

SECOND JOURNEY

—ACTS 16—

After the Council of Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas accompanied Judas and Silas, the delegates chosen by the Council, on their way to Antioch (Acts 15:22–23, 30). After delivering the decrees of the Council to that city, Paul and Silas proceeded on to the churches of Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41), delivering “for observance the decisions (*dogmata*) which had been reached by the apostles and elders who were at Jerusalem” (Acts 16:4). In the nearby city of Lystra, they were joined by Timothy, “the son of a Jewish woman” (Acts 16:1) who had probably become a disciple during the earlier journey of Paul and Barnabas (cf. Acts 14:6–7). Although Timothy’s father was a Gentile, he would have been considered a Jew by other Jews on account of his mother, albeit one who was living in violation of the Deuteronomic Law due to his lack of circumcision. Paul therefore circumcised Timothy to avoid giving scandal to other Jews, in accordance with his customary policy: “to the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law” (1 Cor. 9:20).¹

The missionaries continued to extend the king-

¹In contrast, Paul strenuously refused to circumcise Titus because the latter was a Gentile on whom the Deuteronomic Law had no claim (cf. Gal. 2:3–5). For further discussion of the status of the Law in relation to Jewish and Gentile disciples during this period, see Pimentel, *Witnesses of the Messiah*, 127–29.

dom of Christ by building up His Church throughout the region (Acts 16:5). At this point in the narrative, the Holy Spirit acts to guide the mission of evangelization, apparently through the providential ordering of circumstances. Luke reports that, while in the Galatia, the missionaries were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit” to go west to the province of Asia. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, states that “it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you” (Gal. 4:13). They next attempted to go north to Bithynia, but again “the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (Acts 16:7). Luke’s language reflects his understanding that the Holy Spirit never acts apart from Jesus but always carries out the mission of the latter.

The missionaries took the one remaining direction in which they could press forward and headed northwest to Troas (Acts 16:8), the region in which ancient Troy had stood. It is in Troas that the party was apparently joined by Luke himself.² Once they were in Troas, the Holy Spirit intervened in their itinerary in a more dramatic fashion. Paul received a vision “in the night,” probably in a dream, of a Macedonian begging the party to come to Macedonia to “help us” (Acts 16:9). They immediately grasped that the “help” needed was the proclamation of the Gospel (Acts 16:10), for the liberation brought by the Gospel is desperately needed by persons and cul-

² The first “we” section in Acts, in which Luke employs the first-person plural, begins in Acts 16:10 and extends through Acts 16:17. See Stanley E. Porter, *Paul in Acts*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, Library of Pauline Studies (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 28–29. Luke apparently remained in Philippi when Paul and Silas departed (Acts 16:40).

tures held in bondage by the powers of sin.

The missionaries thus set sail across the Aegean to Macedonia, the province north of Greece (Acts 16:11). By this westward voyage, the mission of evangelization pressed on toward “the end of the earth” in fulfillment of Jesus’ command (Acts 1:8). They soon came to Philippi, an important Macedonian city that lay along the major road between Rome and Byzantium and which had been given the status of a Roman “colony” (*kolonia*) by Augustus Caesar. As such, Philippi served as a retirement location for veterans of the Roman army, and most of its inhabitants were Roman citizens.

The Lydian Woman

There were few Jews in Philippi, apparently too few to support a formal synagogue,³ so the missionaries sought out the informal “place of prayer” (*proseuche*) where Jews and Gentile “God-fearers” gathered on the Sabbath. There, they encountered Lydia, one of the Gentile God-fearers in whom the Gospel quickly took root. The name “Lydia” is not a proper Greek or Roman name, but a place name literally meaning “the Lydian woman.”⁴ Such a name indicates that Lydia was a former slave who was so named by her master. Luke does not indicate how long Lydia had been free but simply identifies her as a “seller of purple goods” (Acts 16:14). Textile work was typically performed by slaves, and Lydia

³The establishment of a synagogue required at least ten Jewish households headed by adult men.

⁴Lydia was a province in Asia Minor.

may well have gone into business in the line of work she had learned before her emancipation. In any case, she was now known by her profession, suggesting that she had become quite successful in that business.⁵

When Lydia heard Paul's proclamation of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit "opened her heart" (Acts 16:14) to receive it, drawing her toward the New Covenant.⁶ Lydia thereby becomes a type of Gentile acceptance of the Word of God. No sooner had Lydia been baptized than she undertook her apostolate, beginning with the conversion of her own household and immediately turning to the missionaries, to whom she extended that sacred hospitality (*philoxenia*) that was so highly valued in the ancient world (cf. Acts 16:15). Suffused with the theological virtue of charity, her hospitality expresses gratitude not only to her human benefactors but, more profoundly, to the Word. The ultimate meaning of her hospitality is thus acceptance of Christ in the person of the befriended stranger (*xenos*). Although Jews, Paul and Silas did not refuse to stay at the house of this Gentile woman.⁷

A Girl Enslaved

⁵ Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, *Paul the Accused: His Portrait in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Mary Ann Getty, *Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, The Liturgical Press, 1995), 46–47.

⁶ Paul elaborates on the renewal of the heart within the New Covenant in 2 Cor. 3:2–3, drawing on the prophecies of the New Covenant in Jer. 31:31 and Ezek. 36:26.

⁷ In contrast, Peter is willing to enter the house of the Gentile Cornelius only after receiving a vision followed by explicit instruction from the Holy Spirit to accompany Cornelius' emissaries "without hesitation" (cf. Acts 10:10–29). See Pimentel, *Witnesses of the Messiah*, 98–101.

On the way to the place of prayer, the missionaries encountered a girl who, unlike Lydia, is still enslaved. Even more, the girl was enslaved not only to human masters but to a demonic power. She is said to have “a spirit of divination” or, more literally, “a Pythonic spirit” (Acts 16:16). The Python was the serpent whose spirit was believed by the Greeks to inhabit the temple of Apollo at Delphi. This spirit would possess the priestess of Apollo and speak oracles through her. Thus, Luke understands a “Pythonic spirit” to be a demon under whose influence one engages in divination. The demon also performed a second function, closely linked to the first, bringing the slave owners “much gain by sooth-saying.” The provision of material wealth is one of the perennial temptations by which the demons seek to entice men, eventually ensnaring them in a bondage both spiritual and material. Such multifaceted enslavement was a defining characteristic of the pagan world.

The girl followed the missionaries, shouting: “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17). The demons know well the truths of the spiritual realm (cf. Lk. 4:34), and will often speak them amidst their lies in order to confuse those attracted by the Gospel. The slave owners apparently saw the attention that the missionaries were receiving through the proclamation of the Gospel and sought to exploit the gathered crowds, following the missionaries about so as to market the girl’s power of divination. At first, the missionaries ignored the evil hucksters, but after “many days” of interference and distraction, Paul

finally turned and cast the demon out of the girl (Acts 16:18), just as Jesus had often done (cf. Lk. 4:35). The power of the Gospel, spread through human cultures by evangelization, progressively breaks the power of demonic influence over those cultures.

The Slave Owners

The exorcism provoked a sharp reaction from the slave owners, leading to Paul's first conflict with Gentiles during the course of his evangelization. Dismayed by the loss of their source of wealth, the slave owners "seized Paul and Silas" and "brought them to the magistrates" (Acts 16:19–20). In their hostile response to Paul, these Gentiles show themselves to be the spiritual antithesis of Lydia, rejecting rather than accepting Christ in the person of the stranger. Hereafter, Paul's relations with Gentiles will be marked by this bifurcating pattern of acceptance or rejection, depending on his audience's receptivity to the Word of God.

The slave owners charged Paul and Silas with advocating customs unlawful for Romans (Acts 16:21). While seemingly unrelated to the preceding events, this charge actually has a subtle connection to the slave owner's loss of a demonically enabled stream of wealth. The pagan religious ethos, with its polytheism and idolatry, was embraced and institutionalized in Roman law, and that ethos was one in which demonic influence flourished. It is not coincidental that the slave owners begin their complaint with the fact that "these men are Jews" (Acts 16:20), known opponents of polytheism and idolatry. In an ironic sense that the slave owners themselves may not fully grasp, their charge against the missionaries

is true. The lordship of Jesus Christ proclaimed in the Gospel is universal in scope and subordinates all other claims.⁸ As Paul will later write to the Philippians, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:10–11). If Jesus is now Lord of all, then neither Satan nor Caesar can be accorded that honor, as much as the pagan ethos sought to bestow it on them. Hence, the Gospel truly was contrary to the prevailing customs of the Romans.

The Philippian Jailer

The magistrates ordered Paul and Silas to be beaten and handed over to the city jailer for imprisonment (Acts 16:22–24). The jailer dutifully secured his charges with fetters in the prison, only to have his work suddenly undone by “a great earthquake” that unlocked all the doors and fetters therein (Acts 16:24–26). Fearing the escape of the prisoners, the jailer prepared to kill himself to avoid the consequent loss of honor and impending punishment, only to be stopped by Paul’s declaration that no one has taken advantage of the earthquake by fleeing (Acts 16:27–28). Having been saved from the circumstance that threatened his physical life, the jailer turned in gratitude and sought the missionaries’ word concerning his spiritual life: “Men, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts

⁸ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 56–57.

16:29–30). They proclaimed to him the necessity of faith in Jesus (Acts 16:31–32), a faith that will lead him to be baptized that very day. At once, the jailer offered hospitality to the missionaries, beginning by washing their wounded bodies. They in turn wash his soul in the waters of Baptism, along “with all his family” (Acts 16:33). Paul taught that Baptism is the sign of the New Covenant, just as circumcision was for the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Col. 2:11–12). The necessity of circumcision applied, without regard to age, to an entire household living within the Abrahamic covenant.⁹ In the cases of both Lydia and the jailer, Baptism is treated according to the same covenantal pattern.

The jailer continued his hospitality by receiving the missionaries in his house and serving them a meal (Acts 16:34). The transformation of his relationship with the missionaries is now complete. The man who began as their jailer has now become their host. Whereas Lydia is a type of the ready acceptance of Christ and the slave owners of rejection, the Philippian jailer moves from a stance of rejection to one of acceptance, becoming a type of conversion. The change in his interior relation to Christ is reflected in his exterior actions toward the strangers who came in His name.

The Vindication of the Evangelist

Unaware of the events that transpired after the missionaries' imprisonment, the magistrates judged

⁹The precise requirement was that any male, eight days old or older, regardless of status within the household, must be circumcised (see Gen. 17:12–13).

their punishment to be sufficient and ordered them released (Acts 16:35–36). Paul, however, refused to let the matter pass so easily. He had been publicly subjected to a beating, a punishment considered dishonorable and from which Roman citizens were exempt. Accordingly, he insisted that his vindication by the authorities be public as well (Acts 16:37). Provincial magistrates were required to uphold the rights of Roman citizens and so, when they heard of Paul's citizenship and insistence on the rights thereof, "they were afraid" (Acts 16:38). They therefore apologized to Paul and Silas and escorted them out of the prison themselves. The missionaries' situation among the Gentiles has undergone a reversal, moving from rejection and imprisonment to acceptance and release. After visiting Lydia and the new disciples, Paul and Silas departed Philippi, probably leaving Luke behind to further guide the nascent Church. In the years to come, Paul experienced few problems with the Philippian church, and it served as a major source of financial support for his missions (cf. Phil. 4:15).

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Questions for Discussion

1. Read Acts 16:3. In what ways should we take care not to offend others unnecessarily in our presentation of the Catholic faith?

2. Read Acts 16:4. Do we strive in our apostolate to convey accurately and completely the teachings of the Magisterium?

3. Read Acts 16:15. What role should the exercise of hospitality play in our apostolates?
