

Gospel Renewal

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[0 : 00] We're in a series now looking at the book of Acts, and we've been looking at this story of how a tiny subculture of Judaism transformed the Roman Empire, and how this tiny subculture grew into an international, multi-ethnic, multicultural, even multilingual movement.

And the answer to the question of how something like that would happen is the gospel. The gospel is, if you will, the kind of secret sauce of Christianity. The gospel is the thing that makes Christianity unlike other religions, other philosophies, other worldviews.

And one of the great things about the gospel, and the reason that this movement became international, is that the same gospel is able to come into different people's lives in different ways.

So it's not just a static list of things that you have to agree to and abide by. The gospel is different because it's dynamic, because it has a power of its own, and because it comes from the kind of God who wants to meet people where they are and is able to do that.

And that's why the gospel spreads so rapidly. That's why, by many statistics, right now there are more people coming to faith in Jesus Christ right now than at any point ever in history.

[1 : 48] Right? If you look at places like Asia and Africa, the gospel is spreading like wildfire as God meets each person where he or she is at that moment.

And so this morning we're going to look more at this by looking at Acts chapter 16. This is a story of how Paul plants his first church in Europe, on European soil.

As he comes into Philippi, he's responding to the Holy Spirit, calling him, and he comes into Philippi to plant a church. And what we see here are three vignettes, three case studies of how the gospel meets people where they are.

We're going to see a businesswoman, a slave girl, and a working man. So let's pray and then we'll look at God's word. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that as we prayed earlier, Lord, and as we'll see in this text, you're the kind of God who can open hearts and open eyes.

And Lord, we need that. I need that. I pray that you would do that. I pray that you would open our eyes and hearts and that you would do your work through your word in us. Lord, that we might not only glorify you and be renewed, but that we might be salt and light in this community.

[3 : 02] Lord, we pray this in your son's name. Amen. So first of all, let's look at this businesswoman. The first person that we meet by name in Philippi is a woman named Lydia.

Now, what do we know about Lydia from the text? Well, we know that Lydia is a successful businesswoman. It says that she's a seller of purple goods. And in the ancient world, purple dye was extremely hard to come by.

It was hard to manufacture. And it was thus very valuable. And Lydia's hometown was actually famous for purple dye and purple goods.

So she's a successful businesswoman. We know that she is a homeowner. We know that from later in the chapter. And it's unusual enough that she would be the primary homeowner that we assume that she's probably a widow.

She must have been very capable and very resourceful. And we know that because you couldn't get to where Lydia was in life as a woman in the ancient world unless you were very capable and highly resourceful.

[4 : 11] So this is kind of a snapshot of Lydia. So here's how I imagine Lydia if she were living here today in D.C. Ivy League education, valedictorian of her class, plays three instruments, owns several high-end fashion boutiques in major cities around the country.

I imagine that she's probably an Enneagram type three with a four wing. You know, she's an achiever but with an artistic side. And I imagine that she's probably been pretty successful at most everything she's tried.

She's probably first born. But there's something missing in her life. You say, well, how do we know that? Well, verse 14 refers to Lydia as a God worshiper.

And that's a specific term that refers to a non-Jewish person who wants a relationship with the Jewish God. Right? There's no synagogue in Philippi.

You had to have at least ten Jewish men to start a synagogue. There weren't even that many. And so Lydia has started attending a small Jewish worship gathering that is happening down by the river about a mile outside the city gates.

[5 : 26] And these women are meeting next to a river so that they can do the ceremonial washing, which is a necessary part of Jewish worship.

So that's what's going on. So I imagine someone like Lydia in D.C., right? I imagine this woman who is super successful by day. Right?

Super impressive by day. But every night, behind closed doors, after her Peloton session, she lays in her bed drinking box wine and looking at houses on Zillow, and she feels profound loneliness.

And she finds her mind wandering away from her iPhone, and she finds herself thinking, does God really exist? You know, I know people who believe in God.

You know, my family kind of went to church sometimes. Is there anything to that? Does God really exist? And if so, does that God, whoever or whatever it is, does that God know me?

[6 : 33] You know, does this God care about me at all? Or, as she suspects, is she ultimately alone in the universe? And, you know, the first century Jewish religion would have been very appealing to someone like Lydia.

At least Lydia as I imagine her to be. Because first century Judaism was all about achievement. If you want to know God, if you want to have a relationship with God, then you need to stay clean.

You need to follow the law. You need to fulfill the requirements. And that would have been very appealing. I mean, Lydia is probably the kind of person who says, whatever standard there is, I will match it.

I will exceed it. And that's really what it means to be a religious person. If you want to have a relationship with God, then you need to be willing to follow the rules and prove your devotion and live well enough as a good person.

And then God will love you and bless you because God loves and blesses the good and faithful people. So Lydia was probably thinking, you know, I was valedictorian of my class. I can be valedictorian of this religion.

[7 : 41] If anybody's going to do it, I'm going to do it better. So then we ask the question, well, how does the gospel come into the life and the heart of someone like Lydia?

And I suspect there are a lot of people probably in our city, maybe even in this church, who would fit this description, men and women. What Lydia really needs is the truth of the gospel.

She needs the truth at the heart of the gospel. The thing is, Lydia is already a seeker. She's already spiritually hungry. She's already open. She's searching for God.

And so what Lydia needs is simply someone to sit down and tell her the good news about Jesus. And we can imagine what Paul might have said based on what he says in lots of other places in Scripture.

We can imagine Paul sitting down and beginning to talk about maybe his own life. You know, you can imagine Paul sitting there next to Lydia and saying, you know, I was also valedictorian of my class.

[8 : 40] You know, you may, I don't know if you've heard of him, but I studied under Gamaliel, who was kind of a pretty well-known, highly respected Jewish leader. Yeah, I studied under him.

It's like going to Harvard or Cambridge. You know, Paul might have said, you know, I used to be not just a Pharisee, but a Pharisee among Pharisees. I was kind of, I was the example that other people wanted to live up to.

You know, people used to talk about how zealous I was for the traditions of my fathers. And then Paul would have said, but then let me tell you what happened. Then I was on my way to Damascus in something that I never could have predicted took place.

I met Jesus face to face. And by the way, this was after his resurrection. I saw Jesus in his full glory. And all I could do was fall on my face.

And then maybe you can imagine Paul kind of tearing up and saying, you know, I realize that there's no amount of washing that I can do. There's no amount of washing that I can do like you're doing that will ever bring me close to that glory.

[9 : 44] I will never be clean compared to what I saw on the road that day. I realized all of this is ineffectual. Nothing compares to the glory of Jesus. And then maybe he would have gone on to say what he lays out later when he writes the book of Romans.

You know, I realize there's actually no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between somebody like me and somebody like you, Lydia. There's no difference. No amount of washing will change that.

We all fall short of that glory. Right? And then you can imagine his face lighting up and saying, you know, and then the penny dropped. You know, and I realized that's the whole point.

Jesus didn't come to give us a new way to be faithful to God, a new way to prove our devotion to God, a new set of rules to obey. Jesus actually came to live the life that we should have lived but can't.

He came to die the death that we deserve to die. Because there's no difference. We've all rebelled against God. We're all living out our own self-salvation projects.

[10 : 51] But Jesus came to die so that we could be forgiven. So that we could know the God who made us, not as just a Lord, but as a father who wants us to be his children.

And you can imagine Lydia hearing this. You know, Lydia, all her life, maybe you can identify, all of her life, people have probably loved Lydia because of what she could do.

Because of how impressive she is. What Lydia really needs, she doesn't know this yet. But the reason she lays there at night longing, wondering, thirsting, searching for God, is because what she really needs is a God who loves her and delights in her regardless of her successes, regardless of her failures.

A God who fully knows her and fully loves her, not because of who she is, but because of who he is. Because of the kind of God he is.

And it says God opens her heart to these words. I love it because the same word is used when God opens a womb. Right? He opens her heart and makes it possible for the word to come in and to begin to create new life there.

[12 : 05] And that's exactly what happens. Lydia's heart is opened. She immediately believes the gospel, immediately gets baptized, and she has her entire house baptized along with any children who would have been there.

And immediately you see the change in Lydia, which is evidenced by her generosity and hospitality. She prevails upon them to stay. This is a woman who does not take no for an answer.

She prevails upon them to stay with her. And then by the end of chapter 16, there's already a church meeting in her home. So Lydia becomes the patron and the hostess of the church in Philippi, the first church that Paul plants in Europe meets in Lydia's home.

And so when you look at Lydia, you realize sometimes people are already open. They're already searching for the Lord. All they need is for somebody to sit down and share the gospel with them.

I've had these conversations with people over the years as a pastor where I think I'm going to go in and there's going to be all of this apologetics and this kind of hard sell. And I realize, oh, no, no, no, no. God is already at work in this person's life.

[13 : 12] I'm just kind of a placeholder. God just needs somebody to come in and just speak the gospel. This person's ready to receive it. That's where Lydia is. I think it's easy for us to imagine as Christians that everybody's hostile.

Everybody's closed. Everybody thinks that it's ridiculous what we believe. No, God is at work in all kinds of ways that we can't see as he is in Lydia's life.

So what she needs is the truth of the gospel. Now, other times, other times, people already know the truth. That's not what they need.

They know the doctrine. What they actually need is the power of the gospel. And this is what we see in the next vignette with the slave girl. They're on their way to the place of prayer and a woman starts following Paul and his companions.

And as I said, unlike Lydia, this woman knows the truth about Paul and Silas and the message that they bring. So Lydia's obstacle was theological.

[14 : 18] But this woman's obstacle is spiritual. It's actually demonic. She's oppressed by some kind of demon. And some men have realized that as a result of this, she has certain abilities of divination.

And so they have made her a slave. So she's a slave to a demon. And now she's been a slave enslaved by these men who are exploiting her, taking advantage of her condition, and making money off of her.

So she starts following behind Paul and his companions saying, These men are servants. And the word there is really slaves. These men are slaves of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation.

The word servant actually means slave. So this woman is a slave to a demonic being and these wicked men.

And yet she also calls Paul and his companions slaves as well. So one slave calling another person a slave. There's something here we need to see.

[15 : 19] Right? Most of us don't want to admit this. But one of the things the Bible is really clear on is the fact that we are all slaves to someone or something.

Every human being by nature is a slave to someone or something. Someone or something is calling the shots. You say, well, I'm not a slave.

Well, if you can't stop overeating, you're a slave to food. If you can't stop drinking too much, you're a slave to drink. If you can't stop scrolling on your phone, right?

Looking at Zillow maybe. I think Zillow is like a big deal. I think a lot of hours are spent flipping through Zillow. You're a slave to your phone. Right? If you can't stop losing your temper, you're a slave to anger.

If you say, oh, this is the last time, I'll never do it again. Then two weeks later you blow up, you're a slave to your anger. If you can't stop compromising your faith or your values or your standards so that some person out there will like you or be attracted to you or approve of you, you're making that person your master.

[16 : 25] You're saying, I'll be a slave. And you can call the shots about the most important things in my life. And like it or not, we have an economy that thrives off addiction. You know, we have an economy that hopes, that wants us to be addicted to our phones and to outrage and lust and envy and all the feelings that come from social media.

You know, we have an economy that really wants us to be dissatisfied with what we have so we'll go out and buy and consume more. We have an economy that really thrives when we are full on enslaved by these appetites and desires.

And so this image of enslavement and exploitation, this is very, very widespread in our culture. Not to mention all of the ways it actually happens, like sex trafficking and pornography and all of the other more sort of kind of low-hanging fruit examples of this kind of thing in the modern world.

And what we need to be clear on is Paul is not just annoyed. It's easy to read the ESV translation and to be like, Paul's family, like, oh, will you please shut up?

Demon committal. And that's not the way Paul is. The word is actually, should be translated, greatly disturbed. He is greatly disturbed by this woman. And I think the reason is, it's deeply disturbing to hear Christian truth come from the lips of someone who so obviously hasn't experienced it themselves.

[17 : 47] That's really disturbing. Right? It reminds me of a conversation I had with somebody who was telling me all about what he had learned at AA.

And all the truisms and all the aphorisms and all of the things that he was learning at AA. But he was slurring his words because he was so drunk as he was telling me about it. That was disturbing.

Right? There's a disconnect there. The purpose of the gospel is to set us free. And either we find freedom by serving Christ or we will become slaves of something else.

And that's really the contrast between Paul and this woman. Some of us know the Christian gospel. I mean, some of us have really good theology.

We can talk all day long about grace and freedom and atonement and all of these things. But that's not the obstacle to faith for us. The obstacle is that we are spiritually oppressed.

[18 : 52] Right? Maybe you're crippled by generational sin or unresolved trauma. Maybe you're enslaved by your appetites or your needs or your addictions or your fears or your anger.

If that's you, then you don't need words. You don't need another book. What you need is the power of God in your life.

You need the power of God in your life. This woman, only the power of the name of Jesus Christ can liberate her. It reminds me of Jesus in Mark 9 when he encounters the boy who's demonically possessed.

And he says, this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer. Some of us are in that place. We have something that has a hold on us. And that can only be driven out by prayer.

And this is one of the reasons why it is so important for us to gather together for worship. This isn't just about coming together to see each other, sing a few songs, hear a little teaching. This is a time to come together hoping and expecting and seeking spiritual liberation.

[20 : 03] There is a rehabilitative function of Christian worship that is always at the very center of what we do. This is one part cathedral and one part emergency room.

And we expect that even though you don't look like it, you look really good and like you have it all together, that a lot of you are coming in on a gurney. You're coming in with an arterial bleed. You're coming in on the verge of death.

You're coming in hopeless. You're coming in in despair. Marriages are maybe falling apart on the inside. You need an ER. You need the power of God. You need to be set free. Right?

So there are many, many, many people who are in the state that this woman is in, who don't necessarily need another book. They don't necessarily need medication. They need the Holy Spirit.

They need spiritual liberation. And, you know, this is why we're, you've hopefully heard already, we're taking steps to start a healing prayer ministry at Advent. It's just one of the ways that we want to focus on this need in our church.

[21 : 02] I meet with people over the years, and more and more I find myself sitting with somebody thinking, I don't think there's anything I can say that's going to be able to help this person. I don't think there's any direction that I can point them, any person that they can talk to.

I don't think there's any book that they need. What they really need is somebody to sit down and pray with them that the Spirit would deliver them. And so that's why we're doing it.

So this church is a place that takes freedom very, very, very seriously. If you want to break out of whatever it is that's enslaving you, you're in the right place. Keep coming. So Lydia needs the truth of the gospel.

This slave girl needs the power of the gospel. What about the third and final vignette, the working man? Well, this working man comes about a little later in the story.

The slave girl's former owners are furious. Once the demon is gone, she loses her abilities of divination, and she's no longer profitable. They go to the authorities, the magistrate.

[22 : 03] They drum up all kinds of charges against Paul and his companions. They are mistreated by the way no Roman citizen, as Paul was, should receive this kind of treatment. But they do it anyway.

And so they basically, the authorities come, and they strip Paul and his companions. They rip their clothes off. They beat them with rods. And then they throw them in jail. And then they order the jailer to keep them secure there.

And so the jailer, to make sure they don't escape, puts their feet in stocks. It's incredibly uncomfortable. And we know from the later context that he doesn't even wash their wounds. So they've been beaten, they're bloody, they're half naked, and their feet are thrown in stocks.

Now this jailer, there's some things that we can actually infer about this guy. We know that he's ex-military. How do we know that? Well, all civil service jobs were given to former soldiers, so he's ex-military.

We know that because of that, he's probably fairly cynical. He's probably seen a good deal of suffering and death. And probably fairly cynical. Probably pretty hard in his heart as a form of self-protection.

[23 : 11] Probably the kind of guy who doesn't really get into theology too much. He's just kind of there to follow orders. If you try to sit down in a coffee shop and talk to a guy like this about the gospel, he's just going to kind of wave you off.

He's probably the kind of guy who today would say, yeah, I'm not really the spiritual type. I'm not really the religious type. You save that kind of mumbo-jumbo for other people. This is not my thing. But don't make the mistake of thinking that a guy like this isn't religious.

Everyone is religious. Everyone is religious. In the sense that everyone has something in their life that they worship. It's just a question of what that is.

And most people don't think of it in religious terms. But it nevertheless is. So, you know, our culture here in D.C. prizes intelligence. People say, as long as I'm the smartest person in the room, right, life is worth living.

We prioritize achievement and influence. Being an amazing parent. Being very attractive. Or being all of those things. A lot of people, I think a lot of women, feel the pressure to be all of those things at the same time.

[24 : 15] Right? For this man, it was his job. It was his job. The difference between Lydia and this man, Lydia had been very successful.

But her job wasn't really the center of her life. You know, she's hungry. She's thirsty. She's seeking. But for this man, he wasn't hungry. He wasn't seeking. His job was everything.

You say, well, how can we possibly know that from the text? Well, look at how he responds when he fails. You want to know what really matters to you? Take something away from you.

Or fail. And see how you respond. Right? The things that matter most to us. The things that we worship are the things that if we lose them. If we fail in that endeavor, it makes life no longer worth living.

That's how you know. God sends an earthquake. All the prison doors open. The jailer wakes up. He thinks that the prisoners have escaped. He thinks that he's failed at the one thing that makes him who he is.

[25 : 20] So what does he immediately do? He draws his sword thinking that the only way he can preserve some of his honor, and this is an honor culture, is to take his own life.

Which is, according to this culture and his values, no longer worth living. The best thing I can do now is end my own life. And as I said before, that's how you really know what it is you worship in your life.

What is there in your life that if you were to lose it, it would make your life no longer worth living? So this man doesn't need truth alone.

He doesn't even just need power. This man needs hope. And he needs to see hope. He needs a living example of hope to offer him some alternative.

Because the only other alternative that he knows is the sword. And he sees this hope in Paul. Right? The first way he sees it is Paul's inexplicable joy.

[26 : 22] You know, by most standards, Paul looks like a failure. Paul has one job. You know, start a church. What happens instead?

He's mocked. He is stripped. He is beaten. And now he's in prison. He looks like an abject failure. However, even at midnight, as the blood is running down his legs in the stocks in a dark dungeon where his life looks like an utter failure, he's singing.

He's singing. He's praising God. He's full of joy. The text seems to imply that he gets all the other prisoners in on it too.

So they're all singing at midnight. Can you imagine singing in the darkness of the dungeon at midnight? Inexplicable joy. What the jailer sees there is, here's a man whose hope is completely separate from his circumstances.

His joy is completely independent from his circumstances. And that's because Paul wasn't defined by his success. He wasn't defined by his performance. Paul was entirely defined by what Jesus had already done for him.

[27 : 37] And Paul knew that no matter what happened to him in this life, that he belonged to God. And that his life was eternally secure in Christ. And the thing is, if your life is built on that, then it's secure.

If you build your life on anything else, you know, your family, your kids, your job, anything else, that thing could be taken away from you. And then your hope and your joy is really circumstantial.

But Paul's life was built on what Jesus had done for him. You could take everything away from Paul. He's still going to sing. And so he sees this inexplicable joy.

The jailer also sees mercy in Paul. You know, Paul easily could have escaped when this earthquake comes. He easily could have led a revolt. And most people, what they would have done is, they would have immediately come out of their prison cell.

They would have grabbed whatever weapon or blunt object possible. And they would have killed all the guards and escaped. That's probably what most people would have tried to do. Paul stays in the prison. He keeps everybody else there.

[28 : 40] He says, no, no, no. The jailer comes rushing in. Paul says, don't worry. He stays his hand. Don't kill yourself. It's okay. We're all here. Your honor is preserved.

You know, your job is safe. And what we need to understand is, from Paul's perspective, right, you ask, how could Paul do this unbelievable act of mercy?

Right? The way they had mistreated him. All the things they had done to him. The answer is because Paul himself was a recipient of even greater mercy. I mean, no matter how badly this Philippian jailer had mistreated Paul, Paul knew that he had done worse to men, women, and children who were Christians before his conversion.

He knew that he had done worse. But then Jesus had appeared to him on the Damascus road. And you ask, well, what did Jesus do then? Did he smite him? Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

Lightning, you know? No. He says, as Paul relates in Acts chapter 26, rise. I have appointed you to go out and tell people that I will forgive them and make them holy if they have faith in me.

[29 : 55] And that's exactly what he did for Paul. And so you ask, well, what was the secret to Paul's joy and mercy? And it's the fact that he saw his entire life as a gift of undeserved mercy.

And if you see your life as a gift of undeserved mercy, if you realize that there's nothing that anybody can do to you, that you have not done a thousand times over to God, and that God has actually forgiven you and blessed you and filled you with the Spirit, if you live your life that way, how can you not show the same grace and mercy to people when they wrong you, right?

So what you see here is God sent one kind of earthquake to open the prison doors, but it seems as though God sent another earthquake, which is happening at the center of this man's life, a kind of holy disruption, where he takes away the thing that matters most in order to open this man's heart to the truth of the gospel.

Here's the thing that you can build your life on that can never be taken away from you. And so the jailer falls down before Paul and Silas, and he asks, What must I do to be saved?

In other words, How do I get this into my life? And they tell him about Jesus. And again, just like Lydia, this man and his entire family, they all hear the gospel, they're all baptized.

[31 : 16] And what we learn here is that sometimes God loves you so much that he sends an earthquake into your life to loosen your hold on the things that you are clinging to to open your heart to his truth.

And, you know, there are people, I've had this happen enough in my own life, and some other time, maybe over coffee, I'll tell you some of the details, but I've had this happen enough in my own life that there are times when I'm talking to somebody or meeting with them and I just think, I ask God, I say, God, I think maybe this person needs an earthquake.

You know? That's the only thing that's going to open them up. I think this person needs an earthquake, I think this marriage needs an earthquake. Now you say, how could you possibly ask that?

Well, it's because I know the kind of God that's going to send that earthquake. And it's the most profoundly loving that God can do to defibrillate that heart, to bring that person back to life.

So we have here, as we look at Acts chapter 16, between three different people, three different circumstances, three completely different conversions that look completely different from one another, same gospel, same Jesus.

[32 : 30] And the reason is because different people need different things. Every single person in this room, for you to take the next step in your walk, the next step in your faith, to become more trusting of the Lord, to become more given over to God's agenda for your life, we all need different things.

Some of us need truth, we need a Bible study, some of us need power, deliverance, some of us need an earthquake, to be re-centered on the source of hope that's never going to be taken away, right?

We need different things. The good news is, God knows that, and he's able to give it to us if we ask. So this should inspire you to be willing to share your faith with other people.

This has been a consistent source of inspiration for me, especially people who are different from you. You know, one of the best things about this passage, one other interesting thing to note about these three vignettes, growing up, Paul as a child would have grown up praying, as most Jewish men did every day, thank you, Lord, that I am not a slave, that I am not a woman, and that I'm not a Gentile.

And who are the first three conversions in Philippi through Paul's ministry? One is a slave, two are women, and all three are Gentiles.

[33 : 48] That's amazing. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, we thank you for your gospel, and we thank you for the fact that it has truth, that it has power, and that sometimes it brings a holy disruption so that it can offer us an unshakable hope.

And I just pray for us, Lord, even now as we sing this song of response, as we come to you in prayer and confession, as we come around your table, that you would be giving each one of us exactly what we need, meeting us where we are, drawing us each in our own way closer to your embrace, Lord.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.