

Acts 15:35-16:15

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[0 : 0 0] We're in Acts chapter 15, the end. And we're going to try and keep going with big chunks. And we're going to do the whole of chapter 16. I love, and I'm sure you do adventure stories.

! And chapters 15 to 20 are full of adventure stories for the gospel. Adventure stories for the gospel. What does the gospel mean?

The gospel is the good news of what Jesus has come to do. The gospel is that Jesus came into this world to die on the cross for sin.

And those early followers of the Lord Jesus, they believed and they saw that Jesus had not only died, but he'd risen from the dead. It transformed their lives so much that they were willing to give up everything.

And to go out and to proclaim this message of good news. That there was hope. There was hope in the face of guilt. There was hope in the face of death.

[1 : 0 4] There was the hope of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. And on the journey that we're going to trace over these next few weeks, through these chapters, we're going to see that these early followers of Jesus are reaching out to people who believed many, many different things.

Christians came from various diverse socioeconomic groups. These city centers, people who were educated and non-educated, they reached diverse people.

There were philosophers. There were those who had nothing. And we see that as Christians were reaching out to these cities and these cultures, time and again, people opposed them.

Today we're going to see Romans who were really concerned that these preachers of the good news were damaging Roman values. The Apostle Paul, he had this relentless passion to share the gospel with others.

And yet we'll also see alongside that relentless passion is the hand of God at work as well. We'll see how the gospel expands and moves outwards in this amazing way.

[2 : 1 5] It will remind us that God is at work in his world. And he was doing that then and he's doing that today. Through struggling people. Fragile, frail people.

Like you and I. And so this is the second missionary journey. I'm going to divide the section into three. We're going to see the new journey. Chapter 15, verse 36 to 16, verse 5.

And then we're going to see the new journey expands from verses 6 to 12. And then we're going to see at the end of chapter 16, the new journey meets fruitfulness and hardship.

Beautiful poetic points for you. All right? So first of all, the new journey. The theme of the section in many ways is summarized in Acts 16, verse 9.

If you want a summary verse. Sorry, not Acts 16, verse 9. Proverbs 16, verse 9. Do you know what that verse says? It says this. Humans plan their course, but the Lord directs their steps.

[3 : 2 1] That in many ways is the summary of Acts, I think, 15, 16 to 20. Humans plan their course, but the Lord directs their steps. We plan, we take initiative, and yet we submit to the fact that it's God is the one who opens doors and closes doors.

So first of all, the new journey begins. Chapter 15, verse 36. It'll really help you to have a Bible open. And it begins with Paul's desire to go back and travel again.

To go back to the towns where he preached the word of the Lord. To see how they're doing. And Paul is referring to the towns and cities that he and Barnabas visited in that first missionary journey. In chapters 13 and 14, Antioch, Cyprus. What's today? Southern Turkey. Pisidian, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derby. And then back home. And Paul says, I want to go back around again.

And to see how they're doing. Verse 37. His sidekick, Barnabas, wants to take this young guy, John Mark. But Paul doesn't think it's a good idea.

[4 : 31] Because he says, John Mark is not reliable. He'd abandoned them. He'd left the first missionary journey in Pamphylia. We read about it in Acts 13. Maybe John thought this was too much.

There's lots of speculation as to why John left that first missionary journey. We don't know. But Paul saw it as desertion. He thought John Mark is too unreliable to take with us.

And so there's a difference of opinion. Can you see the word used? There's a sharp disagreement. Ouch. It leads to a parting of ways.

Paul and Barnabas cannot agree. So they agree to disagree. And they go their separate ways. This kind of thing happens today, doesn't it? It's strong-minded, determined Christians.

Who are working together. And a matter of opinion comes up. And they clash. There's a sharp disagreement. On what is the best course. If you ask any missionary.

[5 : 37] Who's worked outside their own culture. What is the most difficult thing about being in missions. I can guarantee you what they'll say. They will say.

Other missionaries. They will not say the people that they're trying to reach. They will not say adapting to another culture. They will say it's the problem.

I'm going to work with these people. And when these clashes are handled in a godly and an honest way. And amicable solutions for the good of the gospel can be found.

And they must be found. I think that's helpful to us, isn't it? In Christian work. In Christian work. As churches. Like ours.

Full of diverse people. There will be clashes. There may well be sharp disagreements. That's okay. If Paul and Barnabas had them. You and I are not as godly as they were.

[6 : 34] And we can expect them. And so how do we handle them? We handle them honestly. Amicably. Generously. Recognising that sometimes. Christians can't work together. And so what we find here.

Is that this disagreement. Ends up being really strategic. Barnabas and John Mark go to Cyprus. Paul and Silas go the other way. We read that Paul and Silas are commended by the church. We don't read that about Barnabas and John Mark. But the writer doesn't really pass any judgement at all. He just states it. And these clashes happen in ministries. It happens in elderships. And we address them in real honest direct ways. Sometimes we need to agree to disagree. But the wonderful thing is this. God. Can bring good out of these clashes.

And God can bring good. Out of strong personalities disagreeing. And so here instead of one mission team. Going out you've two. It's a more efficient work.

[7 : 36] The narrative moves on in verse 6. We see that Paul and his companions travel on. To the region of Phrygia and Galatia. This week I discovered a really interesting.

Piece of research that's been done by. Stanford University. You can look on the internet. And you can find the Stanford geospatial map.

Of the Roman world. Honestly it's really fascinating. I wasted about three hours on it this week. And they have worked out a way. How you can trace journeys. In the Roman world.

About 200 AD. It's like a kind of ancient race across the world. You can stick. The places in. In this chapter. And they will tell you the distances.

And the main routes. The time it would have taken. And it will tell you the cost of travel. The cost of travel at that point. Was about a day's wages.

[8 : 35] A day's wages would have been about a denarius. And so these people. The Stanford geospatial map of the Roman world. They've worked out. This second journey. Would have been in total.

3,050 miles. It would have taken about 100 days. Just to get from one location to the other. Just travelling time. Straight travelling. The cost in denarii per person.

Would have been 314 denarii. 314 days wages. You can do all sorts of interesting calculations with this. So let me give you the price.

Based on today's UK salary. Of £94 a day. The first missionary journey cost. About £22,000. The second missionary journey cost.

Around about £29,000. The third missionary journey cost. About £38,000. Church planting.

[9 : 32] Church work. Is expensive. Isn't it? It is expensive. How is that money raised? I'd love to know. I'd love to know what was the combination of them working alongside of generosity.

I'd love to know the debates. Couldn't you go on the off-peak travel, Paul? Why are you travelling on a Friday? Surely it's cheaper on a Thursday. Have you tried a Vant West?

It's expensive. And church ministry. Gospel work. The expansion of the work. Will always be expensive. And it calls for gospel generosity from us.

It costs to send planters. The full story in verses 1 to 5 follows Paul and Silas as they move through these churches. They visited on their first missionary journey.

Come to Derby in Lystra. They meet a young guy called Timothy. He's a young lad. He's been brought up in a Christian home. We don't know about his dad, but his mum and his grandmother did family worship with him daily. Timothy. He's from a mixed marriage.

[10:34] His mother is a Jew, but his father is a Greek. All the believers in Lystra and Iconium, they speak really well of him. And Paul wants to take young Timothy with him. But he sees there's a problem.

His parents are in a mixed marriage. Timothy would have been viewed as a Jew, but as an apostate Jew, not a real Jew. Why? Because he wasn't circumcised.

His dad would have forbidden it, perhaps, when he was young. But all the Jews knew he was a Greek. They knew his father was a Greek. He was from a mixed parenting relationship.

But Timothy, through his mother's descent, would have been considered Jewish. But the fact that he was an uncircumcised Jew would have made him an apostate Jew, an unacceptable Jew to the other Jews.

They would have closed the synagogue doors to him. It would have raised a series of cultural barriers to the gospel. And so Paul here shows amazing flexibility.

[11:39] And he circumcises Timothy to make a true Jew of him. There's no ambiguity. The reasoning would have been, Timothy, this will save a lot of confusion and hassle.

It will allow people to hear you and accept the gospel more easily. And so it's a really important thing, isn't it? Chapter 15, Paul says, when it comes to salvation, he is opposed to people being circumcised.

When it comes to people being saved, he says circumcision is of no value. But here in chapter 16, the very next chapter, it's not an issue of salvation, but it's an issue of mission.

It's an issue of church planting. And he seems to show this amazing flexibility. Paul wants to remove anything that's trivial that could cause people to close their hearts to the gospel.

Even before they'd ever had a chance to hear it. This is the kind of heart, doesn't it, that's led people to go across the world and learn languages so that they can tell the gospel in people's mother tongues.

[12:53] To learn cultures so that they don't make a barrier of not knowing the culture so that people can speak the gospel. It led Hudson Taylor, didn't it, in the 19th century to dress like the Chinese people so that the Chinese people would hear him more readily.

To do anything that he can within limits to present the gospel in a way that is culturally appropriate to those around him. And so we must think as a church, what are we doing that is an unneeded stumbling block to the gospel in our culture?

I can imagine it was pretty painful for Timothy to be circumcised by Paul's hand without anaesthetic. I think it is always painful, isn't it?

It is always painful to realise actually the way that I'm acting, the way that I'm speaking, the way that I'm behaving is an unnecessary stumbling block to people hearing the gospel.

It's always painful, to have that pointed out. It's always painful to remove it. And yet Paul says the issue of people hearing the gospel is so important.

[14:09] Do it. Get rid of it. Let's move on to the expansion of the journey. We see from verse 6 to 12, the little church planting group moves forward. The ministry expands, they take Timothy with them.

And in verse 5 of chapter 6, we're told that God is at work through this little band of people. The churches are being strengthened in faith and growing daily. But now the work expands from verse 6.

They break into new territory. And it's a really interesting little section from verse 6 forward. We're told that Paul and his team travel throughout Phrygia and Galatia.

But they're kept, aren't they, by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. They want to go west into Asia. But somehow the Holy Spirit stops them from going there.

They got north to Bithynia. But this time we read that the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to enter there. So they pass by Mycenae.

[15:12] And they go down to a port to a town called Troas on the coast. And it's here in Troas in verse 9. Can you see it? A vision appears to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia is standing there, urging him and saying, Come over to Macedonia and help us.

And the team concludes, this is the way that God has called them to preach. The Spirit has blocked them going west. The Spirit of Jesus has blocked them going north. And so they come to Europe. How are we to understand what's going on here? This is where we see, isn't it? Can you see the interplay between human initiative and divine guidance?

See both those things? Let's take those things in turn. On the human initiative side, I want us to think about this. Paul is not just sitting back. Is he saying, where do you want us to go next? He's not sitting there not moving. He's not saying, I'm not going anywhere until the Lord gives me clear guidance from the Lord. There's no sitting back. With no initiative.

[16:17] He is pressing on, isn't he? With sanctified common sense. He does what seems right. He's strategic about going into new areas that he feels would be a good place to move into.

And as he presses on, the Lord closes two doors and opens up a third one. Sometimes when it comes to seeking God's will and guidance, we need to realise that we don't just sit there and expect the kind of clear mapping out of the next weeks, months, years.

God can do that, can't he? God can reveal to us. This is the way to go. But that's very unusual. Usually it means guidance that God directs us using common sense.

Input from people older than us with wisdom. And as we try to move forward in our lives, thinking and considering about what God wants us to do, what God would have us to do, we seek to be discerning, don't we?

We seek to be wise. But there's limits, aren't there? There's limits to your wisdom. There's limits to your discernment. And at times like this, we're really thankful, aren't we?

[17:39] We are thankful to a sovereign God. For whom it's the easiest thing in all the world to close a door when I'm not going in the right direction. And God closes certain doors and he will open other doors.

We can be, can't we, enormously disappointed when our plans don't work out. Things which seem really great to us and the Lord just closes that door.

But we need to recognise that God guides and God leads and God opens doors. I'm about 23, 24 years ago.

I preached here and I hadn't preached here very well. And I met with the ministerial search committee here and that wasn't a very good meeting either.

And I came out of it thinking they're not going to want me and I'm not sure I want them. And I'm pretty sure they were thinking the same thing. I was quite confident at that point that I'd come here. But that meeting made me think, oh, I'm just not sure.

[18:46] About two weeks later, I went to preach in a town called Abergavenny. Do you know Abergavenny? It's a beautiful place. It's where George Whitefield was. In this beautiful old Welsh building, Presbyterian building, beautiful organ.

I preached two blinding sermons. They were absolutely great. We went to this people's house and the most wonderful Welsh lamb for lunch. I just thought, this is amazing.

At the end of the Sunday, this old elder came up to me and he said, would you consider coming here as the minister? And it was all, I said, well, yeah, yeah, yeah, I would consider it.

The following day, they had a church meeting. They voted and called someone else. The Lord very clearly closed the door. So you're stuck with me, all right?

But actually, that's what happens, isn't it? We think, well, would this be good? Would this be right?

This seems right. This seems the path to go. And it doesn't work out. And the Lord goes, we can be so disappointed, can't we?

[19:41] And yet, the Lord can open a door for you. Like, we're stealing. Well, it can be an enormous blessing. Some of you today will be enormously disappointed that the Lord has closed certain doors.

Recognize that God is sovereign. He's the sovereign Lord who knows what he's doing. I love how Luke uses the language really carefully here.

Can you see he says, he uses the language of the Spirit of Jesus. Notice at one point he says, the Holy Spirit stopped me moving west. Then he says, the Spirit of Jesus stopped me moving north. And what Luke is basically wanting you and I to remember is that Jesus is the one who is still on the throne. He is the one who directs and builds his church.

I wonder how this communication came. How did the Holy Spirit stop them going west? I've got no idea. And neither of the commentators. How did the Spirit of Jesus stop them coming north?

[20 : 45] We just don't know. But we see, don't we, human initiative as Paul presses forward and divine guidance. The Lord closes certain doors. He opens other doors. And the norm that's suggested in Acts is of churches taking initiatives for the gospel.

With wise planning and loving concern for those they're seeking to reach. Trusting God to open or close doors. There's strategic planning and there's sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.

And so this dream or vision comes and the team set off to Philippi. And notice in chapter 16 and verse 11 there's a change, isn't there?

There's a change in how the narrator is speaking about this journey. He's not saying Paul and Silas went and they did this. He's not saying the team did this and went.

No, look verse 11. So setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace. And the following day to Neapolis. And there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.

[21 : 52] Can you see what it says? We. We. There's a change in the narrative. You should smile at this point because suddenly the narrator enters the narration.

Luke, it seems, probably lived in Troas. And here he joins Paul and Silas and Timothy and now Luke joins the group, the gang. And it starts to be an eyewitness account.

And it lifts the narrative to a whole new level. He's not just, he's just recording in his journal what is happening. And so now the team arrives in Philippi and the new journey meets fruitfulness and hardship.

And so verse 13 to 40, we see this movement, this church planting movement, go into Philippi. There's three cases we're given where the gospel impacts very different people and their families. Look at the first one, verses 13 to 15. Lydia, she's a businesswoman. And this little group she's part of on the Sabbath goes by the river to pray.

[23 : 07] She was a God-fearer. She was Jewish but a God-fearer. And they assembled. Why were they not in a synagogue? There's probably too few Jewish men for there to be a synagogue.

And so you can see and imagine these little groups of women and others meeting to pray together.

And so Paul goes up to them and you can imagine them starting to engage with the gospel.

And we read verse 14. One of them who was listening was a woman named Lydia from Thyatira. She was a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshipper of God and an entrepreneur and a businesswoman.

Only wealthy people bought purple cloth. And she listens to Paul explaining the gospel about the one God who created everything.

About the one God who sent the Lord Jesus into the world to deal with our biggest problem. And bring us back to him. And then we read this amazing statement, don't we? The Lord opened her heart.

[24 : 08] The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. It's a wonderful way of describing what happens when somebody becomes a Christian.

When somebody is impacted by the gospel and transformed by it. The Lord, through Paul's message, is opening her heart.

What do you pray for the unconverted people in your family? What do you pray for your colleagues who you're trying to reach with the gospel? What do you pray for your school friends who don't know the Lord Jesus?

What do we pray? We pray that the Lord would open their hearts. John Stott says, although the message was Paul's, the saving initiative was God's. And Paul's preaching was not effective in itself.

The Lord worked through it. And the Lord's work was not in itself direct, was it? That is not how God chooses to work. God chooses to work through Paul's preaching.

[25 : 16] It's always the same. God is at work in this way today. God is the one who works through the telling of his word. To throw open hearts to respond to the gospel.

We tell the people. God will do the rest. Is there a Lydia in your family? Lydia in your workplace? That if you might speak the gospel or you bring them under the sound of the preaching of the gospel, God might open their hearts. So a businesswoman is saved.

Second place we meet is a slave girl, verses 16 to 18. It's a girl who's got an unclean spirit. She can predict the future. And the men who have her have set up this kind of lucrative, fortune-telling business.

And she is nothing to them other than a means of making money. And when Paul and his friends are trying to communicate the gospel at the place of prayer, she follows them and she shouts out at these men.

[26 : 23] She says, they're servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved. In some ways, her message is dead right. It seems harmless enough, but you can imagine the confusion.

A girl who's known as having an unclean spirit, authenticating this team's gospel ministry. Before the pagans. It would have led, wouldn't it?

People hearing her thinking, actually, these men are just controlled by the same spirit she is. Maybe their ministry is motivated by unclean spirits. But besides that, you can imagine just how annoying it was.

Every time you try to communicate winsomely to a group of people who are nice and peaceful, this girl starts shouting out this mantra.

So Paul turns around and says he's annoyed. He's actually disturbed. He's frustrated by the whole situation. And he calls the spirit out in the name of Jesus Christ.

[27 : 24] And the girl is set free. We don't hear what happened to the girl next. But we can only assume, can't we, that she became part of this little fledgling church in Philippi.

It seems that Luke is putting these accounts here to show us the building of the church in Philippi. What happened to this girl caused an uproar?

The owners are furious. They've lost this source of income. They grab Paul and Silas, take them to the magistrate, and they say these people are upsetting Roman values.

The powerful power of the gospel has impacted their sinful business. And their response is anger. And again, this is an alien to us.

When the gospel takes root, and when it impacts people's sinful behavior, we should expect people to get very angry. So Paul and Silas, they are severely beaten with rods.

[28 : 26] They are thrown into prison. They are placed in the inner cell. And that leads us to the third snapshot of the Philippian church. Verse 25 to 36. Verse 25 is stunning, isn't it?

It stops us in our track that at midnight, Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns to God. The other prisoners are listening to them.

They've just been beaten with rods, severely flogged, and at midnight they're sitting there. You can imagine their wounds pressed against the cold stone, and yet they are exulting in God.

Worshipping, and this little phrase, the other prisoners are listening to them, is meant to draw attention to the impact they're making. The other prisoners look at these guys and think, good grief, what is wrong with these people?

What has happened to them? So Paul in his prison and the others, they experience this amazing deliverance. There's a sudden earthquake. The prison doors open.

[29 : 27] The chains come loose. The jailer wakes up thinking, all the prisoners have escaped. He's about to take his life. And Paul says, don't do it, we're all here. And in this moment, the jailer has been so impacted, so powerfully, that he's come to fear this God.

Somehow Paul is communicating to the people. There he says, what must I do to be saved? And Paul simply responds, doesn't he, verse 31, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

You and your household. Then we're told that Paul and Silas and the team spoke the word of the Lord to the Philippian jailer and his family were baptized.

His household say, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. And so we have the first members of the church in Philippi, a businesswoman, a slave girl, a Philippian jailer.

It's hard to imagine, isn't it, a more disparate group. The businesswoman, the slave girl, the jailer.

[30 : 41] Racially, socially, psychologically, they are worlds apart. And yet all three changed by the same gospel. There is one gospel.

All three welcomed into one church. Isn't it a beautiful picture of what God is doing in the world? And so here we are this morning in 2025 from all our different backgrounds, with all our different hang-ups and all our different quirks gathered together having been transformed by the same gospel.

And notice in these three characters there is the clear power of God at work changing their lives. God opens the heart of Lydia. God delivers the slave girl by the power of Jesus and he shakes the prison and he shakes the Philippian jailer causing him to fear the Lord.

And so it's a beautiful picture of what the gospel can do. And so as I finish here this morning and as we come to the Lord's table let me ask is there a Lydia here this morning?

Or is there someone who is oppressed and feeling beaten down? Or is there someone like the Philippian jailer? It may be this morning that as God's word is spoken and seen good news of a saviour who has come down from heaven to deal with your greatest and biggest problem your sin and has died and is risen from the dead as God's word is spoken and you see your need may it be today that God might open your heart that God might change you that God might deliver you from what is oppressing you this morning that God might set you free and that God might change your life because what he did in Philippi he is doing in Ealing IPC the Lord opened the heart of Lydia so she might receive Paul's teaching believe on the

[33 : 09] Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved let's pray Amen Thank you.