



Central Peninsula Church

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Acts 16:13–40
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Freedom in Philippi

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

It's been several years now since the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, came out. If you saw the movie, you've not forgotten the gory realism of the beachhead landing at Normandy. It was an event that many look back on as the key turning point in the war. From Normandy, British and American troops penetrated the European continent, won a series of victories for the Allies, and freed Western Europe from Germany's grip less than a year later.

This morning we're going to consider the story of a critical beachhead landing of another kind. It may not seem like it on the surface, but this was one of the most important events of all time. It rewrote the course of Western civilization. This is the story of the entrance of the gospel into Europe. Perhaps no single event since the cross and resurrection of Jesus has so affected the world as Paul's seemingly unimportant decision to cross a narrow neck of water between Troas and Neapolis. Who could have dreamed that this obscure little baldheaded Jew's decision to leave Asia for Europe would result in the spiritual freedom of so many people?

You remember that Paul, with his friend, Silas, and young Timothy, had been joined by Luke. They were in the city of Troas when Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia asking him to come over and help. So they sailed to Neapolis with the wind at their back and made it in just two days. From Neapolis they walked ten miles to Philippi, one of the leading cities of Macedonia. And it was here that the battle for Europe's soul began.

As Luke describes what happened we want to pay particular attention to HOW God worked through his servants to capture that city for the gospel. We'll see a divine strategy emerge which is no less useful today than it was then. Like Normandy, Philippi was littered with land mines and the enemy was well entrenched. We live in a place not unlike that. The casualties of spiritual warfare abound on the SF Peninsula. People here think of themselves as so free, but are they? How will God work through us to bring real freedom to this place?

As we go through this passage I want you to see several things which God uses to break this city open.

1. Faithful proclamation. It all starts in v.13. **"And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled."** Whenever you want to do something you have to decide where to start. Paul usually began in the most obvious, natural place—the synagogue, where Jewish people gathered to worship. But Philippi was a pagan city, with too few male Jews to have a synagogue. The Law was very specific—ten adult male Jews were required to have a synagogue. If there weren't that many,

then the Jews there were to meet by a river and have a prayer meeting.

So Paul and his buddies walked along the riverside on that first Sabbath morning in Philippi looking for a Jewish prayer meeting. To their delight they found one. But, perhaps to their dismay, they found that the only ones present were women. Women were viewed quite differently in those days. Jewish men were taught to thank God every morning that he had not made them a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. But God has a sense of humor because it now appears that the gospel will enter Europe through a woman's prayer meeting!

So what's the first thing Paul and Silas do after they find these women? They sat down and started to talk. They begin to share with them the message of Jesus Christ. They told them about his life, the remarkable things he did and said and how so many of these things were written about years before by the prophets. They described how his own people rejected and crucified him, but after three days he was raised from the dead. They told them about how God had sent his Son so that we could experience forgiveness and find a purpose in life and have a hope for the future.

You see, this is always the place to start. When God is going to free a city, he starts with someone sharing the gospel with folks who'll listen. There are no bells and whistles. No miracles. No fancy programs. These aren't important or influential people by society's standards who they're talking to. It doesn't look like a very promising start, but that's how God works. Think about your neighborhood or your workplace. How will God start to make inroads there? Same way—just find some folks who will listen and tell them about Jesus.

2. Divine intervention. When you do that, often times something else will happen. Look what happens next in Philippi. **"A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.' And she prevailed upon us"** (vv. 14–15). The next step after sharing the gospel is always up to God. We often forget that. Many of us have given up expecting God to do anything. We share our faith with someone and hope we did a good enough job that they will think hard about making a change, but we don't really expect God to intervene.

But look what God did. He opened up one of these women's heart to respond to what Paul was saying. That means she believed; right there by the river she put her

faith in Christ. Luke tells us a bit about her. After all, this was the first convert of the Western world! Her name was Lydia. She was a worshiper of God, meaning she had become a Jew. She was a business woman who sold purple goods. Purple dye was very valuable and she probably made a good living; had a big house. But she wasn't a slave to her stuff. After she came to faith, she opened her home to Paul and his friends, and eventually to the new church.

What God does in Lydia reminds us that it's not all up to us. Behind the scenes God is at work. He has to be at work because on our own no one would respond. Jesus once said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him..." (Jn. 6:44). I have no doubt that God had been at work in Lydia's life, drawing her towards a relationship. So when she heard Paul's message, it was like she found the golden slipper that fit, "Of course! This is what I've been looking for all along."

When you see God do that in someone's life it's unmistakable. Some of you may be right at that place where God is opening your heart to respond to the good news of Jesus. It's best not to fight it. When God is on your tail is very persistent. You may as well stop running.

3. Spectacular deliverance. But sometimes God also works in much more dramatic ways. That's what happens next. **"It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, 'These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.' She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!' And it came out at that very moment"** (vv. 16–18). This teenage girl, a slave, was possessed by an evil spirit who used her as a channel to interpret events of the day and predict the future for people. Her owners exploited her for money. This girl followed Paul and the others around and declared, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." You might wonder why an evil spirit would want to give Paul and his friends a ringing endorsement? But the same thing happened in Jesus' ministry and Jesus would always silence them. "Gee, thanks for the free advertising but would you please shut up!" You see, the ulterior motive was to discredit the gospel by associating it with the occult. The enemy wanted to derail their message right at the beginning by appearing to be in line with it.

Finally, Paul gets so annoyed with her that he cast out the demon. We don't know what happened to her but many think she came to faith and joined the church at Lydia's house.

So the third thing that happens in this city is this spectacular deliverance. Sometimes God works this way. He'll do something out of the box to set someone free; it may be from a demon or an addiction or sickness. We have to leave room for that in our thinking. We've seen many people in this church set free in dramatic ways from bondage to drugs and alcohol, pornography, and the occult.

4. Violent opposition. But, as always, the devil is

quick to twist everything to his own ends. What was a blessing to this girl, he now uses to awaken serious opposition. Look what happens now. **"But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, 'These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.' The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks"** (vv. 19–24).

On the surface this is awful. The people who owned and used this girl are incensed that their little "cash cow" is gone. They could care less that this girl has been set free; they just care about their profit margin. So they go to the Roman authorities to complain. Notice how clever they were. They conceal what they're really bothered about and instead make it an issue of Roman law: "They're telling us to do things that aren't lawful for Romans." They also appeal to their pride as Romans: "They're telling us to abandon Roman customs." So Paul and Silas are beaten to a pulp and thrown in prison.

This appears to be the death of the gospel in Philippi, but God used it to open a door for a church to be planted. God wasn't surprised by these things. He hadn't lost control. It looked like that on the surface. It often looks like that in our lives, doesn't it? We wonder, "Why is this happening? This is terrible. Nothing good could possibly come of this." But God's ways are not our ways. And one of his ways of opening a community is to allow the enemy to arouse opposition. He'll use the enemy for his own purposes.

5. Joyful suffering. And Paul and Silas get this. Here they've just been beaten and thrown in the "inner prison" which must have been the deepest, darkest dungeon possible. Their feet are bound in stocks so they couldn't turn over or get comfortable. But look what they're doing. **"But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened"** (vv. 25–26). This is one of those scenes that seems so out of reach for us that we almost dismiss it. Here these guys are, not asking God for anything, but just praising him, singing hymns. They're bound up but they couldn't be more free. Their backs are raw and bloody, their feet are bound, they've been mistreated, but they show no self-pity or resentment. They still praise God. They don't know an earthquake is coming to set them free; it doesn't appear they asked for it. But at midnight they began singing. I don't know what they sang. What would you sing? Amazing Grace? Or how about "I've got a river of life flowing out of me, makes the lame to walk and the blind to see; opens prison doors, sets the captives free"?

The real question might be WHY did they sing? I think they sang because they saw things that we often don't see. Ray Stedman says, "These men were men of faith, and I think I know some of what they saw. When you see it, your question will no longer be, 'Why did they sing?' but, 'What else could they do but sing?'"

What did they see? I believe they saw that God would use this. Somehow he would redeem this situation and use it for good. Their pain would not be wasted. He would use this in their own lives, even if it meant death. They knew that this was part of their own refinement. Suffering is an inescapable part of God's curriculum. We'll never grow up, never be what God wants us to be, without some form of suffering. When we learn that, we'll stop griping and start singing.

They also saw that God would use this situation for the gospel to spread in Philippi. Regardless of what happened to them, they knew that the gospel would take root through the small remnant of believers already there. Later Paul would write to them and say, "what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel..." (Phil.1:12). In this case it was literally true because notice Luke says that "the prisoners were listening to them." What kind of impact do you think this had on them? Later when Paul and Silas leave Philippi it's clear that there are many believers there. My theory is that some of them had come to Christ in prison listening to these two beaten and bloodied men sing songs of praise and thanksgiving at midnight. You never know who is listening; you never know who is watching.

And as you read on, it's almost as if God said, "I love what these guys are doing so much that I just can't hold still. I'm going to shake the place up a little bit!" An earthquake thunders through the prison; the chains fall off the prisoners and the prison doors open up. Somebody has said that the gospel entered Europe through a sacred concert which was so successful that it brought the house down! That sounds right to me!

6. Simple invitation. One of the guys who was impacted by this whole series of events was the jailer. Look what happens. **"When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!' And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household'"** (vv. 27-31).

The jailer thinks that everyone has escaped and so he is ready to take his own life. We thought he was free. He has the key to the jail. But he's far from free. The penalty for a Roman soldier who allowed his prisoners to escape was death. This guy knew it was over for him one way or the other so he decides to do it himself. But before he can drive his sword through his chest Paul calls out, "Do not harm yourself. We are all here." Paul and Silas could have escaped, but chose to put this man's welfare before their own. They saw that this man's spiritual freedom was much more important than their own physical freedom. So

Paul assures him, "We're not going anywhere."

But then the jailer asks one of the best questions of all time: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" What did he mean by that? His life was in danger; perhaps he was just asking how he might be able to be saved from the certainty of death. Maybe he just wanted to stay safe. I don't think so. I think he was asking about eternal salvation; the salvation of his soul. Why? Because that's how Paul took it as seen by his answer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household." It's so simple, yet it was this simple invitation that would help crack this city for Christ. Let me ask you, what would you have said in response to this man's question? "Well, come to my church and find out?" Or, "You need to read this book that will tell you what to do." Or, "You need to go see a counselor." Paul and Silas didn't say any of those things. They didn't give him a lecture on theology. They didn't tell him to clean up his language and stop drinking. They just kept it real simple: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ."

7. Open Homes. Notice this simple invitation extended to his entire household. The idea isn't that if he believed they would all be saved by his faith. But rather his belief would be so contagious that they would believe and be saved just like he was. You see, the jailer brought them home and had Paul explain it to them as well. Look at vv. 32-34. **"And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household."** So here we have an entire household baptized in the big hot tub in the backyard: his wife, his children, who must have been old enough to believe the gospel. It's the same thing we saw with Lydia. In v.15 it says that she and her household were baptized also.

I think God loves to get a hold of households—families. Thirty-four years ago God got a hold of me. Out of the blue he just plucked me out of my family and said, "I'm going to start with you." I shared him with my brother and a few years later my brother came to faith. And then we both shared him with my father and about 20 years later he came to faith.

So God took a household. And I think he loves to take entire households with the gospel because then he can use them to reach other households. When God takes a household, then that household becomes an open house for others. Notice how both Lydia and the jailer invited Paul and his friends into their house. And I love how it says that the jailer brought Paul and Silas home and the first thing he did was wash their wounds. What a tender thing for this rugged man to do. Just a few hours before he had thrown them in the cell and brutally locked them in stocks. Now he's tenderly taking care of these men to whom he had been joined in the family of God.

And then they sit down at the table and have a meal together and Luke adds "they rejoiced greatly." It's kind of a nice Thanksgiving scene, isn't it? You've got Paul and Silas, Dr. Luke and young Timothy. You've got the jailer and his wife and his kids. I don't know if they had

turkey but it must have been quite a spread. That's freedom.

This is part of how he cracks open a city. He opens hearts to the gospel, and then he opens homes, and those homes become the place where lives are changed. I know some of you are the only one who believes in your household. That's hard. It's especially hard at Thanksgiving. I know that the hardest place to be a witness is in your own home. But don't despair. God isn't done yet. Keep praying. Keep being a witness who is not perfect, but real.

8. Safe community. The story ends on a rather humorous note. **"Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, 'Release those men.' And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, 'The chief magistrates have sent to release you Therefore come out now and go in peace.' But Paul said to them, 'They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out.' The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city. They went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed"** (vv. 35-40).

There is a lot of humor in that, isn't there? The police tell Paul he can go, but he says, "No! I'm not going. They were the ones who broke the law. They should come down and ask us to leave." And so these magistrates, who had just cast them into prison, came down, hats in hand, and apologized to these two prisoners for their treatment, and begged them to leave town. Now Paul is calling the shots. He says, "O.K., we'll leave, but we'll take our time about it. We want to have lunch with Lydia first. Have you tried her pot roast? And then we'll visit some of the brethren."

You might ask, "Why did Paul raise the issue of his Roman citizenship at this point?" Some think he was being a bit difficult or spiteful for his own sake. But he's doing this for this new church at Philippi. He could have invoked his status much earlier. Had he mentioned that he was a Roman citizen when they were about to beat him, he could have spared himself the beating. But he didn't say a word then. He only does now for the sake of the Christians he left there. What a difference it made to have these magistrates come down and meet the believers, apologize to Paul and Silas, and acknowledge their illegal treatment. That gave the church an entirely different status within the community. Paul did this for the sake of the body.

His final act is to gather the church together and to exhort them, teach them, and admonish them to go on in the Lord. So when he leaves, that's what he leaves. He leaves a church. They didn't have a building; they met at Lydia's house. They didn't have a paid pastor; they just had a bunch of new believers. But this is a church and it would grow to become one of the great churches of the New Testament era.

CONCLUSION

This is how God began his work in this continent called Europe. He started with a beachhead landing in Philippi. And this is how he works in neighborhoods and schools, cities and counties today. Do you know what the theme of this story is? It's FREEDOM. When God cracks open a city he brings true freedom.

One of the things we learn from this story is that there is freedom, and then there is freedom. The people in this story you think are free really aren't, but the ones you would think are slaves are really free. Lydia could have been a slave to her money, but she is set free by the gospel to the extent that she opens her home for church. The slave girl is in the worst kind of bondage, but she is set free. On the other hand, her owners who we think are free are really bound up by their own greed. And then we see Paul and Silas locked up in prison, yet they're the epitome of freedom as they sing praise to God. After their chains are loosened, we see that the jailer is the one who is in trouble. We thought he was free but it seems having the key to someone else's cell doesn't make you free. He, too, can only be set free by the gospel.

You see, there is freedom, and then there is freedom. Today we pride ourselves on living in a free country. We can say what we want and call it freedom of speech. We save and invest wisely so we can attain financial freedom. Or we call someone who seems to live without any restraints a free spirit. But is this real freedom? Years ago a German poet wrote, "None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free."

This is exactly what Jesus taught. On one occasion Jesus was debating with some religious leaders and he said, "If you live out what I tell you then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." But they didn't get it and responded, "Wait a minute. We've never been slaves to anyone. What are you talking about?" Jesus said, "Everyone who lives in sin is a slave of sin, but if the Son makes you free you will be free indeed."

So the question this morning is, are you free or are you really free? Has the Lord opened your heart to believe in his Son? Has he freed you from bondage to sin? Are you free enough to sit in a prison cell and sing songs at midnight? Are you free enough to open your home to people you may have little in common with other than your love for Christ? Are you free or are you really free?

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