississippi. The way the family dressed, the

way they decorated their home, all the music that they listened to—it was clearly being brought over into the cultural practices that were coming through the worship and practices of the church. And so they had to have a hard conversation. Are you trying to plant a southern church in a place where they don't speak southern? It caused the church planter to really question—how much has my cultural identity been associated with my faith? Am I willing to become southwestern so that I might be able to preach the gospel in a vernacular, in a way that they can understand? Paul shows us the way. He removes the barriers. That is a part of his strategy.

But more important than removing barriers—more important than coming up with a grand, great church strategy and vision—this passage has for us the greatest of strategies, that unless we yield to it, we will not be able to truly grow as Christians or as a church. It's right here in the text. Notice what it says. And you won't make me read back through all those cities' names, right? Okay. "As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily." And so then their desire was to take it from there and to go into Asia. And then this text tells us: "having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them."

Do you know what the grand strategy is? The grand strategy is before we go about any of our vision, any of our plans, we need to go before the Lord and before his Spirit and say, "Lord, give us wisdom. Is this what you would want us to do?" And oftentimes, we don't get the answer right there. We have to take a few steps, and then we meet with perhaps failure or closed doors. And that doesn't mean we are a failure. It may mean that's precisely not what the Holy Spirit wants us to do. They still tried to get into Asia, but the Spirit kept them from doing so. And then the Lord gives to Paul a vision by the Spirit, I believe, that there was this man of Macedonia calling him over into the Roman Empire—into the heart of the Roman Empire. And so Paul listened.

So the strategy is yes, we are to remove barriers, but it must also be done in the context of asking the Spirit of the Living God to guide us. And to pray. And to humble ourselves and our plans and our agendas before the Lord, because it's not our ministry. It's His. It's not our evangelism. It's His. It's not our gospel. It's His. This is what Paul teaches us.

The next thing that we see in this passage is, as they continue to travel through, they reach this particular locale. And in this district of Macedonia, around Philippi and on the Sabbath day, they go outside where they hope they will find—which has been their practice—along the riverside, those who are gathered for worship on the Sabbath. And here they meet a group of women. Only one is given a name: Lydia. And here we begin to see that the Holy Spirit, who prevented them from going into Asia, had another great plan. He had a divine appointment between Paul and Timothy and Luke and Lydia. That's what God's doing. Isn't it beautiful? It's so beautiful. They thought—and they were right—why not take the gospel into Asia? It's because the Lord had another plan. He took them right to the riverside, and there they were. And so we get to see here the beauty of the gospel bringing change.

What happens? It meets with this woman named Lydia. Now, why is this important? First, Lydia is given a name. Rarely are women given names or referred to by name. But here she is. There's another thing. It tells us that she is a trader. She has her own business. She is a seller of purple goods. But she's also a God-fearer. So she believes in the one true God, but she as either not heard Christ or responded to the message of the gospel yet.

It's important because not only is she given a name, but she's given a name because she clearly traffics in purple goods, which means she only traffics among the political elite of her day. Well before this time in history, purple was of the most high value. In fact, it was considered worth its weight in silver, because it was so tedious to cultivate. Sea snails, which are very prevalent in this part of the world, had to either be gathered up and then taken apart and dried—which would be an enormous stench—or when

gathered together, they would be crushed. Because purple was first found in its natural habitat in the mucus linings of these sea snails. Yes. And there were laws, actual laws, that said if you are below a particular status in the Roman Empire, you were not allowed to wear purple. It was a symbol of status and success all the way up through at least the Elizabethan era of England. And so what they would have to do is she would have to cultivate this purple or at least buy it—which means she had to be a woman of significant means—and then it would be made into fabrics and sold. And so it is to this woman that the gospel comes.

And what happens? It tells us. In verse fourteen, the second part, it says: “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” And she was baptized, and her household as well. Paul was teaching the gospel of what Jesus Christ had come to do on the cross for sins and then buried and raised on the third day. He would have preached the gospel that she was to believe and receive. And it tells us that the Lord opened her heart. Now, theologians abound in trying to break that out. What are the constituent parts of how her heart was opened? It’s a mystery. Even the greatest of our theologians—and there are many—have tried to get at what happens in the nucleus of change in a human being’s heart to bring them to a point first of humility, to be open to the message of the gospel. It is a mystery, I tell you, that even when we try to name it, we can’t even begin to go to the depths of what God is doing by his Spirit in this woman’s life at this moment. But this we know: her heart and her will—her heart and her mind, said another way—are opened up to the truth of Jesus Christ. And she responds and receives baptism. Her heart has changed. Her life has changed.

And the beauty of this passage is it tells us that change is possible. I’m so grateful for this text, because in the next part change doesn’t happen. Something else happens—threat. But I’ll get there in just a minute. Let me camp here for just one moment. The question is, do we believe that the gospel can actually bring change? We read of Lydia and others and it seems, as we read it in a passage, so simple. But it was not. It’s incredibly difficult. It’s a God thing. He opens the heart of our lives to receive and hear the gospel.

But the truth is, when we hear this—because when we look in our own lives, oh I don’t know, we’re almost through January. How many have already failed at your New Year’s resolutions? Amen? I’m right there with you brother. All right. And so in a very shallow way, that’s a good picture of how cynical oftentimes—do we not?—we grow cynical and frustrated by the lack of change in our lives. We reason to ourselves with an inner dialogue about why we can’t change or move forward. This dialogue is so potent and so powerful, loaded with reasons why we can’t change. We’re often defeated by self-sabotage, self-deception, and self-corruption.

I wrote it this way: in fact, the potency of our inner dialogues become what Sigmund Freud called a death wish. These inner dialogues move faster than a speeding bullet, more powerfully than a locomotive, and before we know it, our cynicism and frustration about change close down all desire that we have for change. The problem gets worse, because when we feel defeated, we simply go back to where we started. But worse yet, we begin to look out at others, and we take out the sharp knife of cynical judgment and we begin to doubt. Can God change anyone? Even now, some of you are already putting in your brains—because you know what I’m talking about—you’re already putting up examples for why we can’t change and why it’s so frustrating and why we end up so cynical.

If you’re there, I want to give you one more reason why oftentimes we grow cynical. It’s Hitler. Yes, I’m serious. Did you know that he took his entire inheritance, went to Austria, and wanted to go to the academy of fine arts? He also wanted to go to the academy of architecture. That didn’t exactly pan out, did it? When was the last time you saw Hitler’s paintings? And as one historian wrote—and I recognize and call it an overstatement, but I’ll say it anyway—“It was easier for Hitler to start World War II than it was for him to face a blank canvas.” He failed. He gave up. And he took to something else. And so it is for us. We are faced with a long string of failed attempts at change. We lose hope, and doubt in the power of the gospel in us and in other to bring about that change. We look before the canvas of our lives, and we say,

“What a mess.” And then we turn to others with a critical eye of the worst art critic and say, “They’re a mess too.”

So what needs to happen? What needs to happen in us is what happens in Lydia. Do you see it? What happens in her soul and her heart? Can I give you one more illustration? This past week a video went viral—I don’t know if it went before that, but it went this week—of a young boy named Griffin who got his first kiss. He’s about eight or nine. And in the car ride home, he videotaped himself. And he said, “When she kissed me, it blew my mind. It got all up in my head and my heart. And she kissed me, and my head and my heart went *kablooey!*” Now, recognize for just a moment—he received a kiss from a girl, and it was just a kiss. And yet, in his mind and his heart, the reason why it went “kablooey” and blew his mind is because he got to taste—is this what it feels like when someone likes me? It blew his mind.

You see, what Lydia realized in that moment, and what God opened her heart to see, and what he wants our hearts to see, is that God has kissed our souls. He’s the only one who really shows us what love really is. “I came to die for you and was raised to life for your victory.” This is what ought to blow our minds and warm our hearts. And I don’t mean it to be sentimental, but I want you to see what when a little girl gave this boy a kiss it was a direct thing, the indirect thing is it affected her heart. Paul is preaching directly the gospel, but God works indirectly in us. He opens our hearts and our minds to receive and believe that Jesus loves me. And someone who loves me like that, I will give my life to them. That is what happens. And when we grow cynical about change, it’s because we’ve forgotten the one who loves us. And we need to go back to him and confess our cynicism, confess our judgmentalism, confess our self-deception and self-corruption. Lord, have mercy on me and my doubt that you can bring change by the gospel. You want to do in me more than just a repainting of the outside of my house, but as C.S. Lewis once said, you want to redo the whole house. You’re building something completely new. Forgive me for forgetting that you love me that much.

Do you know—and I’m actually going to end here. I’m not going to get to the threat. I’ll do that next week. But you know, we’re coming to celebrate the Lord’s Supper this morning. We’re going to do it again next Sunday morning. This Sunday morning, we’re going to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. But I want to tell you, as you go there, you and I need grace to believe that God still brings change in human hearts and lives. He wants to make us a people who reflect his grace and his mercy and his love. We need to come to this table confessing, “Lord, I doubt. I am frustrated. I am cynical, because I wonder if you can even change me.” Do you know that the table of the Lord is a picture of precisely the change that the Lord came to do? He came in human flesh to walk amongst us, to demonstrate God’s love, to die on a cross, and to be raised in victory over sin and death—to show us that by his power, no change is impossible. If it can take a twenty-nine-year-old heretic in Joseph Heart and make him a hymn writer, isn’t that a picture of what he can do in us and in those you love? So come to the table to receive grace. Come to the table confessing your need of him. Come to the table asking that he will work in you. Let’s pray.

Lord, I pray this morning that as we see the change and the beauty in Lydia’s life, that you will open that up for us to see that as you kissed her soul with the power of the gospel, that you also do the same in us. And Lord, you call us to receive it. For any here, Lord, this morning who have not received this gift, I pray you would open up their hearts to receive your love this morning. Lord, for those of us who are just crusty, old, cynical Christians, Lord will you break through our cynicism and judgmentalism with the piercing beauty of the gospel? Because left to ourselves, we can’t change ourselves, Lord. We can’t change anybody. Only you can. Will you do this? Help us, Lord. Take from us our hearts from stone, and give to us hearts of flesh. We offer these things humbly before you in the matchless name of Jesus. Amen.