

July 21, 2024

Acts 16:11-34

The book of Acts is one of my favorite parts of God's Word. It is one of the best books to read if you want to truly understand what we are asking God for when we ask that his Kingdom come, because Acts is a collection of case studies of God's Kingdom coming- of the message of Jesus being preached and people's hearts being changed and brought to faith in Jesus. Today, we are going to chapter 16 where we see 3 specific case studies of God's kingdom coming, and these three are especially significant. This is the first time the Bible records the Gospel reaching the continent of Europe. Up to this time, Christianity has been mostly in the Middle East, Asia Minor, and Africa- it started in Jerusalem, and spread north to modern day Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey- which is where Paul had spent most of his time up to this point. We also know that the Gospel has gone down to Africa from Philip's interaction with the Ethiopian eunuch. Here's something else: remember that Christianity was started by Jewish people, Jesus and his disciples, and many of the first converts were Jewish people. At this time, many Jewish people (specifically men), were known to pray a specific prayer every day when they got up from their beds. That prayer that many Jewish men prayed was this: "Lord, I thank you that I am not a woman, a slave, or a Gentile." They prayed this because they thought that women, slaves, and gentiles (non-Jews) were less favored and less important to God. How remarkable, then, that the first Christian converts on the continent of Europe recorded in Scripture are a woman, a slave, and a Gentile Roman. **Today, we are going to see how God's Kingdom comes into the life of Lydia, the Slave, and the Jailor.**

1. Lydia. Paul and his companions go to Philippi, which was the first major city in the north part of Greece, and they look for what they normally look for: Jews who worship God and are therefore likely to be receptive to the Gospel. Here we have a very small group, possibly all women, who were likely well-versed in the Old Testament and gathered each week by the river to pray, listen to the Scriptures, and sing Psalms- like a small Bible study with singing and praying. Paul approaches them, and look closely at what happens. Paul shares with them the good news. He probably points out all the promises of the Old Testament that they were singing about, the coming Messiah who would heal all the wrong done by humanity, who would be the perfect servant of God and yet die in the place of sinners so that by his wounds, sinners could be forgiven, the king that would come and defeat the Serpent for good and establish his reign forever, who would bring all nations to his glory, who would be the sacrifice to end all sacrifice and free all from their sins. Paul tells them, "he's come! His name is Jesus and through believing in him you will be forgiven and free." Paul preaches, Paul teaches, Paul proclaims, but he himself doesn't convert- do you notice that? The Lord is the one who opens Lydia's heart to receive and believe the Gospel, and she does! She is converted, the Kingdom of God gains her heart as its territory through the preaching of Paul, and notice what happens! Her heart overflows with generosity! She says, "I want you to stay with my family and my house, I'll feed you, I'll provide for your needs." And notice that little phrase, "she persuaded us," the Greek word for

that is a little more aggressive than “persuade,” it could also mean “press upon,” which tells me that the conversation went: “Paul, Silas, Luke, Timothy, you stay at my house, I’ll feed you, I’ll take care of your needs.” “Oh, that’s very kind, but we…” “I wasn’t asking.” This is beautiful- the first person that comes to know Jesus is a gentile woman from Thyatira, a merchant of purple cloth who uses her wealth to enable Jesus’ missionaries to do his work in Philippi. The next conversion, however, won’t be quite as pretty.

2. A slave girl. The next person we hear about couldn’t be more opposite to Lydia. Lydia was a wealthy woman. This slave girl was deeply impoverished. Lydia was powerful and free. This slave girl was enslaved not simply to earthly masters who exploited and used her for profit, but also enslaved to a demon. Literally, Luke writes that she has a “python spirit.” In Greek culture, the python spirit was a serpent spirit, often associated with or controlled by the god Apollo, and would possess a human being and use that human being as a puppet for telling fortunes. This demonic possession, especially this kind, is alluded to or described by many, many ancient Greek writers, and some describe instances where the human’s mouth wouldn’t move, and yet a voice would come from them. This poor girl was possessed by this parasitic demon who used her as a conduit to tell people what they wanted to hear, and her slave masters made a lot of money off of her. Think of this- Lydia was one of the first people you’d expect to come to Jesus. This girl was the last. And yet, she starts following Paul and Silas proclaiming the truth… Why? Hard to say. Could it have been the demon trying to undermine them like they did to Jesus? Or was it the girl who knew from the demon that the demon’s maker was working in Philippi through Paul, and she desperately wanted to be free? We don’t know, but it got to the point where Paul was so troubled- “annoyed” isn’t quite right- and sad for her that he freed her from her demonic master, and therefore also freed her from her earthly masters- she wasn’t any use to them anymore! You see how God used his Word differently to bring her into his Kingdom? With Lydia, God used Paul to preach Christ from the Old Testament, but here he used Paul to free a slavegirl from her demonic master, and in this way she was brought into his Kingdom. I want you to notice this! Sometimes, God brings people into his Kingdom through a conversation or a preaching or teaching of the Gospel like Lydia. Sometimes, God brings people through our charity and his Word, when we do social services for people. That’s something God wants us to do, and he promises that he can work through it- that when we serve non-Christians with their physical and spiritual needs, he brings them into his Kingdom. But we still see one more way God brings people into his Kingdom.

3. The Jailor. Of course, the girl’s masters aren’t happy with Paul, so they drag Paul and Silas to the local magistrate and they don’t say, “these men cast out the demon that was possessing this girl and now we’ve lost money!” I’m not sure that would have held up. Instead they say, “These Jews”- which, at this time, Jewish people were not liked by Romans and had been expelled from Rome, strike one, “Are teaching strange customs that are unlawful for us Romans to follow.” The Romans did not like foreign ideas or religions, and to them the Roman law was sacred, so

anyone that said anything different than that was an enemy of Rome and couldn't be tolerated, strike 2, and Paul had lost the Philippians their favorite fortune teller- strike 3! They are stripped almost naked, beaten publicly, and thrown into prison where the jailor, probably a former Roman soldier, purposely treats them with cruelty- he puts them in the nastiest, coldest, dampest cell and puts them in stocks where their bare flesh would scrape against the iron and stone and wood and their hands and feet would purposely be spread as far as possible. This was mild torture, and the jailor gladly does it. And Paul and Silas curse the jailor and call down God's wrath on those who dare to do this to anyone, let alone God's servants! No. They sing hymns of praise. And everyone in that prison can't believe what they're hearing! And then the earthquake- the stocks are broken and the doors are open and the jailor knows that even if one prisoner escapes, he'll be publicly executed, so to spare himself the shame of that, he's going to end his own life until Paul yells from the cell- "Don't! We're all still here!" To be frank, that may have been more miraculous than the earthquake. What could have possessed Paul and Silas, when the Romans would rather kill themselves than endure public shame, to praise God and celebrate in their shame and torture? What could have possessed Paul and Silas to not do what he would have done- get out of that jail and cost him his life- especially because he was so cruel to them, and instead voluntarily stay and make all the other prisoners stay so that he wouldn't have to die? How could they resist the temptation to gain freedom at the cost of his life? Little did he know, Paul and Silas had already gained a better freedom at the cost of someone else's life. The jailor knew they had something and he desperately wanted it so he sprinted in there and fell at their feet and asked, "what must I do to be saved? How can I have the joy and hope you have? What do I have to do to be as free and saved as you are? What must I do?" Paul says, "It's not about what you do. It's about what Jesus has done for you, and he has gladly been publicly shamed and executed for what you've done, and he's risen and now invites you to find your joy and hope in him. Believe in Jesus, you and your whole family. You will be saved." And God, through the powerful witness of Paul's actions and the Gospel preached by Paul, saved that jailor and his family- another heart in his kingdom.

But pastor! That's great, but that was back then. God doesn't work that way anymore. People don't believe in God anymore- God's Kingdom can't come like it did back then. It's different today! Is it? The Christian Gospel was born into a world that was not inclined at all to accept its beliefs. The Jews were not inclined to put their faith in the Messiah who won his victory and founded his kingdom through his death- they liked power! The Greeks and Romans were not inclined to believe in things like the resurrection- they liked sophistication. The ancient world was not inclined to have God's Kingdom come- but it still did, and it still can, and it will. Through the Word, through you. Do you know what this part of Acts means? You each have a ministry. If you are Christian, you have been redeemed and saved by Jesus' blood and made completely new, completely forgiven, completely righteous, and are therefore empowered to share this. Maybe you have a Lydia in your life- someone who's morally upright, goes to church maybe even knows her Bible, but doesn't know the peace and joy and forgiveness that Jesus

offers all for free and you can show her. Maybe there's a slavegirl in your life who's looking, and she just needs kindness and respect and dignity, and you could show her a Savior who gives her an honor and status above all honor and status for free. Maybe there's a jailor in your life- someone who looks tough and rigorous on the outside, not a "church person," but would seriously consider ending his life if he lost his honor or reputation, and you can show him a Savior who can actually enable him to endure all kinds of shame and pain with joy and maybe he'll see it in you when you repay evil with good and show joy in your own suffering. You have a ministry- even if it's one person, you have a ministry, and God's Kingdom will come through you. Amen.