

The Name That Brings Freedom

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[0 : 00] So thank you again, Addie, Simon and Paul, Ben and Claire, and of course, Charlie and Anna. You know, it's been such a joy to be able to have these conversations with our kids again.

Boys and girls, it's now time for you to respond to today's story. If your parents are on our children's ministry email list, you can decorate the coloring page that I sent out this week, or you can add to your map of Paul's journey or start a new map if you haven't already.

Also draw a picture of Paul and Silas worshiping God in prison. They were in a really sad and hard place, but they still had joy in their hearts. As they sang hymns of praise to God and prayed to him, what do you think that looked like?

We would love to see your creations after the service in our breakout rooms. So like Dan said earlier, we've been following Paul and his friends on this great adventure of following Jesus, taking the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

This week, the Holy Spirit leads Paul and his friends to Philippi, where three very different people meet Jesus and have their lives changed forever. Before we dive into our story, though, we need to remember where we are in the big story of Acts.

[1 : 16] Last week, we read about a huge turning point in the book of Acts. Paul and Barnabas are then sent to Antioch with a letter explaining all of this and instructing these new believers.

And while in Antioch, though, Paul and Barnabas get into a fight, a disagreement. Barnabas goes with his cousin Mark to Cyprus, and Paul and Silas pick up Timothy in Lystra and continue west toward Asia Minor.

And that's where we pick up our story today. And if you have a Bible nearby, I'd encourage you to open it up to Acts 16 and follow along with me. Today's story has two big sections.

First, in verses 6 to 10, we see how the Holy Spirit leads Paul and his friends to Philippi. Look at verse 6. They, so that's Paul, Silas, and Timothy, went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

And then verse 7. When they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, what's going on here?

[2 : 43] Did the Holy Spirit sort of speak out audibly and rebuke or scold Paul for wanting to go to Asia or to Bithynia? I don't think that's what happened. This word that's translated here as forbidden can also mean to hinder or to prevent something from happening.

Luke doesn't tell us how the Holy Spirit did this. It could have been through a prophetic word from one of the believers at Lystra. It could have been just an inward sense as Paul and his friends were praying.

It could have even been through external circumstances that just prevented them from going. But somehow, God prevented Paul and his friends from fulfilling their plans before he called them to go to Macedonia.

And I think this little passage teaches us two really important things about how God leads us, which are both very relevant for the season we're in right now.

The first is that God leads us by restraining and inviting, by calling us out and by holding us back. John Stott calls this the double guidance of the Lord.

[3 : 54] Before the Spirit called Paul and his friends to go to Macedonia, he actually stopped them twice from going ahead with their own plans.

We're living right now in a time of great restraint. We've likely all had plans frustrated or derailed by COVID-19. I know we certainly have as a church.

And this story confronts us with some important but challenging questions. Do we trust that God is sovereign both in restraining us and inviting us?

Are we too focused on the paths that God has closed to see the ways that he is calling us to move forward into new and different things? And perhaps most of all, do we have the faith to rejoice in God's restraint as well as his invitation, in God holding us back as well as calling us out?

And the second thing we see in this passage is that God expects us to exercise wisdom and to discern his will together. Notice what Paul does and doesn't do with his vision.

[5 : 04] Look at verse 10. When Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Paul doesn't just pack up and ship off on a solo journey. He gathers together his trusted friends, his co-workers in Christ, and together they conclude, which that word actually means to infer or to draw a logical conclusion based on evidence.

They make a wise decision together with the information and guidance from the Lord that they have. And I think we would be wise in this time of uncertainty to follow his examples as a church.

So our beloved historian, Dr. Luke, joins Paul, Silas, and Timothy in Troas, and they follow God's call to Macedonia and to Philippi, where we see Jesus at work bringing freedom and life.

In verses 11 to 34, Luke introduces us to three people, Lydia, an unnamed slave girl, and a jailer. And all three of these people encounter Jesus in profound ways.

[6 : 18] First, we meet Lydia. When they arrived in Philippi, our friends made their way down to the river, where a group of women regularly met to pray on the Sabbath.

In verse 14, we read, One who heard us was a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods who was a worshiper of God. We actually learn quite a lot here about Lydia. She was a businesswoman from Asia Minor who sold rare and expensive purple goods. We find out later she has a spacious home, which means she's likely wealthy and well-respected in her community.

And Luke tells us she's a worshiper of God. This means that she was a Gentile who had come to believe in and worship Yahweh, the God of Israel, without submitting to the whole law of Moses. Now, God opens up Lydia's heart to receive Paul's teaching, and she believes in Jesus. She's baptized, and she shows the fruit of her conversion by welcoming Paul and his friends into her home.

[7 : 22] Next, we meet this anonymous slave girl. Luke recalls, This young woman could hardly be more different than Lydia.

She would have been at the very bottom of the social ladder, with no legal rights or privileges, totally dependent upon her masters, who were cruelly exploiting her oppression and her suffering for financial gain.

After harassing them for many days, Paul finally commands this spirit to come out of her in the name of Jesus, and immediately it does. I mean, this is great news, right?

This girl has come to freedom in the name of Jesus. But her owners don't see it quite that way.

Luke uses the very same Greek word to show that when the spirit came out of the girl, her owners saw their hope of profit go out as well.

And they are furious about this. They drag Paul and Silas to the local court and bring false charges against them. As a side note, we've seen persecution already in Acts 14, but notice the motivation behind this persecution.

[8 : 40] It's all about money. Not about religion, not about philosophy, not about worldview or politics. It's about money. This girl's masters didn't appear to care about God or Caesar any more than they cared about her.

As God's people, we are called to bear witness to his kingdom of love, grace, justice, and mercy. We do this by preaching the gospel in the kingdom of God, but we also do this by advocating for the poor, the oppressed, the exploited, by doing good to those whose society is cast aside and pursuing justice for all.

And if we do this, if we stand up for the dignity of every person who is made in the image of God, we will find ourselves opposing and in conflict with people who make a profit by exploiting others.

And we can be sure this won't always go over well. Now, ironically, by doing good for a victim of injustice, Paul and Silas become victims of injustice.

They're severely beaten and thrown in prison. And this is where we meet the Philippian jailer. Luke doesn't tell us much about this guy. He was likely a retired Roman soldier, which means that honor and duty would have been really, really important to him.

[10 : 05] He was likely in what we would think of as the working class, making a comfortable but certainly not glamorous living. And we can assume he participated in the civil religion of Rome, but Luke doesn't tell us anything about his attitude toward Jesus or to the God of Israel.

Now, the jailer comes to believe in Jesus through the witness of Paul and Silas, first through an act of great love, and second by the word of the gospel.

So, when Paul and Silas arrived at the prison, they would have been in really rough shape, bloodied and bruised by the severe beatings they had received. On top of that, they were put in the innermost prison, a dark, terrible, hopeless place, and their feet were put in painful stocks.

Despite all of this, we read in verse 24, about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

Now, their unshakable joy clearly made a strong impression on their fellow prisoners, because when an earthquake shook the prison to its core and burst open the prisoners' bonds, they all stayed put, possibly out of respect for Paul and Silas.

[11 : 26] And this effectively saves the jailer's life. In Rome, a jailer who allowed his prisoners to escape could receive the same punishment that they were due to receive.

Now, for a retired soldier, a man of honor like this jailer, this seemingly hopeless situation really left him one option, to take his own life rather than to have it taken from him.

So, can you imagine his confusion when, from the darkness of the prison, he hears Paul call out, Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.

The jailer is clearly moved by this act of incredible love and selfless generosity. He breaks down and asks Paul and Silas, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

They respond with the simple truth of the gospel, followed by more in-depth teaching from the word of God. They say, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and all your household.

[12 : 35] You know, I find the jailer's response to this incredibly moving. This man who was about to fall on his sword in hopelessness brings Paul and Silas out of the prison.

He washes their wounds. He invites them into his home. He's baptized by them. And then together they rejoice in this newfound faith that he has in God.

They rejoice together as brothers in Christ. And friends, this is the gospel, the good news of Jesus at work. So to conclude, I want to ask a question.

Why do you think Luke chose to write about these three people from Philippi? We know that Paul and his friends stayed there for some time, and we know from Paul's letters that a really wonderful church actually grew up in Philippi.

So there are likely lots of other converts, but why did Luke choose to highlight these three? Well, last week we were reminded that the good news of Jesus is for all people.

[13 : 44] We were reminded that God's gift of the new life, his salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus. Not faith plus keeping the law, or faith plus being born into the right family.

simply trusting in Jesus. And in drawing attention to Lydia, to this slave girl, and to the jailer, I think Luke is showing us on the ground in real life what it looks like when the gospel of grace and the powerful love of Jesus meet very different people in very different circumstances.

The jailer asked, what must I do to be saved? The surprising and glorious truth of the gospel is that the answer to this question is the same for men and for women, for the rich and for the poor, for those who are honored and dignified in this life, and for those who are victims of oppression and who are exploited.

It's the same for those seeking God, for those who are far from God, and for those who don't appear to care one way or another. God doesn't play favorites.

How is anybody saved? By trusting in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The Church of Jesus is the one place where a wealthy and well-respected businesswoman, a poor, exploited slave girl, and a working-class, blue-collar guy can live together not only as equals, but as the family of God, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

[15 : 31] This good news really is for everyone. It's for you. Come and receive freedom. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen.