

The Name That Brings Freedom

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 August 2020

Preacher: Rev. Ben Roberts

[0 : 0 0] We're going to look at this passage from three different angles. The first is God's way, the second is God's work, and the third is God's witnesses. So, let's dive into God's way.

This is the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey. And so, Paul, Silas, and Timothy leave Syria. They go to encourage the churches that they went to in the first missionary journey, which means basically walking all the way across modern-day Turkey.

And they have some rough plans that they're going to kind of stay in Asia Minor in that area. But to their complete surprise, they end up getting on a boat, sailing across the Aegean Sea and landing in Philippi, Macedonia, which is modern-day Greece.

So, it's kind of like saying that you're going to go to Spanish banks for small group and ending up planning a church on Vancouver Island. This is not what they were expecting to do. And how that happens, how that comes about is God's way.

God has a plan, and God leads them. So, if you look at verse 6, this is really interesting. They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

[1 : 1 2] That's a strong word, forbidden. And then in verse 7, it says something really similar. And when they had come up to Mysia, before they attempted to go in Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

So, they have this plan. They've gone to see these churches, and then they're like, well, while we're here, let's share the good news with some other people in this area. They set out down the road to kind of go to the next city to preach, and Jesus, by His Spirit, says no.

So, they go to the next logical place, which apparently is Bithynia. I guess you have to be there. Bithynia is the next logical place to go share the gospel.

Jesus, by His Holy Spirit, says no. That's a hard pass on Bithynia. Yeah. So, they take a final fork in the road, and they're basically heading kind of into the middle of nowhere, it seems to them.

They end up in this little coastal city called Troas. They're wondering where in the world God is leading them, what in the world is going on. And that's when they receive this vision, this man from Macedonia that's calling, saying, come over and help.

[2 : 1 8] And they meet together, and they say, all right, this is what God's calling us to do. And they cross the Aegean to preach the gospel. So, the reason I said that I think this is super interesting before is these two no's.

And I think these two no's that God's Spirit gives to them are really encouraging. I'll tell you what I mean. It's really easy to forget how active God's Spirit actually is.

Acts reminds us that the Spirit is at work in our lives, in the world, in the church. And the Spirit is kind of like this general that is deploying people, deploying gospel witnesses all across the world, sending and calling, preventing and protecting, interrupting and connecting people, always empowering and directing God's people.

And sometimes, the Spirit actually directs God's people by saying, nope, not that. So, I mean, we may attempt something in God's name.

It may seem really great to us from our point of view. And the door just gets slammed in our face repeatedly. And what we see here is that doesn't mean that God isn't with us.

[3 : 3 2] It doesn't mean that the Spirit is not at work. The Spirit is silent. It doesn't mean that we've failed in our Christian witness, if that happens. But it is an invitation for us to say, okay, God, that's obviously a no.

What's next? Lead me. Show me. With COVID-19, there are a lot of no's that we are facing in our lives right now, individually and also as a church.

But what this passage says is that God's Spirit can orchestrate a fantastic yes out of a hard no. God's Spirit is not distracted or dismayed or discouraged. God's Spirit sometimes says no to lead us to something even better. He knows the way. He is at work within His people. And that's our second point, that God is at work. God's work is at the heart of all of these conversions that happen in Philippi. So, you probably notice each of these converts and the way that they're converted is remarkably different. [4 : 31] And so, each is the work of God, who has the power to change and transform lives. And the main theme of the book of Acts is that all the growth that happens in the church, all of it is God's work.

And so, all of it happens by God's Spirit-empowered Word spreading across the world, advancing powerfully through everyday Christians just witnessing and sharing about Jesus, sharing the good news.

It's God at work pushing the Word forward. And these conversions really show that. They're very clearly God's work. So, we've got Lydia, right? She's actually an immigrant to this area. She's an entrepreneur. She's in the purple dye business, which I guess was a good business to be in. It says she was wealthy. She was doing well. It also says she was a worshiper of God. So, this is someone that's kind of leaning towards Judaism, but not all the way in. And she and some other women are meeting up by the river. They're meeting up to pray. There isn't a synagogue in the city, apparently. Our missionaries show up. Paul speaks about Jesus. [5 : 33] And what happens? God works. And it says, The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And she was baptized.

And her household as well. That's fantastic, isn't it? The Lord opened her heart. It does not say Paul's unbelievable rhetorical skills convinced her that Jesus was the truth. It doesn't say Silas's sassy Christian t-shirt convinced her that this was the truth. No. These guys meet. Lydia and Paul and all of them meet up. Paul shares about Jesus, about the hope that he has. And then Jesus is there. And Jesus opens Lydia's heart. And the whole point here is that this is not an accident. The Lord is actually working in Lydia, has been working in Lydia before this moment. Working in her and her whole household. He's been working in Lydia and been guiding the apostles. [6 : 30] And so, when they meet up, it plays out like a script. Because the point is that there is a director here. God is working. And that's what Luke wants us to see.

That before and around and behind any gospel sharing that might happen in our lives, God is already at work. I was talking to Andrew Buchanan, our evangelist, about this this week. And he said that evangelism is like flipping switches and seeing if the light comes on. I love that. Because that approach to evangelism is only possible if we believe that God is actually at work. It's kind of like we just are stumbling along. We come to this room. God has already installed the wiring. God has provided the power. God has opened an opportunity for the gospel to blossom in somebody's heart.

And we share and things happen. God has opened an opportunity for the gospel to blossom in somebody's heart. And I've been praying that Jesus would set up these opportunities for me this week.

[7 : 33] Just prepare me to be willing to test that switch when I run into people. And if Acts is any indication, this is exactly what God wants to do. It's exactly how he wants to use his people.

Okay, Lydia. And briefly, we're going to talk about the other two. So, what about the slave girl? Well, we see that she's being exploited to make money for her owners. There's some sort of speech happening here, some sort of fortune telling.

It says that it's possession by an evil spirit. That's what the apostles discern it to be. And our translation says that day after day, they ran into this girl and she kind of followed them around and was proclaiming these things until Paul got annoyed.

That's what the ESV says. Disturbed or grieved is probably a better word. God sees her affliction is disturbed and he says, I command you in the name of Jesus to come out of her.

And it came out of her that very hour. Well, this is clearly God's work, right? Jesus' name is powerful, not intrinsically because it's his name, but because it's Jesus himself that is alive and at work.

[8 : 42] And when his name is used, it's invoking his living power to come into a situation. Sometimes this is what conversion looks like. Sometimes it's not this slow kind of reasoning or convincing or discerning.

Sometimes it's just a dramatic rescue and transformation just comes into somebody's life, changes them, delivers them from something, and they're transformed by God's power.

That's what happened with the slave girl. And what about this business with the jailer? Well, this is also God's work, clearly. There's this hard-nosed Roman soldier and there's, you know, an extremely, extremely unlikely series of events that goes down as he encounters God's people. And what happens is that he falls down on his knees and asks, what must I do to be saved? God led the apostles so that they would run into these people.

And then Jesus worked by the word and power and witness to change their lives. And from a human level, we may read this and think, this is so random.

[9 : 51] This is so unlikely. Who would think that this wealthy immigrant businesswoman and a demon-possessed slave girl and a Roman jailer would be the people that Luke would want to write about, the people that join the Church of God.

But the snapshot that Luke gives us here shows us the wonder, really, of God at work. There are no unlikely converts from God's perspective. There's nobody that's unworthy of our time or of his time. These three are precious, each of them. And he sends the apostles all the way across the Aegean Sea just to reach them. God still works in that way through us, through his church, empowering the word and our witness by his spirit.

That leads us to our final point, which is God's witnesses. So, we've rightly held our attention on God's way and God's work so far.

But what does it mean for those of us who may be his witnesses, who are called to go and share the good news about Jesus? Well, when we catch up with Paul and his fellow missionaries at the end of this, well, they've been beaten and jailed.

[11 : 04] They're in trouble for disrupting the slave owner's business model that was going really well for them. Surely, they are in pain. Surely, they are...

I don't know. What would you be feeling? But we find them, instead of what you might expect or what I expected, we find them praying and singing in this jail cell. And the prisoners and the jailer are just looking on in astonishment.

They're like, what is happening right now? And then all of a sudden, there's this earthquake, which is obviously God's work. It's not a coincidence because, I mean, imagine an earthquake that doesn't just kill everyone, but just pops open all of the jail doors and opens all of the shackles that they're wearing.

And this is what happens. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

But Paul cried out with a loud voice, do not harm yourself, for we are all here. What are they doing there? That's my question. I mean, put yourself in this situation.

[12 : 13] I would have been like, guys, God has staged a jailbreak. My dudes, get your sandals. We are out of here. But honestly, think about what this tells you about the character of Christian witness that they're displaying here.

What it means is that they're not sitting in jail, stressing out about their mission. They're not complaining about how hostile of a mission field Philippi is.

They're not moaning about their bruises. Instead, they find themselves in jail and they turn their attention to prayer and to praise. How do they do that? They do it because they have a living trust in Jesus.

They look back over the course of their life. They see that Jesus has led them here. He's led them all the way there. Jesus has empowered them in this work.

And so they come to the likely conclusion that Jesus is not going to leave them now. They trust that Jesus is with them, that Jesus is able, that he has a plan. So when they're in this jail cell, they're not fixating on escape.

[13 : 20] They're not thinking about whatever other anxieties. They have this conviction that this terrible situation that they face is actually in God's hands.

It's amazing to think that this place of true opportunity, the very place of opportunity, is what seems like the center of the storm, like the worst place that you could possibly be.

And it's only in Jesus, it's only if we're also in God's hands, that we can have this experience of peace and trust in situations like this. That's what it means to be a witness, friends. It's simply trust that we're caught up in a bigger story, that we are backed up by a God that is much, much bigger than a jail cell, that the good news about Jesus really is good news, no matter where you are or what you face.

And so when the jailer sees this, when he sees this happen in their lives, he comes to the conclusion that that's the thing that he wants as well. What must I do to be saved? I'd invite you to wrestle with this idea a bit this week.

[14 : 30] Maybe you are shaking the bars a bit. I know maybe we all have been over the last months. Maybe you're pacing the floor. What would happen if you were to lean back and say, Lord Jesus, this looks really bad, but I know that you are powerful and that you have a plan.

Let's see where this adventure leads. Let's see where this adventure leads.