

Acts 16:11-40 – The Gospel Comes To Europe

“So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.” (v40).

In the mid to late nineties, long before Spotify and YouTube, when the New Musical Express and Melody Maker were the only place you could find new music and gig listings, one of the biggest bands in Britain was Oasis. The brainchild of Noel Gallagher and fronted by his loud-mouthed brother, Liam, they were huge. Every shop you went into would be playing one of their singles, every wall in cities centres was plastered with their posters and every talk show seemed to be interviewing them.

They had eight number one songs and eight number one albums. They headlined Glastonbury on three separate occasions and two-and-a-half million people (more than 4% of the population at the time) applied for tickets to see them when they played at Knebworth in 1996.

And yet, in spite of all that, there are many who consider them to be something of a disappointment because, unlike The Beatles, who are clearly a huge influence on them, they never conquered America. For all their achievement, they never got big in what is for many, the most important market of all.

It wasn't for lack of trying – they toured and spent a fortune on publicity, but for whatever reason, the sound of brash Mancunians singing about Champagne Supernovas and Wonderwalls, just didn't cut it across the pond.

Some things, it seems, just don't travel well. We are more connected now than ever and yet when you go on holiday to other countries, you come across all sorts of weird and wonderful things that you've never heard of before, and which you'll frankly be pleased to never see again. Whether it's entertainment, food or humour, some things never last long outside their homeland.

Something that has travelled well however, is the message of the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ, who died in the place of sinful men and women. It started off very small, with just 120 people in Jerusalem just after Jesus ascended back into heaven. It's hard to get an exact number for today but estimates by the Pew Research Group put the number at somewhere around 2.3 billion. There are Christians the world over now, in diverse places – from different races, creeds and backgrounds.

But how did this all start? How did the message of the Gospel travel from 120 people in Jerusalem, to what we see today? I dare say that even in these days when the church in our land is in decline, that there are more than 120 Christians just here, in Yateley.

The passage that we have before us this morning is part of Paul's first missionary journey after he was sent out from the church to take the gospel to new lands. They covered an impressive amount of ground, and many came to know the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour. But now, the message of salvation was going to the heart of the Roman Empire. For Paul and his companions, they were now on a cross-cultural mission trip.

The trip to Europe came about because of a vision that God gave to Paul – a vision of the man of Macedonia, who pleaded with the missionaries to bring help to Europe. We read in verses 11-12:

“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 in the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days.”

The expression **“we made a direct voyage to Samothrace”** is revealing because this is a nautical expression. It has the same meaning as *“having the wind at your back”* today. The conditions were so perfect, in fact, that they sailed the whole 156 miles in just two days. For context, they made the return journey in chapter 20, which took 5 days. They must have been very conscious of God's forces of nature, propelling them forward with the message of grace to new lands.

The town of Philippi, where they ended this initial leg of their journey, was an ancient town, having been renamed in 356 BC by Philip II of Macedon, after himself. He was clearly a humble, self-effacing chap.... With the expansion of the Roman Empire, it became a Roman possession in 167 BC. But its greatest fame came from the fact that it happened to be the place where the armies of Mark Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius in the decisive battle of the Roman civil war in 42 BC.

This particular event helps us to get an idea of what the city was like when Paul arrived. As a thanks for the part played in the battle, Philippi was awarded the status of a Roman colony that answered directly to the Roman emperor. Roman soldiers were encouraged to retire there, and its citizens were exempt from any provincial taxes. This was going to be completely different to anywhere they had ministered previously!

To Rome, Paul's visit to Philippi on that day wouldn't have even made it to the least read page of the local free newspaper. However, Paul's visit was not going to be insignificant as the power of the Gospel was brought to bear on the greatest empire of the day. Christ was about to win a great many people to himself.

We see this morning then, that the Gospel is universal – it knows none of the world's barriers of race, gender or class. And we see how that Gospel does its work. We meet a lady by the name of Lydia first, as we see:

1. The Gospel's Power When Proclaimed

When Paul, Silas, Luke and Timothy arrived in Philippi, they did what was customary for them – they went to where they knew they would find the religious people in the city. Verse 13:

“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.”

Of course, they would normally have gone to the local synagogue – after all, that would be the best place to find an audience who would have some sort of religious background. But on this occasion, they went instead to a riverside for the simple reason that there was no synagogue in Philippi.

So, they walked outside the city walls on the Sabbath, in search of some fellow Jews who were would be worshipping together. When they got to the gathering, they found that they were all women who had gathered to pray and recite the Law and the Prophets together. There was not even one man present.

As they got to the river side, it became clear that God had led them there. Verses 14-15:

“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptised, 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.”

What power there is in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ! Lydia was a “worshipper of God”, which meant that she was a Gentile who saw truth in Judaism and was attracted to it. As a result, she'd come under the influence of the Jews and heard the Law and the Prophets – what we now call the Old Testament.

It would seem that the majority of the women who accompanied Lydia, who was a very wealthy woman, as a seller of purple, were her family and household staff. God had already started to work both in Lydia's heart and the hearts of those who were with her.

As she heard the gospel proclaimed, **"The Lord opened her heart"**. (v14).

When Lydia put her trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, she experienced the joy of her sins being taken away by the blood of Jesus, shed for her. Happiness welled up in her and extended to all those who were with her, so much so that her whole household believed. The result of their faith was that the missionaries had the privilege of baptising them right there, in the very river where they had been worshipping!

Their first recorded encounter in Philippi was an unqualified success. Through this one act, God opened the heart of a woman who was living in a Roman colony, and that place would go on to be a beachhead in Europe for the Gospel. We can't always measure what God does in numbers. The opening of this one woman's heart in Philippi spelled the beginning of the end of Rome's power and reach.

But Lydia wasn't done just yet – she imploring the missionaries to stay at her house for a while. From that day forward, Philippi was destined to become one of Paul's favourite congregations. As he wrote to the church there later:

"And you Philippians know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only." (Philippians 4:15).

After the disappointment and uncertainty that had led to them coming to Philippi, they now started to see the plan of God in action, once again. It's no wonder that Paul would later write of the power of the Gospel:

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Romans 1:16).

At this point, it seemed as if their perils of previous times were behind them and that it was going to be smooth sailing from here on in. But of course, they weren't so naïve as believe that! We see secondly that through their next encounter.

2. The Gospel's Power Over the Demonic

God was clearly at work, which meant that the devil wasn't happy. We read what Satan did in verses 16-17:

“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 proclaims to you the way of salvation.’”

At first glance, we might be tempted to think that this girl was a believer. All that she was saying was absolutely true, after all. Whenever the missionaries went near her, she drew attention to them. But what seems like a positive, happy girl, actually turned out to be a child sorely oppressed by demonic attack.

Examining the original Greek, we see the full horror of what had happened to this poor girl. The phrase, “had a spirit”, literally reads, “had a spirit of Python”. According to the myths of the region, Python was a snake that guarded the Temple of Apollo and who was eventually killed by Apollo. Later, the word *python* came to mean a demon-possessed person through whom Python spoke.

This poor child was full of demons and was, as a result, able to reveal the future to her clients. The men who “owned” her were spiritual pimps, who profited from this girl's misery. Satan's strategy was ingenious – if he could get people to believe that this girl, who was so obviously affected by him, was also allied to Christ's work, then he could get people to believe that there is no difference between the two. He loves to distort the gospel, just enough, to twist its message into a deadly heresy.

It would have been easy for Paul and his companions simply to leave well alone. After all, she was telling the truth, whatever her motivations. Whatever their initial feelings might have been, they weren't going to take the bait. Instead, as their Saviour had done before, they were going to have to cast these demons out.

Satan kept this up for several days, but Paul responded decisively:

“And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned to her 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.” (v18). Such is the power of the gospel!

This was a great moment for this poor girl – she had the demon cast out and, we presume, she received Christ. God’s power had been evident and worked a mighty miracle. The population of Philippi were now on notice – the Gospel had come and lives were being changed.

The problem for Paul and his mission partners though, was that not everyone welcomes such change – especially when their hugely profitable revenue stream has just been shut down. This leads to what we see thirdly and finally this morning:

3. The Gospel’s Power in Persecution

Usually, when someone – particularly a child – gets healed of some horrendous ailment, everyone is pleased. But not the callous men who had been taking advantage of this child for their own gain.

“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. 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 the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods.” (vv19-22). Some thank you!

Paul was in trouble because the gospel had interfered with the owner’s source of income. Whenever the preaching of the gospel impacts upon the economic structure of the powers that be, opposition will always come.

Paul had touched the profiteers’ hearts. The problem was that their god was money. What followed was a barrage of lies and racial innuendo. Apparently, Timothy and Luke escaped all that happened because they were Gentiles, but Paul and Silas, who were Jews, were imprisoned. Notice how quickly the devil changes his angle of attack – when deception didn’t work, he turns the screw and goes in with persecution. Both are effective, but often, he overreaches with the second and his plan backfires.

The beating they had before they were escorted into prison doesn’t bear thinking about. Suffice to say, lying down on their bloodied backs would be unbearable. But that was what they were forced to do as they were put in the stocks, their backs rubbing on the stone wall behind them.

How easy it would have been to wallow in self-pity or to curse their enemies. However, neither of those was the route that they took. The Gospel power once again resounded as, verse 25:

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them,”

Paul and Silas weren't singing because they had some sort of inside information that God would come and save them. They knew how he had worked in the past, of course – how he had delivered Peter in a most spectacular way. But they also knew that Stephen and James had been martyred. They did not know what was going to happen, but they sang praises anyway because they knew that whatever God had in store for them would be for their good and his glory. They sang because they knew that they weren't ultimately prisoners of Rome, but of God.

After some time, God's power was displayed in response to the songs of his servants:

“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.” (v26).

You can imagine the feeling in the pit of his stomach that the jailer would have had at this turn of events. He's woken by an earthquake, so he grabs his torch and ventures into the prison, where he finds all the doors are unlocked. He's going to have some explaining to do – and that doesn't usually end well.

He assumed what I guess we naturally all would – that the prisoners had fled and decided to go out on his own terms, rather than let Rome have the satisfaction of executing him. But Paul's gracious cry stopped him. Confused, he stumbles into the prison again and asks:

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (v30).

He had heard how the girl was delivered from demon possession. He had seen how Paul and Silas had conducted themselves under desperate circumstances.

Putting all these things together, he asked a sincere question and received an answer that has resonated through the ages:

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” (v31).

Paul didn't tell him to join a particular church or to take a particular course – although, of course, those would come later. He simply urged him to put his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The gospel begins with faith. A gospel that requires more than faith initially is no gospel at all. The Philippian jailer was saved that night by faith. If he lived on for many more months and years, he would certainly grow to discover that the Christian life demands our all. But he knew that salvation came, not through anything that he had done, but through Jesus Christ alone. What a glorious thing it is to offer salvation to all by trusting in the Lord Jesus, plus nothing!

Not only was the jailer saved, but so was his whole family:

“And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptised at once, he and his family. They brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.” (vv33-34).

As they sat down to breakfast that following morning, they did so as evidence, once more, of the power of the gospel. They were brothers and sisters in Christ! God's power had affected the conversion and forgiveness of guilty sinners.

After breakfast was over, it was the turn of the courts to interfere in Paul and Silas' lives once again:

“But when it was day, the magistrates sent the 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 they took them out and asked them to leave the city.” (vv35-39).

The apostle, who was so tender when he needed to be, could be tough when circumstances called for it too. He refused to be dealt with immediately and without discussion because he didn't want the idea that he and Silas were lawbreakers to stand. A public escort from jail by the ruling magistrates would

proclaim publicly their innocence, and that in turn, would bring protection to Lydia and her house church also.

So after some too-ing and frow-ing, the magistrates came out, with their tails between their legs and offered an apology to the missionaries.

“So they went out from prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.” (v40).

Can you imagine how full of joy that meeting would have been as Paul and Silas recount what happened the night before? There would doubtless have been some tears, but also a sense of overwhelming joy.

And just think of the church that Paul left behind as he went on with his journey – a rich businesswoman, a former demonic girl and a jailer! These were the first European church! The rich and the poor, the slave and the free, the young and the old, the men and the women were all one in Christ Jesus.

All this takes us back to where we started this morning – to the power of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ! The gospel, which is so universal in the way in which God uses it knows no bounds and so, we can say with Paul:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16).