LYDIA, THE SLAVE GIRL AND THE JAILOR
ACTS 16
2026-10-04

Last week we talked about the Council of Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch and were deadlocked with Pharisee Christians who insisted Gentiles must become Jews first before they could become Christians; they must be circumcised and follow the Law. So Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem, the headquarters for the Church and appealed for their decision. Peter reminded those present what had happened with he and Cornelius ten years earlier. The proof Peter had acted rightly was that God had granted His Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. Any attempt to obey the Law and so earn salvation was a losing battle. There was only one way—the acceptance of the free gift of the grace of God. Can a person earn the favour of God, or must 1 admit helplessness and in humble faith accept what the grace of God gives? A religion of works verse a religion of grace. No one ever puts God in his debt. Victory is through surrender; the way to power is through admitting one's own helplessness.

I spoke at this point last week about the Reformation. In 1519, Martin Luther, the most famous of the Reformers, nailed 99 theses to the church doors in Wittenberg. He never wanted the church to split. He wanted discussion on things the church was doing that didn't ring true with the Gospel. Chief among them was the use of indulgences—people could pay the church to buy their dead relatives out of purgatory. There were other issues: marriage of priests, confession to priests, worship of Mary …It was a time of life and death. If you were on the wrong side, you were a heretic and might well be killed. If a king was Catholic, the country became Catholic. If a next king was Protestant, the country became protestant. In the middle of this, the Catholic Church held the Council of Trent over a sixteen year period. The main purpose of the council was to formalize a response to Protestantism. In the end they doubled down and endorsed a salvation by works. Baptism could save you. If you lived "a good enough" life you'd get to heaven. They rejected salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone revealed by Scripture alone. They supported Scripture; but also supported the tradition of the Church—quite fallible if the tradition of the church had been wrong-and it had been. To be in the clergy made a man powerful and wealthy. That didn't line up so well with Scripture. I say all this here, because the issue at the Council of Trent was salvation by grace versus salvation by earning it. It's an issue that prevails today; it's an issue which confuses people. Have you ever asked a person whether or not they're going to heaven? The most common answer from people who are unfamiliar with Scripture is "I hope so…I think I'm not a bad person…I haven't murdered anyone…I try to live a good life…" Only Christianity says you cannot earn your way into heaven. Every other religion is on the opposite side of that statement. For reference, Eph. 2:8-10 tells it:

"For it is by grace you are saved; through faith, and this, not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, so that no one may boast. For you are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Saving grace first, then good works. His grace alone. Not the other way around. And with respect to hoping to go to heaven, 1 John 5:13 says: *"I write these things to you who believe in the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." Not hope, but know.*

James, Jesus' brother, and the moral the leader of the Jerusalem church, answered. He'd had a resurrection appearance all to himself (1 Corinthians 15:7) and he changed completely from when he didn't believe Jesus was Christ in John 7. But James was also a rigorous observer of the Law. If he could side with the Gentiles, then all was well. Don't put hindrances in front of people.

They drafted a positive, simple and unburden-some letter. Two of their number accompanied Barnabas and Paul to deliver the letter and speak to it. The requests were easily doable—circumcision was not necessary for Gentiles. Within the Church the principle was established: Jew and Gentile were one.

After the letter was well received, Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. Though the two had travelled and faced so much together, they had a disagreement they couldn't resolve. In Acts 11, Barnabas travelled from Antioch to Tarsus just to bring Paul back to Antioch so they could be a missionary team. In chapter 9, it was Barnabas who vouched for Paul's bonified conversion. It wasn't a doctrinal matter that divided them, it was John Mark. Who'd left Barnabas and Paul during their first mission trip in Pamphylia and returned to Jerusalem. Paul considered him to be a deserter and felt him to be unreliable to be on the next mission trip.

A split. But the result was two missionary teams instead of one. Barnabas and Mark sailed for Cyprus, while Paul and Silas went to Syria and Cilicia, "strengthening the churches". There's a happier end. Ten or twelve years later Paul encouraged Timothy to bring John Mark to him while he was in prison *"because he is helpful to me in my ministry." (2 Timothy 4)* Because a person does something you don't like or think's wrong, doesn't mean he's irretrievably in the sewer. People change. Particularly with Christ, they can be completely redeemed and good relations can be reestablished.

This is now Paul's second missionary trip. It had been five years since Paul had preached in Derbe and Lystra. He met Timothy and discerned his value as a fellow missionary. Paul was always well aware of the need to train a new generation for the work that lay ahead. This is the view of the Church. The Haven program starting here in a couple of weeks is an example of that. Training up young people who can live the life and share the Gospel with others. My dad was a banker—at the time, the Bank of Nova Scotia—now Scotiabank. Whenever he was promoted, his first job he said, was to immediately start training the next person for his job. Great advice! Too many times we encounter people who are quite unprepared in whatever new work role they are taking on!

You may be wondering why Paul circumcised Timothy, after the battle he had just won about circumcision at the Council of Jerusalem. But there's a clear answer. Timothy was a Jew. Paul had never said that circumcision was not necessary for Jews. It was the Gentiles who were freed from the ceremonies of the Jewish way of life. Timothy was the son of a mixed marriage. The strict Jew would refuse to recognize that as a marriage at all. The Jewish half of the marriage would be regarded as dead, sometimes even with a funeral carried out. By accepting Timothy as a brother Jew, Paul showed definitely how he had broken down this barrier. Timothy went on to become *"1 whose mind was so much at one with Paul's."* He referred to him as his beloved son.

Next, the Gospel comes to Europe. The HS of Jesus barred Paul from the Roman province of Asia—strange because it contained Ephesus and all the recipients of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation. But one door closes and another opens. A vision of a man from Macedonia guided him there. They end up in the Roman outpost of Phillipi—no synagogue from which to start. But where that was the case it was common for Jews to have a place of prayer, usually by a riverside. He met Lydia there, a purple merchant. That may not mean much to us, but purple dye had to be gathered drop by drop from a certain shellfish and was so costly to dye a pound of wool would cost thousands of dollars at today's pricing. So she was a wealthy woman at the very top end of the social scale. She was won for Christ. She has an immediate reaction. She offered the hospitality of her house to Paul and his friends. A Christian home should be one with an ever-open door.

Next, the slave girl. She came from the bottom of the social scale. She was being taken advantage of by opportunistic men. She had a spirit that could predict the future. Interestingly, she, like Legion who had demons dwelling in him, was able to identify God's presence in a way that those around them didn't or couldn't. *"These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."* How astute is that? She might have been a great asset for Paul and Silas, but it aggravated Paul enough that he ordered the spirit out of her in the name of Jesus. How is it that those who are demon possessed can see God in a way that others can't?

Well, the loss of that spirit meant the loss of income, and the slave owners dragged Paul and Silas into the market place—accusing them of advocating customs unlawful for Romans to accept or practice. The crowd got into it and the magistrates ordered Paul and Silas to be stripped and beaten. They were severely flogged and thrown into jail with orders to the jailer to guard them carefully. Arrested for doing good. Do you earn money by serving or by exploiting others?

So into the inner cell with feet in the stocks. *"About midnight Paul and Silas were singing hymns and praying to God."* This is one of my favourite passages. Severely flogged, thrown unceremoniously into prison, into stocks and they're not moaning in their wounds. The other prisoners were listening to them then a violent earthquake shook the foundations of the prison. Just another day at the ranch for Paul and Silas. The jail doors flew open and everybody's chains came loose. Of course, the jailer was about to kill himself, for, if any prisoner escaped, the jailer, by Roman law was to suffer the same sentence that the prisoners were to receive.

But Paul intervened. A complete takeover by the Holy Spirit. None of the prisoners tried to escape and Paul let the jailer know that everyone was accounted for. Think about this. The Holy Spirit must have invaded every one of those prisoners or they would have run to freedom. So what happened next wasn't just the saving of the jailer and his family. It probably included the entire jail population. And the question of the jailer rings through the entire Bible: "What must I do to be saved?" It's as bald as the question gets. Well, you need to clean up your life for starters. You need to find a good church/synagogue. You need to hang out with good people. You need to be generous. You need to be kind…Nope. *"Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved."*

But it doesn't end there…*"you and your household"* are added. It throws a bit of a wrench into the believers' baptism. You don't know whether the jailer had little kids or not. Who was in that house hold? The family is a protected unit of God's design. Those in the household were saved. Take from that what you will. I believe we don't go into heaven because our parents were /are believers. We each need to make a confession of faith when we are able. But the family is protected under the umbrella of God's care in the intervening time.

What can you say about this. Right back to where we started. Are you saved by earning credit to God or are you saved by God's gift of grace? It's pretty clear here. The jailer, to our knowledge, had no works to speak of. He was awestruck by grace, knew it and acted on it. From Paul and Silas' perspective: as a Christian you can never take away God and the presence of Jesus Christ. With God there is freedom even in prison and even at midnight there is light. And Paul could preach to the very man who had fastened him in the stocks. You may not know it, but Paul should never have been treated this way as a Roman citizen. To scourge a Roman citizen was a crime punishable by death.

And then back to my earlier question of salvation. Though not by works, the jailer washed the prisoners' wounds and set a meal before them. So, after salvation, unless a Christian's faith makes him kind, it is not real. The professed change of heart must be matched by a change of deeds.