

Collaborating with God

Acts 16:16-34

Over the course of our three services this morning we will be baptizing 13 people. In preparation for our baptisms, I want us to consider an account in Acts 16 that describes how God orchestrated an opportunity for a specific man to hear the gospel in a way that was compelling. After he believed the gospel, he was immediately baptized. This account illustrates ***a couple of spiritual realities*** that we need to understand since we seek be a church that brings the gospel to people in a compelling way. One of these realities involves what God does, and the second involves what we do (by God's power, of course). Leading people to Christ is a collaboration between God and his people.

Allow me to set the context briefly. The apostle Paul and Silas (along with a few others) came to Philippi in response to a vision Paul had one night. Because of that vision there was no doubt that God wanted them to be in this specific city.

Beginning in verse 16 Luke describes how God put Paul and Silas in close proximity to the man in charge of the jail in Philippi so that he might hear the gospel in a compelling way. Luke (the author of Acts) writes this:

16 As we were going to the 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.

This girl's "owners" were evil men. They were exploiting her because she was possessed by a "spirit of divination" - an evil spirit that apparently/ostensibly gave her knowledge of the future. They made a lot of money by having this demonized girl make predictions for people. This is just a horrible example of exploitation.

17 She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."

What the spirit said through this girl was true enough, but just as Jesus didn't want demons declaring that He was the Son of God (see Mt. 8:28), Paul didn't want this evil spirit making pronouncements about him.

18 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.

No doubt about it, there is power in the name of Jesus. As you might imagine, this made the girl's "owners" very angry.

19 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. 20 And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. 21 They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the

magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. 23 And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. 24 Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Because Paul cast out the demon and because he and Silas were thrown into prison unjustly, the Philippian jailer is suddenly in the presence of a couple of men who were passionate about Jesus. Surely that was no coincidence. We aren't told anything about the spiritual temperature of this jailer in Philippi. We're simply told that he did what he was ordered to do. He put Paul and Silas in the inner prison, fastening their feet in stocks so they wouldn't escape.

Now we're getting to the good part:

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them,

Paul and Silas weren't sitting in prison asking, "How can a good God allow us to be beaten and thrown in prison w/o due process?" No, they weren't accusing God of not protecting them. They were praying and singing hymns to God. And the prisoners were listening to them. This mirrors what happened back in chapter 5. There we read that after the Jewish authorities had beaten and threatened Peter and the apostles, they went away "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name" (5:41). That was Paul and Silas' attitude here as well.

26 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. 27 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.

He assumed that if they had the chance to escape that they would do so. Knowing that he would receive a death sentence for allowing his prisoners to escape, he decided to end his own life.

28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Apparently this jailer knew that Paul and Silas had been telling people that there was salvation in Jesus Christ. So he asked them flat out, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

31 And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

That's the simple gospel message: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. 34 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.

This was the pattern throughout the book of Acts: those who believed were soon baptized as a declaration that they had now experienced salvation through faith in Jesus. When a person is baptized, they are declaring, "Because of what Jesus has done for me, I am now a child of God and a disciple of Jesus. Because He died for me, I now live for Him."

There are at least two spiritual realities that led to the salvation and baptism of this man and his household. The stories of those being baptized this morning are different from this man's, but the realities are the same.

The first reality is that ***God orchestrates events so that people can hear the gospel.*** For the Philippian jailer, those events included Paul seeing a vision to go to Philippi; Paul and Silas being thrown into his prison. Those are the events God orchestrated to lead the Philippian jailer to Christ. Some of those being baptized today came to Christ in the context of their families; that is God's design. Others came to Christ through Christian friends or mentors. Whatever the details, every believer can look back and see how God orchestrated events to lead them to Christ. Jesus came to "seek and save" those who were lost.

The second reality is that ***The gospel is compelling when it is embodied by God's People.*** Paul and Silas embodied the gospel by suffering joyfully and having compassion on the Philippian jailer. Their lives screamed, "Jesus is worthy of my worship whether I'm in comfort or pain. And Jesus offers you the same salvation we've received." Their witness wasn't merely words; their lives embodied the gospel. And that made it compelling. Those being baptized today have also seen the gospel embodied by family members, friends, and mentors in the body of Christ. They have seen firsthand the type of life that Jesus offers all who believe in him.

In a couple of minutes we'll hear excerpts from the stories of all 13 being baptized today. But first I'd like those being baptized in this service to come up on stage to make a series of affirmations.

Affirmations for those being baptized:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of evil in the world? **I renounce them**

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? **I do**

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? **I will, with God's help**

Affirmations for the Church.

People of God, what is our response?

We receive you into the family of God! Live and proclaim the gospel of Christ, and share with us in life everlasting.