

SUMMER 2 - Acts 16-28 - The Gospel in Greece - Philippi

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[0 : 00] Well, thank you. It's very nice to be back at HTD. When we moved down to Melbourne over eight years ago, we arrived in a Saturday straight from Sydney, stayed with our friend Paul Barker across the road, and our first church experience was HTD.

And we stayed for eight years. Not at HTD, and our preacher that morning was Andrew Moody, which is a great introduction to the Melbourne church. It's lovely to be back as you turn to God's Word in this wonderful part of Acts 16.

All I want to do tonight, really, as we turn to God's Word, is to encourage you of what you know, that the God we serve, the God we love, the powerful God, changes lives.

Now, I know we all know that. But you might think, well, Mike, if you knew my sister, or my spouse, or my son, or my neighbour, well, God couldn't change that life.

Well, we read Acts 16, and we are reminded again that this is the God who opens people's hearts. Let's pray. Father, thank you we can gather here tonight in freedom and gather around your life-giving Word.

[1 : 21] And we pray you will encourage us tonight. We pray that as we hear the work of the apostles, that we, like them, might not be ashamed of this Gospel.

We might keep on believing it, keep on preaching it, and be pleased, we pray, to turn the lives of many. For Jesus' sake. Amen. The cover story in The Good Weekend, a couple of years ago, had the bespeckled Dick Smith.

You all know Dick, who wants us to eat Aussie foods. Dick's always on a crusade. It's to eat Aussie foods, or a while ago, the journalist trapped in Somalia, and Dick raised money to get him out.

Well, this was about Dick's latest crusade. Dick wants to save the world. I think that's entirely admirable. Dick's flown over the polar ice caps and the forests and seen what we are doing in ruining our planet.

We're just consuming stuff, tearing apart the forests. He said that we've signed a suicide pact with China, eating all our resources, leaving nothing left for our children.

[2 : 31] That's his crusade. It tends to be a bit more moderate in the things we consume. The journalist did point out to Dick that since he himself has three homesteads, two cars, a camper van, a steam train, at least two helicopters, and a plane.

He's probably our leading consumer. But Dick moved on. The point stands, Dick wants to save the world. And I meet people, I think, like Dick, people want change.

They don't care about the world. They just want change in their lives. I think when you get beneath the veneer of niceness in people's lives and talk about their lives and uncover what's there, they want change.

When I was at BCV a few years ago, we had an open day. And a woman came with her daughter who was thinking of studying there. And I was talking to the woman, not a churchgoer. We've been talking a few minutes about our family.

She asked me about my parents. I said, oh, both my parents are in heaven. And she said, oh, do you believe in heaven? I'm the principal of Bible college. I'm paid to believe in heaven.

[3 : 47] I didn't say this. Yes, I believe in heaven. I said, I think most people believe in heaven because for most people, life is tough. And they think there must be something better than that.

And then she said immediately, yes, life is hell. I'd known this woman five minutes and she opened up a door to her very, very sad life.

It turned out as we spoke that she had once been married to an Anglican minister who had left her for another woman. Life is hell. My wife used to go walking with a woman in Sydney, Indian background, wealthy.

She said she used to hobnob with royalty. She's about 40. She said that every year of her 40 years has been hell on earth. Sarah thinks she's probably been abused emotionally, sexually.

For so many people, life is tough and people want change. For all that Malcolm Fraser achieved as a prime minister, most of which I've forgotten, he's remembered for one thing he said about life, isn't he?

[4 : 57] Remember it? Of course you do. Life wasn't meant to be easy. There were a few years ago in Sydney a murder-suicide and the then premier Bob Carr made a statement which made the next day's papers.

It's quite profound from an agnostic. Carr said this, life is an inherently disappointing experience for most human beings.

Some people can't cope with that. What a statement that life, for men are agnostic, that life in its essence is disappointing.

It will let you down. It won't fulfill your dreams and some can't cope. And we long for change. And our word to our world is God will change.

where there's sorrow, God brings joy. Where there's death, God brings life. We see it here in Acts 16, this wonderful account as Paul launches into the evangelization of Europe.

[6 : 04] He's been called to come over to Macedonia and Paul meets here in this city three very, very different people. And we see these three encounters in this passage. First of all, he meets this woman called Lydia.

Now, Philippi was an important town. It was called Rome in a microcosm and a very small Jewish community. There's no synagogue mentioned. And as you know, when Paul went to a town, he first went to a synagogue.

There's no mention of that. So very few Jews in Philippi. A few women by the river. And Paul finds them, meets a woman called Lydia, which is a Gentile name.

She's a Gentile. But she's a God-fearer. She loves Yahweh. She's heard about Yahweh and put her trust in Yahweh and seeking to live according to the law.

She's a good woman, a God-fearer, like Cornelius. And most agree, probably wealthy. She deals with purple cloth, the color of royalty. So she worked in Melbourne.

[7 : 04] She'd sell her wares not to Rivers or Target, but I think to DJs, to Myers. She owns her own house, where Paul will stay a bit later with his friends.

She's a wealthy woman. And along comes Paul and tells her the Messiah has come, that all her dreams and prayers have been answered, that he is the fulfillment of all our hopes.

And there's wonderful words, and the Lord opened her heart. The Lord gave her understanding and faith of the gospel. And the church in Philippi is born.

And I think, probably, the standout church in the New Testament. Of all the letters Paul writes, I think Philippi is the only one with no rebuke.

Mind you, there was a little rebuke to two women who were fighting, but apart from that, no word of rebuke. The one church that stood by Paul through thick and thin, and the church that was for all the other churches a model of generosity.

[8 : 07] A great church. And it began with the conversion of Lydia by the river in Philippi. That's the first person he meets, Lydia. Then in verse 1624, we meet the dramatic exorcism of the slave girl.

She has what's called a spirit of prediction or a python spirit. She can tell the future. Needs an employer to do that. You pay a denarius, you tell her your future.

A bit like, I guess, today's astrologers. Pay your pennies, they'll tell you the future. And you could hardly find two more different women, could you, than Lydia and this woman. There's Lydia.

Educated, respectable, a woman of some standing. The other woman, disreputable, enslaved, an outcast.

Lydia runs her own business and makes money for herself. The other girl is someone else's business. She makes money for them. And within is a spirit, an evil spirit, who identifies Paul and Silas as servants of the Most High.

[9 : 17] And day after day after day she cries out to the people about Paul and Silas. These men are servants of the Most High who are telling you the way to be saved.

And day after day after day and finally Paul gets fed up and says, stop! Now why did Paul do that? I mean, don't they say that any publicity is good publicity?

Why did he say that? I mean, the Lord silenced the demons but I think for a different reason. They recognized who he was and they told early in his ministry who he was and he knew the leaders would perhaps try to kill him.

That's not what's happening here. I think Paul just gets frustrated with it. He's going to preach the gospel and all the time he's interrupted day by day by day.

I think out of frustration he stops it and casts out the demon. Now what's striking here I think is Luke does not tell us does not say and the Lord opened her heart.

[10:27] Lydia receives God welcomes Paul into her house. The jailer receives God welcomes Paul into his house. There's no such thing. There's no hint here she's been converted.

She may have been but why doesn't Luke tell us? He does with Lydia and the jailer so not here so I remain agnostic about her conversion.

It may simply be that the demons cast out but this story does pave the way for the next main event which is the conversion of the Philippian jailer.

the men have lost their income. They're angry. They drag Paul before the court and Paul and Silas are severely flogged and put in prison and they're in great pain.

I've not been flogged but they're in agony. In agony. He's told to guard them carefully. He puts them in a cell, not some kind of clean, sterile, comfortable cell you might find here in Australia with three nutritious meals but in some dark, dank, smelly hole.

[11:38] In the inner cell, in maximum security, with their legs in stocks. They can't move their legs, so they're cramping. So they've been flogged, they're in agony, it stinks to high heaven, they're cramped and face possible death the next day.

that's their context. And again, Luke records God's wonderful intervention. The God who called them to come to Philippi, the God who opened Lydia's heart, the God who cast out the demon from the woman, now sends an earthquake which leads to the conversion of the jailer.

Now again, you find another very, very different person from the first two. There's Lydia, a wealthy businesswoman. There's a slave girl, and now a working class soldier.

I'm just, I'm a big fan of Paul. I'm just struck by Paul and how at ease Paul is with all sorts of people.

There he is before a Roman pro-consul, or a Jewish king, or a Greek philosopher.

a wealthy Gentile woman, a slave, a tent maker, a soldier, and Paul is at ease with all of them, and shares the gospel. God knew what he was doing when he chose Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

[13:14] Then we meet this jailer, what an interesting character. I think he comes across as being fairly impetuous. Have you noticed that? as soon as he sees the prison door open, he plans to kill himself right away rather than face trial and execution for letting them escape.

Then when hearing they're there, we're told he rushes into the cell. Then the same hour, he takes them home and washes their wounds, and right away he's baptized.

This man knows what he wants and wants it right now. And he asked that question you long to be asked by someone, what must I do to be saved?

I mean, have you ever been asked that? Sat on a tram in Swanson Street, reading your Bible, and someone said, oh, Ian, what must I do to be saved?

It happens occasionally. I have two friends, I think it's John Dixon, you know John Dixon, and I think it's Greg Clark who heads the Bible Society, were having coffee in Newtown, across opposite more college some years ago, just having coffee, chatting about theology and philosophy and the Bible and whatnot, and just chatting.

[14:23] And a woman in a table next to them just kept kind of leaning over, just listening. And John and Greg were talking and they finished their coffee, got to leave, and she just leaned over and said, I just couldn't help but hear you, are you Christians?

What must I do to become a Christian? What two guys to ask? John Dixon, Greg Clark, God knew what he was doing. It happens occasionally, not two of heavens occasionally.

And he's wonderfully converted. Now, what led to his conversion? What makes this guy ask that question?

Well, maybe the earthquake, that's pretty dramatic. The earthquake, the gate spring open. But, this is conjecture, but I think he sees Paul and Silas. Here are these two men.

in agony, in the central cell, facing possible death. And what are they doing at midnight? They're praying and singing hymns.

[15:27] And with the doors spring open, they can walk away, what do they do? They stay there because they're concerned for him. I think that's what strikes him. Their joy and suffering, and their concern for him.

So, he asks, what must I do to be saved? Let me say, friends, we know, don't we, how powerful the witnesses have changed lives to people, how powerful it is.

I just think, for all our faults, I just think the church is our greatest evangelistic tool, when we are the church, loving one another. I went to Brisbane a few years ago to a church there called the City Tabernacle Baptist Church, it's in the centre of Brisbane.

I went there for Christmas time, and they run a carol service, like many churches do, for years and years and years, in the park, a carol service. And the church volunteered for it and put it on, and it grew and grew and grew, and it became so popular, the Lord Mayor said to the pastor, how about making this thing the city carol service, we'll call it the Lord's Mayor, carols in the city, you do all the work, I'll get the credit.

And they do that, and it's sponsored by IGA, and Channel 10 televised it, all put on by the church, run by the church, all volunteers, that's an enormous amount of work, enormous amount of work.

[16:55] And I went there this year, I had a front row seat, it was great, they have Marina Pryor, Colin Buchanan, Troy Cassadaly, and it's great, wonderful, wonderful carol service.

The following week, the pastor told me this, the head of IGA Queensland called him into the office and said, Peter, I want to talk to you. I've seen this carol service, you guys do, I want to know, what's in it for the church?

He said, nothing, come on, come on, how much do you guys make? He said, make? It costs us 80,000 bucks a year to put this thing on, what's in it for you?

We just want folk to know the true meaning of Christmas. And he was staggered, staggered. He said, well Peter, what can IGA do for you?

They talked together, and they resolved that next year, IGA will produce a small attractive booklet for kids on the true meaning of Christmas. and put this booklet, this little book, in every IGA store in Queensland.

[18:05] And that same week, the head of the Channel 10 film crew called Peter over and said, Peter, can I have coffee with you? Peter said, sure. He said, Peter, I've been here for years filming this thing, and I've seen your church, I've seen your people and the way they behave, and you're different.

Tell me why. He didn't quite say what must I do to be saved, but he was so impacted by the lives of these people, their selfless serving one another, it touched them.

And this man sees Paul and Silas, their joy and suffering, their care for him, and he asked that question, what must I do to be saved? And he takes them home to his family and brings the good news to them.

Five times in this text we're told that the person, Lydia, the jailer, and all their family were saved.

Verse 31, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household.

verse 32, they spoke the message of the Lord to him along with everyone in the house. It wasn't just they followed their dad's example, they heard the gospel themselves and believed.

[19:30] Verse 33, right away he and his family were baptized. Verse 34, he rejoiced because he had believed God with his entire household.

Doesn't always happen but happens sometimes. The God will save a whole household. I grew up in a fairly pagan family, my mother was a kind of cultural nominal Anglican, dad had no faith whatsoever, never went to any church, wouldn't go to my confirmation, wouldn't go to weddings, just didn't like church.

I became a king Christian about 19 at university. This was 30 odd years ago. And I began to give my daughter books to read. If you are my vintage, you remember things like Run Baby Run and God Smuggle and The Cross and the Switch I gave her these books and she became a Christian. My mother had two Christian kids now, almost within a few months, two Christian kids. And something stirred in her heart. And she decided to go to church. She got dressed one night with my daughter to go to church.

And dad said, where are you going? I said, I'll go to church, Baptist church. He said, I'll come with you. He could have pipped my mother off the floor.

[20 : 49] I'll come with you. Hadn't been to church in his life. He went to church a month later. He went forward. One night, the same service, my father, mother, sister were all baptized together.

God does that sometimes. Works in households. And here we see the wonderful example of God doing that, that grace to the whole family.

They put their faith in Christ. Three very different people, all in different ways impacted by the gospel. Two at least wonderfully converted, wonderfully changed.

Let me just say a couple of things in the light of this great passage. I thought about Paul going to Europe. I thought about Europe. I have, like you, friends who work in Europe as missionaries. I've got friends in France and Italy, had friends in Spain.

If you know about Europe, it's like Australia. It's very, very tough. It's very, very tough. There's a guy called Leslie Newbiggin, who's a famous missionary in India, a bishop there.

[22 : 01] He retired and went back to England at 65 and began church planting in Birmingham amongst the working class. Newbiggin said this about England, which is true of Melbourne.

I quote, it is much harder than anything I met in India. These next words are in bold print.

There is a cold contempt for the gospel, gospel, which is harder to face than opposition. If I could describe Melbourne right now, Australia right now, and their response to Christ, I would say about this city, this nation, there is a cold contempt for the gospel.

As I visit the Asian homes in the district, most of them Sikhs Hindus, I find a welcome which is often denied on the doorsteps of the natives, the English.

I have been forced to recognize that the most difficult missionary frontier in the contemporary world is the one of which the church has so little consciousness. England is a pagan society, and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the church.

[23 : 36] Paul went to Philippi and he found it tough, and he was flogged. And you know, if you try to reach your Anglo-Saxon friends here in Australia, it's tough.

Immigration is saving the church in Australia, I reckon. And I look at Doncaster as an example. It's not the Anglo-Saxon becoming believers, it's the Singaporeans, the Chinese, the Indians.

I led a mission some years ago to Singapore with a more college team. We went down Orchard Road to hand out brochures about the mission. Now, if you've been to Orchard Road, it's full of tourists.

I just watch them. I give a tourist a brochure, European, Australian, straight in the bin, straight in the bin. I gave one to Singaporean, look at it, in the pocket.

And they came to the meetings again and again and again. God's working, praise God, amongst the Asians. But for us, amongst the Anglo-Saxons, there's a cold contempt for the gospel.

[24 : 50] Paul met it, we'll meet it too. But don't be discouraged because God opened Lydia's heart and saved this jailer as doing the same today.

I had a man walk into my church, I'm at St. James Earl Cathedral about six, eight weeks ago. A Turkish Muslim just walked off the street. he told Matt this story about three, four months ago.

He had a dream. A man in white, Jesus, appeared to him. He was in a field and the wind was blowing fairly gently. And this man simply said to him, Vulcan, follow me.

Vulcan said, well, if I follow you, I'll face persecution, I'll lose my job. And the wind got stronger, he said, follow me. So I woke up and I thought, I'd better find out more about Jesus.

He went to the internet, he tracked down churches, he came across St. James Earl Cathedral. Just turned up one day, Matt shared with him the gospel, and the month he was baptized.

[26 : 05] The Lord opened his heart. Wonderful. I was in America last week, Christmas days, I was speaking of service, a thing called the whosoever gospel mission.

It's a center of men who have been in prison, who have come out of prison to get their lives together. They go there for six months a year, do some courses to get a trade, to get a job. And I spoke of their Christmas service.

And they got up and gave their testimonies. Men who have been drug addicts, alcohol addicts, like Neil, grew up Jewish, have been a businessman, became an addict, ended up in prison, went to AA, Alcoholics Anonymous.

And they believe in AA, as you know, in the higher power. And he had to read out a card one day, he asked the question, what higher power do you trust in?

And he said publicly, Jesus Christ. He thought, oh, where'd that come from? I'm Jewish. What made me say that?

[27 : 09] He's just kind of popped out. He said, I'd better find out who he is. He turned up at this mission, enrolled there. I sat and had lunch with him. He now works for them.

He's been saved. He works for them. He lives with 50 other guys in a big room in a bunk. having a contentment in his life he just didn't know of before.

God changes lives. God opened hearts. He sets the prisoners free. It's a great encouragement, isn't it?

You think of your friends? My wife has a friend called Fiona. When you were in Newtown in Sydney, I've known it for years. Lived across the road with her husband and kids. Then she left her husband for a lesbian relationship, moved to Melbourne, sat her beach with her regularly.

She's prayed for Fiona for 15 years. Can't get to first base. You feel like giving up, don't you? A committed lesbian, no faith in God, you feel like giving up.

[28 : 21] Then I read about Lydia and the jailer. How God opens the heart. God puts the words in someone's mouth.

God can give a dream. God changes lives. We live in a world of people who desperately want change. Life is hell, they say.

And Christ offers eternal life and forgiveness. My dear friends, let's not be ashamed of this gospel. keep praying for those you love.

Keep living lives before them of joy and love and faithfulness. And at the right moment, speak a word in time.

For this is the God who loves to change lives. Let's pray. Father, thank you so much for this remarkable and wonderful reminder tonight through your word.

[29 : 31] That you're the God who took the gospel through your servant across Asia Minor and Europe and so your church come to birth and grow and flourish. church. And thank you for 2,000 years.

You've kept on doing that across the world and draw many, many to yourself. Thank you so much for this powerful gospel. We pray tonight for our city of Melbourne. We love our city.

We love our suburb. But we do see every day this growing hardening against all things Christian. So you pray you'll treat this city not as it deserves, it deserves destruction.

But treat us, we pray, with grace and mercy. And as you open this woman's heart, as you set free that jailer, have mercy on Melbourne and the people we love, the people around us, and grant them, we pray, the gift of eternal life.

And be pleased, we pray to work through us, through our prayers, our lives, our words, to achieve your solemn purpose in their lives. We pray this for their salvation and the glory of the Son.

[30 : 45] Amen.