

Part 30: God's Leading to Life

Tyler Velin | Acts 16:6-15

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I recently booked a flight and was able to reserve a seat in the emergency exit row. Being a generally oversized person, I love the exit row. But if you've ever traveled, you know there's a catch to the extra space. They ask you a question to which you have to give an answer: "Are you willing and able to assist in the evacuation of the plane in the event of an emergency?"

Notice how it can't just be one or the other. If someone is willing to assist, but lacks the power to do it--then they are not worthy of that seat. If someone is powerful and capable enough to assist, but unwilling, they too are not worthy of the seat.

It's a lot easier to find someone willing and able to find agree to such responsibility in an exit row than it is in real life. The question itself is actually weighty—"Are you willing and able to work for the well-being and salvation of others when things get intense." Yet, we easily agree to it because airline travel is relatively safe—the odds of being needed is rare. Moreover, it's really a glorified opening of a door.

But finding someone willing and able to assist in other areas of life is more difficult. There are many people able to help pay off debt, to fund a clinical trial, or to fix your car—but are they willing. Moreover, I'm more than willing to protect my family even if it means laying down my own life. But the truth is—my ability is lacking. I'm limited—if only by death itself.

These contradictions can make us guarded. We've been let down by others. We've seen empty promises and unconcerned affections.

Maybe that's how you view God? Maybe you view him as loving, like a good dog. He's always eager to see you—he'll never leave you. But really, what good is he beyond someone who brings us some occasional emotional support. Or maybe you know God is powerful, but you wonder if he has any interest in helping you. Maybe he enjoys the extra legroom of divinity—but could care less about helping others.

If that's how we view God, then we will search endlessly to find someone or something that seems more trustworthy and capable—someone else more worthy of that role. And the cycle seems to continue on and on. We run to hope until we find it either unwilling, or unable. But our passage today shows us that God alone is willing and able to save.

Last week we saw Paul and his missionary companions arrive in Philippi—the leading district of Macedonia. Philippi was a prestigious town and had been awarded a special status by Rome, *ius italicum*. But what we see today is that in the leading city—God is leading people to himself. There's a new king in town—and his is granting his people the salvation they desperately need.

Our main point this morning is simple, **God alone is willing and able to save**. My prayer this morning is that you would see that and be changed by that.

In our three stories of salvation today Luke wants all of us to see three things: **God's work, God's power,** and lastly **God's salvation.**

As Paul arrived in Europe—he used was consistent to proclaiming the same gospel in the same way. But in this new culture he couldn't immediately find a synagogue—but they heard there was a Jewish prayer gathering outside the city. This is where we pick up the story: **Acts 16:13-15**, "And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purpose goods who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay,' And she prevailed upon us."

Here we see our first point this morning: **God's work.**

Here we read of the conversion of a woman named Lydia who is in Philippi—but is from the town of Thyatira. This is important because Thyatira was one of the towns Paul would have certainly visited last week when he tried to go into Asia. But you'll remember Paul was prohibited from entering the area by the Holy Spirit.

Yet notice how God's plans are always bigger than our plans. God is a better missionary that we are. Instead of bringing Paul to Thyatira in Asia, he brought a business woman from Thyatira to Paul in Philippi. When we follow God's will, we find that he often brings us into a greater field of purpose and evangelism than we ever dreamed.

This story reminds me of Robert Jermain Thomas. Thomas was a Welsh Missionary who was convinced he would go to China. In fact he's quoted as saying, "It is my duty to go to China." He felt this was God's urging. However, when he arrived in China, the door to ministry was quickly shut there. Dejected he took a job as a customs agent—which is where he heard two Christians from Korea sharing about the need for ministers amidst the persecution in Korea, or what was then called, "The Hermit Kingdom." It was through a difficult encounter in China, a conversation overheard at work, and a U.S. trading vessel that Thomas then went to Korea where he is still largely revered by Koreans as their father in the faith.

God is working right now—and he's using his faithful messengers to bring good news to new people in new places.

Lydia, was not unfamiliar with the God of the Bible—but her response to Paul's message showed she herself was not a Christian. She's a Gentile "worshipper of God," but she was neither fully a convert to Judaism—nor was she yet a convert of Christ.

It's important to notice these things because, on a surface level, Lydia was crushing it. It appears she was a single woman, doing well in her trade, eager to worship the God of the Bible, consistent in attending prayer groups on the Sabbath. But there's a big problem isn't there? What is that problem? She's unconverted. She's not saved.

Acts records a unique time of transition where there were those who hoped in God's promise to save from the Old Testament, but who didn't hear that God had sent Jesus as the fulfillment of those promises. But, what we've seen so far in the book of Acts is the promise of God is only redeemed when

we come to faith in Jesus Christ. If you want to know God's work to save—you must know it in Jesus Christ.

While we live in a different time of history these problems often remain. It's all too easy, like Lydia to assume we are pleasing God and our life is going along quite well. We attend church, we are inclined to hospitality, we are doing well in work, life is good. But God would have you see his salvation and his goodness in one place—faith in Jesus Christ.

And how does God bring someone to that saving work?

First, it's through the preaching of that message. The message of Paul and his friends was made clear last week when they said, (**Acts 16:10**), "that God had called us to preach the gospel to the Macedonians." God wakes up those who are close—but not yet Christian—when faithful Christians are dedicated to preaching the gospel with clarity. Just because people might know God, and enjoy religious things—does not mean they know God through the gospel. To get people to the God of the Bible we must point them to the exclusive place where God works to save: faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, the gospel must not only be preached, it must be truly heard. Notice how verse **14** says, introduces Lydia as one who "heard" the preaching and she "paid attention to what was said by Paul." It's one thing to "hear" the gospel—the gospel is the good news that Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us to God. You all just heard it. But, Lydia not only heard it—she heard it in that she urgently accepted it.

Think of it this way: Imagine a track and field event. Everyone in the stadium is going to hear the sound of the gun go off when the race begins. But those sprinters on the block, they are paying attention to that sound in a unique way—their ears are almost hurting as they strain to hear and respond to that gun as quickly as possible. To hear the gospel and pay attention to it implies that we hear the gospel with such a desire as an Olympic sprinter.

But notice what Luke draws our attention to in specific. God saves by bringing the message of the gospel to the ears of the lost by the mouths of the found. But the gospel is not mere information accepted by human reason. Belief itself, acceptance, and therefore salvation is entirely the work of God. Look at how Paul put that in verse **14**, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul."

This might be the most boring salvation story in all of Scripture: Lady goes to church and believes in Jesus. I pray that's what our own stories look like. But notice how behind the ordinary process is God's work. God brought Paul and Lydia to Philippi, God put the preaching of the gospel into Paul's heart, and as Paul opened his mouth—and Lydia opened her ears, God opened her heart.

God must open not only the mouth of the preacher and the ear of the audience, but the heart of the believer. And when God does this—like Lydia we run to receive it by faith. It is irresistible and incredible. While God must work—God works through the ears of those who hear. Have you paid attention to the gospel like this?

Dear believer, I wonder if you marvel at this reality in your own heart. While our external circumstances vary—it is the work of God alone that brings us to saving faith. People shared the gospel with you because they loved you—but behind all of that motion was the God who orchestrated it all because he loves you more. Salvation is the work of God because God works to save.

This doctrine of sovereignty and election might sound difficult to some—but let this next passage open our eyes to our great need for it. **Acts 16:16-18**, "As we were going to place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour."

Here we see our second point this morning: **Our hearts and the power of God.**

Now, what does it mean here that Paul “became annoyed” with this girl. It doesn’t mean that Paul, like an irritated parent, spoke harshly because he was irritated for his own comfort. Instead, the word expresses a burden and a disturbance at the ongoing darkness this girl was living in.

When we read narratives like Acts, we must not forget we are reading history. And the history of this girl should break our hearts. What do we know about her? We know she is a slave. Moreover she is owned by multiple owners, most likely men. We also know she is not merely a slave—she is a slave girl. The title would imply she couldn’t be older than a teenager. We also know that she is oppressed by an evil Spirit. The word Luke uses describes the sound some of these afflicted people would make when they were in a fit of oppression. It would cause them to hiss, and moan, and whisper. We also know that when she was in the fit of oppression—he masters would force her to “perform” for money. The unintelligible ramblings she gave were sold as a kind of dark fortune cookie to any who would buy them. Day after day, no one sought her benefit, no one cared for her, but instead she was spiritually oppressed, financially extorted and physically enslaved.

But one day, Paul overwhelmed with the mocking announcements of the spirit, spoke to the spirit and delivered the girl in the name of Jesus Christ. And immediately the girl was free. Can you imagine that experience? Her freedom was so visible that her owners were distraught because she could no longer work for them. In fact Luke uses a play on words in verses 18-19—just as spirit went out of her, the hope of gain went out of their owners.

Now, here's why it's important to hold Lydia and this slave girl together. No one reads this story of deliverance from spiritual oppression and turmoil and says, "How dare God remove that spirit from her? How offensive that he would violate her freedom in such a way to free her like that?"

That's because when we see and understand true oppression--we cheer when the hero shows up, breaks open the doors, sets the captives free and liberates us. This story is important because it shows how dire our circumstance is and how even though we might feel like Lydia, we are all the slave girl. All sin is slavery that must be broken by the power of God.

That's not to say all of us are possessed in the same way this girl was. This is unique. But consider how Paul describes God’s work in **Romans 6:17**, “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching which you were committed.” The message of the gospel sets us free from slavery to sin and frees us to live for Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, we sit not merely in unwillingness--we sit under the power of darkness. Satan has his claws deep into our souls and if you think you can negotiate with him--you're a fool. While this woman's pain was clear--Satan often works more effectively through pleasure. The chains of spiritual

slavery are often lined with memory foam. It feels good, we feel safe, we feel comfortable and yet we are enslaved, subjected to the will of another.

To illustrate this, let's read on. **Acts 16:19-21**, "But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, 'These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate for customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.' The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods."

Who is enslaved in this passage? Who holds the power? The power of God beings to reveal the slavery of sin. These men though they were the owners of the girl—but they were dependent upon her. They were enslaved to her. And when she was freed—this came to a head. Their slavery to sin blinded their hearts to humanity—they could not rejoice in her deliverance—but instead feared its ramifications. Instead of joy—they saw fear. Instead of freedom—they saw ruin. So they trumped up lies regarding the message of the apostles and stirred up a crowd hoping to take back by force what had just occurred by grace.

God's power to save is a threat to all other ways of salvation. God's salvation shows the emptiness of all of our other hopes. His power shows us how powerless other things are. And unless we see that as good—we will respond in hostility.

When we hear that God saves us by grace from sin—that we might not sin—we might like these men misinterpret that salvation. If sin, if worldly treasures, satisfy us then the gospel will terrify us. I wonder if you've ever had an experience like that? We see that God calls us to trust in him, not in our wealth, or in our relationships, or in our family—but we recoil and cling to sin like Gollum cradles his precious ring. But as we will see later on—those who run to worldly hopes are all too easily crushed by worldly hopes. Those idols have a power to enslave—but never to save.

We must see true salvation, and that's what we see in our next point: **Our hearts and God's salvation.**

Acts 16:23-27, "And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to god, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's bonds were unfastened. 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."

Now, put yourself in Paul's shoes. You had just had fake charges mocked up against you, you were just the subject to unjust legal treatment, you were stripped in an act of humiliation, beaten with rods, and thrown into prison, and bound in stocks which was designed to be the most uncomfortable way of storing criminals.

And then, God so worked to cause an earthquake which opened the doors and loosed the shackles. But there's one problem. The Jailer. Given Philippi's history—it's likely that this jailer is a retired military officer. He's trained in combat—and he knows the rule of Rome which is this: "If you lose a prisoner, you lose your life." Paul knows what stands between him and freedom is retired Rambo.

But then he sees the guy draw his sword—his persecutor, his problem—is going to kill himself because he assumes all the prisoners already escaped. What would you do in that instance? What do you think the crowd outside would do in that instance?

But notice how a heart changed by the gospel views people differently and how a heart saved by grace lives for the salvation of others. **Acts 16:28-30**, “But Paul cried with a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’ And the jailer called for lights and rushed in and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’”

Just as before I asked the question—who was really enslaved—here I ask who was really saved? And how? What grabs our eyes in this story are the prisoners set free from chains and bars—but by the time morning comes around—they are all still in jail! This isn’t a story of how God set men in physical prison free. This is a story of how God saved a Philippian jailer. And pay attention to the order of events. It is only after he finds out all the prisoners are safe that he runs to Paul in fear and says, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” God often uses the terrors of life to reveal to us the greater terror of sin.

Don’t miss the irony of this timing. This man feared Rome, he feared it so much that he was willing to take his life in order to be spared. But as soon as he found out Rome would be fine with him—he realized he stood under a greater condemnation. Saved from Rome—and yet not yet saved. He didn’t know how—he didn’t know where—but he knew—perhaps through the mocking message of the spirit—these men knew the way of salvation.

Ed Moore, who is coming here to preach in May, once shared a story of the janitor at his church growing up. Ed described the closing of every church service as a time when there would be an “invitation” to salvation. What he witnessed was it as a time where people would come forward, shake the pastors hand with a dignified affirmation, and then go on their way. The janitor who cleaned the facility was not a believer, but he would often overhear sermons as he passed by in the hall. One day, the “invitation” came, and without dignity, without self-control, without social awareness the janitor ran to the front of the church and cried in a loud voice, “God have mercy on me!”

When we realize the weight of our sin, the offense it is to the God of the universe, and the penalty we would stand under eternally—come like this jailer to Paul, and like that janitor to his pastor. We don’t inquire—we implore. Do you realize this? Do you realize that if you are to be saved it cannot come from a human court, a cancer drug, or a day at the lake? To be saved—saved truly, ultimately, you must be saved from God’s wrath. And this story, the whole gospel story shows the beauty of the gospel as this: That those who need salvation *from* God are also saved *by* God. God is willing and able to save.

And how does God save? **Acts 16:31-34**, “And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household.’ And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.”

Sometimes God leads us to the gospel with gentility into eager acceptance like Lydia. But sometimes the gospel comes like a wrecking ball of desperation. But the gospel always leads us to Jesus. As the old hymn says, “Some through the water, some through the flood, some through the fire, but all through the blood.”

Have you come to Jesus for salvation? Do you rejoice that you have been granted belief in God! Or do you find yourself turning back to the worldly promises of salvation again and again. But notice how it was the slave girl who was the most free, it was the men in the stocks who sang, it was the failing jailer who was delivered. Meanwhile those who looked to worldly gain were characterized by anxious fear of loss.

Remember, the mob appealed to Roman law and their desire to protect it in order to subject Paul to prison. But notice how the very source of power they appealed to for their salvation became to them the very weight of hopelessness. **Acts 16:35-40**, "But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, 'Let those men go.' And the jailer reported these words to Paul saying, 'The magistrates have sent you to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace.' But Paul said to them, 'They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.' The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed."

What's the problem here? Do you see the inversion? They hoped an appeal to Rome would bring them peace. But in appealing to Rome, they actually found themselves under Rome's wrath. You see because Paul was a Roman citizen, and because of Philippi's privileged history—it was considered Rome itself and all its citizens had the privileges of Rome in full. It was illegal to beat and imprison any Roman citizen without a due trial. A violation of this would have been a scandalous outrage.

And yet to find relief—they found themselves fearfully condemned. Rome was able to save them—but they knew that if Paul wrote his senator—Rome would not be willing.

There is a phrase Paul could have said when all this began, "Civis Romanus Sum." Which means, "I am a Roman citizen." He could have boasted in that for his salvation—but for reasons we don't know—he didn't. He would not be wrong for having done it, and he will do it later on. But the result of his restraint is two-fold.

First, it produced conversion in the house of the jailer. And second, it shows us that there is a greater name to boast in than that of Rome. There is a name we can boast in which will not ultimately put us to shame. And that is the name of Jesus Christ. May this passage call the lost to that message, and may this passage call the believer to consider where we might functionally doubt the saving grace of Jesus.

Might we say with Paul, "For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."