

Day 7 : Acts 16:16-24 – Imprisoned

Prayerfully read: Mark 1

Understanding

Whilst in Philippi, Paul will be imprisoned for the first (recorded) time – coming to share in the experience that the Jerusalem apostles had had (chapters 4 and 5).

The pagans of Philippi had a strong belief in spirits who were able to tell the future. In the case of the demon-possessed girl here, it is clear that it was not any supposed ability and/or accuracy in telling the future which her masters valued her for – but for the money which she brought them. Had they taken her word and obeyed it, they would have acted quite differently towards Paul and Silas!

It is not clear how the girl's saying would have been understood – it is possible that it can be understood as still pagan: God is acknowledged as one among many, and Jesus is literally said to show *a* way of salvation. In any case, Paul knew that the gospel was not honoured by such testimonies, and used his apostolic power to command the spirit to depart from her.

Paul and Silas were imprisoned, but the charges were lies – the real motive was money (v19). Paul and Silas were themselves Romans (v37), but it seems that in the furore there was no opportunity for them to protest. They were beaten, and then thrown into prison – without even their open wounds being washed. The masters of the slave girl appealed to national pride and dislike of Jews. In this incident, as in many in Acts, Luke shows that in fact the apostles were law-abiding and peaceful, whereas it was the *enemies* of the gospel who stirred up great strife and acted illegally.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The gospel is to be advanced in God's way. The Lord is not honoured through the use of any unbiblical means, no matter what good results there might seem to be or what arguments can be made for them.
- Many people reject the gospel but their true motives remain hidden – and will only be revealed at the last day (Luke 8:17).

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Ask the Lord to show you your motives in what you do. It is part of Christian maturity to suspect ourselves more and trust ourselves less!
- What does the passage show us about being willing to suffer for the gospel? How does it challenge our thinking?

The Acts Of The Apostles

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 11 (Chapter 15:1-16:24)

Grace Church Belper

<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk>

(For previous weeks' notes, visit
<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk/readingnotes.php>)

Day 1 : Acts 15:1-5 – Controversy!

Prayerfully read (above and): Galatians 2

Understanding

The gospel is now spreading amongst Gentiles – who are added to the church, but remain Gentiles. This is now happening to such a degree that the character of the church is changing. Luke will now tell us of a significant challenge which arose because of this. A new thing will now be recorded – controversy within the church. Luke will show us how controversies ought to be settled, and how the freedom of Gentiles in Christ was won.

As the chapter opens, we are with Paul, Barnabas and the church in Antioch – the church which was the launch-pad for the Gentile mission. Teachers come from Judea – where the mother church was – and teach (v1). Notice just what they teach: that without circumcision, there was no salvation. Verse 5 amplifies; Gentiles must both be circumcised and follow all the regulations of Moses which were given to Israel. In other words, Gentiles must become Jews if they would be saved.

Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed this new message. The false teachers, though, did not yield even to the apostle – presumably they questioned whether he really was so. The church, then, decided to send them and others to Jerusalem so that the matter could be decisively settled.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The church has never been free of false teaching – even false teaching so serious that it corrupts the very gospel itself and preaches untruths about the way of salvation. Paul and Barnabas did not seek to avoid confrontation or play down the differences, but identified the false teaching as something serious and to be completely opposed.
- The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is not negotiable, at any cost. It is too precious, because it alone reveals the way for men and women to be saved. There are two ways that we can ruin the gospel: we can take away from it (by saying that people can be saved without repentance or without faith in Christ), or by adding to it (by saying that people must have something more than only faith and repentance).

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- How precious do you hold the gospel – as shown by your thoughts, desires and conversations? How clear are you on what it teaches? If you were challenged, could you defend it – why would that be important?

Day 6 : Acts 16:11-15 – Lydia Converted

Understanding

Verse 12 says that Philippi was a colony – i.e. A Roman one. This explains the inhabitants' zeal for their citizenship that we see later on.

The minimum number of Jewish men for a synagogue was ten – it seems that Philippi did not have this many, so instead those who there were met by the river for prayer (v13). Maybe Paul wondered what God's purpose was in bringing him to such an unpromising place. But one woman there was Lydia, who seems to have been in charge over her own household – we are not told whether she was a widow or unmarried. She was a trader, importing purple from nearby Thyatira (v14).

Verse 14 tells us that Lydia believed – and also why she believed: the Lord “opened her heart”. When she was baptised (v15), she persuaded the apostles to stay at her house – no doubt she strongly desired to be taught much more!

Doctrines (Teachings)

- All of God's chosen ones are very precious in his sight. God does not look for crowds, but for individuals, and deals with each one of them personally (Luke 19:10).
- There was no synagogue, but instead the missionaries spoke to a few women by the riverside. We must use whatever opportunities God gives us, whether great or small. We might speak to a crowd and yet nobody believes – or we can speak to just one and the Lord might open their heart. Our responsibility is to use whatever opportunities the Lord gives us.
- When a person is converted, it is ultimately because the Lord has opened their heart, as he did with Lydia. It is not superior cleverness or education or skill or worthiness that commends us to God. Rather, God sovereignly grants mercy to those whom he chooses in his own grace, and grants them to see and understand the spiritual truths and realities which are hidden from the rest of mankind (1 Corinthians 2).

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Has your heart been opened to the gospel?
- What opportunities has the Lord given you, and how can they be faithfully used? What encouragements does this passage bring?

Day 5 : Acts 16:1-10 – Paul and Timothy

Prayerfully read: 1 Timothy 1

Understanding

Though Paul and Barnabas' separation was unfortunate, God in his sovereignty had a purpose to bring good out of it. Paul had lost the company of Barnabas and of John – but at Derbe and Lystra he came across Timothy, who would become a faithful companion and fellow-labourer, who Paul would in later years call his “own son in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2).

Timothy was the son of a converted Jewish woman (Eunice – 2 Tim 1:5), and hence counted as a Jew – but his Greek father had not permitted his circumcision. In chapter 15, Paul had strongly opposed the enforcing of circumcision upon Gentiles as necessary for salvation. However, he also knew that the work would encounter opposition and misunderstandings is he was accompanied by an uncircumcised Jew – so Timothy was circumcised.

Timothy now accompanied Paul as they visited the various cities and passed on the decision of the council at Jerusalem. Verse 5 is another verse in which Luke gives us a summary – the churches were consolidated in strength and growing rapidly in numbers. The fall-out between Paul and Barnabas was unfortunate; but the church continued to grow.

Paul and Timothy were lead across Asia (modern Turkey), but forbidden to preach there (v6) – God was going to reveal his purpose to them, to have the gospel preached in Europe (v6-10).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- Those who go out to mission work ought to be capable men – and their ability ought to be testified to by the believers who they have been amongst, as Timothy (v2).
- God is sovereign in missionary work and in the gospel's advance. In some places it is not yet his time for the gospel to advance; whilst in others it is. We do not have these things revealed to us in the same way that the apostles did; but we know that it is God's purpose for the whole world to hear about Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18-20).

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Are you moved by the countless numbers of those who need help because they are without the gospel?

Day 2 : Acts 15:6-21 – The Jerusalem Council

Prayerfully read: Amos 9

Understanding

At the council, many spoke – but eventually three significant voices were heard.

First, Peter reminded that the Gentile mission was not new, but had begun with him (Acts 10-12). God had clearly testified to the Gentiles' acceptance without circumcision. The Jews themselves had not been able to obey the law – so how could they demand it of the Gentiles? Peter and his fellow believing Jews were looking to Christ, not the law, for their salvation – how could they direct the Gentiles anywhere else?

Paul and Barnabas then recounted what had been done by God through them in their mission to the Gentiles. God had testified – who would dare to argue?

Then, James summarised. This is James the half-brother of Jesus who became a leader in the Jerusalem church - not James the (beheaded) apostle. James pointed out that Scripture taught the inclusion of Gentiles within God's people. James' use of Amos' prophecy is interesting – his inspired interpretation of the rebuilding of the tabernacle was not literal, but through the growth of the Christian church. Those who use the Old Testament as the basis for predictions of any literal restoration of national Israel are wrong, because the Bible itself does not interpret this way.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- It has always been God's plan for Jews and Gentiles to be both part of his people, through faith in Christ – not on the grounds of their deserving obedience.
- The Old Testament prophecies this, sometimes using imagery which should not be interpreted literally. The correct way to interpret the Old Testament prophecies is how the early church did – understanding them as speaking of Christ and his church.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Do you read the Old Testament? You should, because it is full of encouraging views of Christ and the church! It is not easy to understand at first, but God rewards our trusting, persevering efforts. If you began reading through and your bookmark has got “stuck”, then keep going!

Day 3 : Acts 15:18-29 – Jerusalem Council

Prayerfully read: 1 Corinthians 8

Understanding

Circumcision was not to be required – but the council did set down four things to require of the Gentiles (v20, 29): that they should avoid meat which had been offered to idols, or obtained from a strangled animal, or contained blood – and they should avoid sexual immorality. This mixture of things has often puzzled Bible readers. The two most likely answers are: 1) These things would especially enrage Jewish sensitivities and they should be avoided for the sake of peace within the church family – this is suggested by verse 21. 2) These four things were especially associated with paganism and idolatrous pagan worship, and the instruction is basically stating that whilst Gentiles do not need to become Jews, they cannot remain as pagans. In any case, the prohibitions were not intended to be universal or permanent – the reason given in verse 21 no longer applies, and Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 8 show that the prohibition was not in force any more.

The church sent some of its own members to Antioch, with Paul and Barnabas, together with a letter to explain their decision. They clearly distanced themselves from the unauthorised false teachers (v24), and asserted that circumcision and attention to the Jewish laws were not binding (v24). This passage introduces us to Silas (v22, 27), who will accompany Paul on his next missionary journey and is named in other New Testament letters (e.g. 1 Thess. 1:1, 2 Cor 1:19).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The Christian does not relate to God through the law, but only through faith in Christ. He is entirely free from the fear that he may fall short and lose his standing with God, because this is already secured forever by Christ.
- The Christian's freedom must be used carefully. It gives us no freedom to commit sin (because we are the servants of Christ); neither must we use our freedom in such a way as will cause other Christians to stumble.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Do you know what your Christian freedom does and doesn't include? Can you describe in your own words the main principles? Are you thankful for it?

Day 4 : Acts 15:30-41 – After The Council

Prayerfully read: Acts 12:25-13:13

Understanding

Paul and Barnabas, with their companions from Jerusalem, returned north to Antioch (in Syria). The letter caused much rejoicing and encouragement – the gospel which they had embraced and which had saved them had been vindicated! The church had overcome its first major controversy. Paul and Barnabas continued to teach and preach in the church.

Some time later, they decided to make another missionary journey, to see how the churches were doing (v36). This marks the start of Paul's second missionary journey – if you have a map in the back of your Bible you should look this up.

However, Barnabas was determined to bring John Mark (his nephew) on the journey – John Mark who had previously deserted them on the first journey (v37-38). Paul opposed him, and Barnabas was not willing to compromise even with an apostle, and they had to go separate ways (Barnabas over sea to Cyprus, and Paul over land through Syria). Verse 40 makes clear that it was Paul who went with the church's support. After this incident, we do not hear of Barnabas again – but we do hear of Mark, who came to work with Paul again, showing that the breach was healed and that Paul later judged Mark ready again after his previous fall.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- Sadly, even godly and gifted believers do not always see eye to eye. We cannot expect to fully agree with each other until eternity. Nevertheless, we are commanded to always be “endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:3). Divisions amongst us over non-essential things dishonour the Saviour.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Have you ever been, as Barnabas, “determined” to do something, regardless of the opposition and of the consequences? Being a very gifted, mature and used believer did not stop Barnabas from being led away by his self-will. Is there any course you are presently set upon that is not according to the Lord's will revealed in the Bible?