



Acts: The Church Unleashed- Session 10

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Introduction

Share a people watching story from your life. What intrigues us about people watching? To what extent can you know someone just by watching them?

When you people watch—either in person or online—one thing that you will notice is that there are so many different people in this world, and every one of them has a unique story. And every one of them puts their hope in something and finds their meaning in something. For some it's their family. For others it's work, wealth, or fame. And still for some it's religion that's all about doing, works, and self-righteousness. The truth is while everyone is different in so many ways, we are all the exact same in other ways. We are all loved by God and need the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One of our measures at New Vision is that we want to ask ourselves: *who is someone that is far from God but close to me?* This question is meant to encourage us to think about the people that God has placed around our lives every day that we can share the gospel with in our lives and through our testimony.

When you think about people that surround you, what do they put their hope in? What do they see as their redemption and purpose in life?

Transition: In this session, you will meet three different people who each had a unique encounter with the gospel and were changed. In these three encounters, you will recognize that God uses different methods to reach different kinds of people. For example, in Philippi, Paul and Silas saw converts from different social and economic backgrounds come to faith through their witness and testimony, even though the guts of their message was the same for all: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

1. The Spiritually Interested. Acts 16:11-15

Have a volunteer to read Acts 16:11-15.

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, the next day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, a Roman colony and a leading city of the district of Macedonia. We stayed in that city for several days. ¹³ On the Sabbath day we went outside the city gate by the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and spoke to the women gathered there. ¹⁴ A God-

fearing woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, was listening. The Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying. ¹⁵After she and her household were baptized, she urged us, “If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

What is the context of these verses?

In the verses preceding these, we see that the disciples were forbidden by the Holy Spirit from speaking the gospel in Asia and from even entering the region of Bithynia (16:6-7). But soon thereafter, Paul received a vision in which a Macedonian man was standing and pleading with him to come and help them (v. 9). It was because of this vision that the disciples set sail and ended up in Macedonia (v. 10). God had a plan for them, and He was going to accomplish His will.

The disciples entered the area with high expectations. They were called with God to go to this area and begin to minister. However, after a few days in the city, they didn't experience any dramatic signs, miracles, or conversions. Perhaps they had heard wrong? Perhaps the vision they had received was made up, the invention of an overactive imagination? Who knows the myriad of thoughts that must have been going through their heads?

Once again, we see that Paul and the others were not deterred. They may have been anticipating an amazing work of God when they were called to Philippi, but they couldn't even find a synagogue in the city. Many of us may have found that as an excuse to pick up and move on and find “more fertile ground,” but Paul and his companions didn't. And so, they sat down and talked with a group of women who also didn't let the excuse of no synagogue in their city prevent them from gathering and praying.

In your personal experience, was there ever a time that you planned a trip or party and things didn't go as planned? What were the causes of the issues? What did you learn from your experience?

Have you ever planned a ministry event or mission trip and you encountered opposition and were unable to fulfill your plan? Why do we question God's plan when opposition arises? How did you see God working through that time to providentially guide the situation?

Who is Lydia?

Lydia is described as a dealer in goods dyed purple, a likely occupation since Thyatira was indeed a center of the purple dye trade. Lydia's business is not an incidental detail. It marks her as a person of means. Purple goods were expensive and often associated with royalty; thus the business was a lucrative one. Lydia's invitation to the four missionaries to stay in her home in itself indicates that she had considerable substance, such as guest rooms and servants to accommodate them adequately.

Women like Lydia were particularly prominent in Paul's missionary efforts in this portion of Acts—the women of Thessalonica (17:4) and of Berea (17:12), Damaris in Athens (17:34), and Priscilla in Corinth (18:2). Priscilla and Lydia took an active role in the ministry of their churches. This was in part due to the more elevated status of women in the contemporary Greek and Roman society. This was particularly true in the first century when women were given a number of legal privileges such as initiating divorce, signing legal documents, even holding honorary public titles.

The prominent role of the women in Acts is perhaps due even more to the message Paul brought them: “In Christ Jesus, there is neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28).

Lydia was a “worshiper of God” (16:14), one of those devout Gentiles like Cornelius who believed in God but had not become a full convert to Judaism. There was an extensive Jewish community at Thyatira, and she had perhaps first come to her faith in God there. (New American Commentary)

What happened to Lydia?

The Lord opened up this businesswoman’s heart and she accepted the gospel. Then her entire household was baptized. The disciples were then invited to stay with her at her house. This was providential because later on we read that after Paul and Silas were imprisoned and then released from jail, they went straight to Lydia’s house, where they saw and encouraged the brothers and sisters in the faith before departing the city (Acts 16:40).

A great point to see in this is how Paul did not assume that just because Lydia had wealth that she had a relationship with Christ. This example tells us that we should have an attitude to ask every one of their relationship with Christ. We should not assume, but ask.

Lydia did not just hear the gospel and walk away. Rather, God used her to minister to and bless the disciples. The gospel gripped her heart and changed her.

In this passage, we discover that God does not *only* care about the large miraculous events. Nor does he *only* care about the masses. God cares about the smallest of details, and He is deeply involved in the lives of everyone—one person at a time—and so should we be. It is tempting for us to want to be used by God in seeing a large group of people come to Christ or to teach large groups of people, and there’s nothing wrong with that. However, we also need to look for that one person, who may even be easy to look past, who is ready to hear and respond to the gospel.

When you think about your business or the place that you work, what are measures of success? (More profits, more products sold, more market saturation, etc.) Have you ever been guilty of thinking that financial success is the same as spiritual success? How can we have an attitude to ask?

When we think about success in the church, we can think it’s only about getting a large crowd together instead of seeing the impact made by the power of the gospel. Why is it in the church so easy to value ministry to the masses over ministry to the individual? In what ways are we to value both the ministry to the masses and the individual?

Transition: In this next section, we encounter a slave girl who had a *special* gift—the ability to predict fortunes. As a result, she was probably on the receiving end of a lot of people watching in those days. Here we’ll see our need always to be ready to provide freedom in Christ.

2. The Spiritually Captive. Acts 16:16-18

Have a volunteer to read Acts 16:16-18.

16 Once, as we were on our way to prayer, a slave girl met us who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She made a large profit for her owners by fortune-telling. 17 As she followed Paul and she cried out, “These men, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God.” 18 She did this for many days.

Paul was greatly annoyed. Turning to the spirit, he said, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!” And it came out right away.

What is happening in these verses?

Paul exercised the authority that he had in Jesus and commanded the spirit to leave that girl. Instead of celebrating that this slave girl was set free, her owners got angry because their hope for profit out of her was gone. Their source of income had been cast out along with the evil spirit. So, her owners dragged Paul and Silas before the city leaders and leveled several charges against them, hoping something would stick.

How is Lydia and the slave girl different?

Lydia was a business owner who probably had significant financial means. She was a committed worshiper of God who was probably open and eager to hear about Jesus. It was probably easy for Paul to step into her life with the gospel.

The slave girl, on the other hand, had nothing, not even her freedom. She was not a worshiper of God and probably wasn't even looking for Him. While this girl no doubt received her fair share of attention in public, she probably frightened most people away from her.

How did Lydia and the slave-girl compare with one another?

Two very different people with the very same need—deliverance through Jesus. The slave girl reminds us of our need not to count anyone out and always to be ready to be used by God to meet their needs, no matter what they may be.

What are the signs of people that are spiritually captive? In our culture today, what are ways that you see people “enslaved” by their own desires? (Addictions, desire for power, financial, desire for popularity) In what ways are people “enslaved” spiritually?

What does freedom from such enslavement look like? How did the gospel “break every chain” in your life? How can you use your personal experience to be a testimony to someone else that is enslaved and needs hope?

If you have specific needs where you need to discuss with someone, please check out the Care Ministry at the www.newvisionlife.com

The truth that this passage shows is that there is power in the name of Jesus! It's not a power to make us healthier or richer, it's a power that sets us free from sin in our lives no matter where we are in our lives. Read these verses to see how the Scriptures affirm the promises and power of Jesus: John 14:13-14, Luke 10:17, Acts 4:29-30.

Transition: In this last section, we see the importance of faithfulness and being ready to share the gospel in every situation and circumstance, to whomever God places before you. Here we must strike the balance of always being “ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15) while trusting that “the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what must be said” (Luke 12:12).

3. The Spiritually Skeptic. Acts 16:19-34.

Have a volunteer to read Acts 16:19-34.

¹⁹ When her owners realized that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities. ²⁰Bringing

them before the chief magistrates, they said, “These men are seriously disturbing our city. They are Jews ²¹ and are promoting customs that are not legal for us as Romans to adopt or practice.” ²² The crowd joined in the attack against them, and the chief magistrates stripped off their clothes and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had severely flogged them, they threw them in jail, ordering the jailer to guard them carefully. ²⁴ Receiving such an order, he put them into the inner prison and secured their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains came loose. ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the doors of the prison standing open, he drew his sword and was going to kill himself, since he thought the prisoners had escaped.

²⁸ But Paul called out in a loud voice, “Don’t harm yourself, because we’re all here!”

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He escorted them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

³¹ They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house. ³³ He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴ He brought them into his house, set a meal before them, and rejoiced because he had come to believe in God with his entire household.

Sometimes God will use large, loud, and uncanny circumstances to get our attention. In fact, for some, it’s only through experiencing circumstances like these that our hearts become postured in a place to re-examine our long-held beliefs and convictions.

What happened?

Pastor Brady says that Paul realized how the earthquake was not for them but for the jailer. In this case, when the jailer woke up and saw that the doors of the prison were open, he thought his life was over. He was asleep on the job and thought all the prisoners had escaped. Roman jailers were personally responsible for their prisoners and could be executed for allowing them to escape. The jailer was in a way planning to take his life because he knew his life was to be lost because of thinking the prisoners had escaped. However, unbeknownst to him, no one left. Everyone stayed put.

How do we look at the trials of our lives to see how God desires to use them to share the gospel?

How did the jailer respond?

When the jailer realized that no one had escaped, something happened in his heart and he realized that there really was a God and that Paul and Silas knew this God! Perhaps the jailer had heard Paul and Silas preaching in the city before this. Perhaps it was seeing them live selflessly and not try to escape when given the opportunity. Perhaps it was their concern for his life, or maybe it was that he fell asleep listening to worship songs ringing in his ears. Whatever it was that prompted him, we know that God was at work, and Paul and Silas were prepared to respond. Furthermore, think as well of how the jailer sought to clean the wounds that he had

created. How is that true in our lives of how Jesus through the cross and resurrection cleansed the wound of our sin.

In your experience, when was a time that you had to be prepared to respond at a moment's notice (in a game, in your work, a military experience, etc.)? How do we see Paul and Silas demonstrate the ability to be ready at a moment's notice to share the gospel? In your life, what would need to change to have this same type of attitude and preparation?

Application

It's important that we be ready and willing to share the gospel with anyone around us at any time. The gospel crosses over all divisions and barriers that man has established—culture, ethnicity, socio-economics, politics, and more—and so should our love and compassion.

Think about the people that are within your life's influence and connection. How can you leverage your life to share the gospel with them? What is one action that you can take this week to help them see Christ in your more clearly?

Pray for an opportunity to share the gospel with them—to preach the same message that Paul preached and that we all need: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

Quotes/Commentary

Acts 16:11-15

"As Paul and his friends spoke, Lydia believed what they said and acknowledged Jesus as Lord. She thus became Paul's first convert in Europe. When she was baptized, together with her household (which would include her servants and other dependents as well as her family), she gave practical proof of her faith by pressing the four missionaries to become her guests. Women in Macedonia were noted for their independence; moreover, under Roman law (which governed life in the colony) freeborn women with three children and freedwomen with four children were at this time granted a number of privileges, including the right to undertake legal transactions on their own initiative."³ –F. F. Bruce

Acts 16:16-24

"The second part of the story takes us out of the world of Judaism into contact with the popular superstition of the Hellenistic world. On one of Paul's visits 'to the place of prayer,' he and his companions were met by a slave girl who had the gift of second sight and made money for her owners by telling fortunes. Her gift is attributed by Luke to 'a spirit of divination,' literally 'a spirit, a Python.' The latter word originally meant a snake, and in particular the snake which guarded the celebrated oracle at Delphi and which was said to have been slain by Apollo. The word was also used to mean a ventriloquist. Ventriloquists acted as fortune-tellers, the unusual character of the sounds which they produced no doubt having a numinous effect; they were probably thought to be inhabited by a demon. In the present case the girl presumably spoke like a ventriloquist and had the gift of clairvoyance, and therefore Luke has described her as having a spirit (i.e. an evil spirit), namely one capable of ventriloquism."⁶ –I. Howard Marshall

Acts 16:25-34

"Paul and Silas do not tell the jailer to clean up his life. They do not exhort him to forsake any particular sin. They do not tell him to *do* anything. Rather: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you

will be saved, you and your household' (v. 31). Trusting faith in Christ, apart from anything we bring to the table, is all that is required to be saved from what we rightly deserve: condemnation and hell. This is the promise of grace to us, as individuals, and it extends to our households as well."¹⁰ –Justin S. Holcomb