

## **“Dead End or Breakthrough?”**

Acts 16:1-40

*Series: Cliff Notes Week 17. Paul's Missionary Journeys*

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Last week we looked at the conversion of Saul the persecutor of Christians to Paul the preacher of Christ. Jesus blinded Saul so he could see. I mentioned I once underwent eye surgery and considered wearing an eyepatch in worship so I can be the Preaching Presbytery Pirate. Well, be careful what you wish for. Sunday night I had an eye infection. The solution? My Eye Doctor recommended an Eye Patch. The instructions say, “Microwave on high...place mask over eyes.” I solved my eye problem by burning them out. If I wear this, I can't see if you are falling asleep during my sermon. But now you can't tell if I'm asleep.

After Paul's conversion, he spends the second half of the Book of Acts preaching the Gospel and planting churches across the Roman Empire. Luke, the author of Acts, describes Paul's three missionary journeys and a terrifying voyage around the Mediterranean. This is how the Good News spread from “Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Yet though Jesus healed his eyes, many times on these trips Paul felt he was going around blind curves, down blind alleys, hitting blind, dead ends.

- Paul wants to go with Barnabas to visit the churches they started in Galatia. They get into an argument and go their separate ways (Acts 15:36-41). Dead end.
- Paul wants to preach in the province of Asia – the western coast of Turkey. The Holy Spirit says no (Acts 16:6). Dead end.
- He pivots and tries to head north to Bithynia. The Holy Spirit doesn't allow it (Acts 16:7). Dead end.
- Paul steers northwest to Troas and runs out of land (Acts 16:8). Dead End.
- At night he receives a vision of a man begging him to, “Come over to Macedonian and help us” (Acts 16:9). He goes to Philippi and plans to preach in their synagogue except for one problem – no synagogue. Why? No Jews in Philippi. Dead end.

Maybe you've hit some dead ends on your life journey,

- When you made wedding plans you didn't expect your course to lead to divorce.
- When you cradled that little bundle of joy in the hospital you never expected that later you'd have such arguments, angry words or anxiety.
- When you went for your check-up it was supposed to be routine. How did you wind up driving to all these treatments?

- When you took the job you had lots of goals for your career. Now you're looking for the exit ramp or maybe they sent you packing.
- When you started this year you saw so many new opportunities on the road of your life. Now you, or someone you love, is facing a literal dead end.

Whatever the reason, whatever the season, you face a dead end. Now what do you do?

What did Paul do with his dead end in Philippi? On the Sabbath Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke go through the town gate and down by the Gangites River and find some women praying. Gentile women. Jewish men are not supposed to talk to Gentile women. Another dead end. Should they go back? But then Paul notices something: these Gentile women are praying to the God of the Jews. So against all social conventions, Paul explains to them the Good News of salvation through Jesus. One of them, a businesswoman named Lydia listens. And as she does, her eyes widen and her face brightens.

The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. Acts 16:14-15

Lydia's house is Paul's first church in Europe. A dead end becomes a breakthrough.

Are you at a Dead End or a Breakthrough? What makes the difference? Many years later Paul will be in another Dead End – a jail cell in Rome. He will write a letter to this little Philippian church probably still meeting in Lydia's house. In this letter he shares the secret of how to turn Dead Ends into Breakthroughs: Joy.

There is a world of difference between Happiness and Joy. When you cross the Scudder Falls Bridge a sign used to say, "Welcome to Pennsylvania: Pursue Your Happiness." Did you know we live in the land of happiness? In this state we even have a whole Valley that's Happy. Everyone in our state is happy all the time right? Just keep driving on our highways and you'll find that's not true. Happiness is an emotion based on circumstances – what happens. If what happens is good for me, I am happy. If what happens is not good, neither am I. There is a reason happy and haphazard sound alike. There are lots of times, random times, when happiness just doesn't happen.

Sitting in a dead-end prison, Paul writes to the Philippians about Joy. While joy includes emotions, it is not primarily a feeling. It is not based on circumstances.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Philippians 4:4, 12-13.

It does not depend on circumstances. Paul says, ‘I have joy whether I’m starved or stuffed, wealthy or in want.’ Joy and contentment are not based on outside circumstances. They live within. They are a gift from God, a fruit the Holy Spirit grows in you. Joy is more than a feeling. It’s an attitude and outlook on life. It is the conviction that God can turn dead ends into breakthroughs. Watch how Paul handles his dead ends.

**Dead Ends Are A Time For Decision.** When you hit a dead-end, you have three options: 1) Ignore it and plow straight ahead – possibly over a cliff. 2) Turn around and go back the way you came. 3) Look for an alternate route—God’s route. Paul could have ignored these Gentile women and kept looking for a synagogue. He could have turned around and gone back to the Holy Land. Instead, he decided to sit down and do what he was sent to do: tell the Good News. And Jesus met him there.

What decision do you need to make at your dead end? Ask forgiveness? Pray for guidance? Let go of control? Explore other options? Offer comfort? Share the Good News? Many times, we make a situation worse by expecting it to go a certain way. We may try to bend someone, including God, to our will. Usually the result is more frustration and pain for us. Surrendering your agenda, your desires, your control to Jesus is difficult. Yet often it’s the right decision when you hit a dead end.

Maybe you need to decide to put your life in the hands of Jesus Christ. Is today the day you decide to surrender all to Him as Lord and Savior? If you want to know how to do that, join a Growth Group. That single decision will help you discover a whole new direction for your life. What decision do you need to make at your dead end?

**Dead Ends Are A Time for Deliverance.** As Paul and his team move about Philippi they attract some unwanted advertising.

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” Acts 16:16-17

You would think Paul would appreciate this free promotion. But it is as irritating as an infomercial. So he drives the fortune-telling spirit out of her.

There may be some irritating and annoying people in your life. They take up your time. They invade your space. You wish they would just go away and leave you alone. At first it seems surprising for Paul to get so distressed. Actually it isn’t distress but deliverance. This poor girl is enslaved and abused by her owners. She is in bondage by this evil spirit. So Paul sets her free.

There is joy when we see God set others free. Yet the journey there is not always easy. Who are the difficult people in your life? Why do you find them irritating and annoying? Now ask yourself another question: what in that person’s life is causing them to be that way? What is imprisoning them: drugs, drink, past abuse, emotional pain,

loneliness, mental or physical illness? It's likely they need understanding, not rejection. They may need counseling and treatment. Some, like the slave girl, will need deliverance from spiritual oppression. All of them need prayer. If you are hitting a dead end with someone it's probably time to pray for their deliverance.

Finally, **Dead Ends Are A Time for Declaration**. The owners of the slave girl are not happy about her deliverance. In their eyes she is property not a person. She is income not an individual. Paul stopped their cash flow. Instantly her owners drag Paul and Silas into the marketplace and begin to stoke up the Anti-Semitism of Philippi.

They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. Acts 16:20-24

This is absolutely the worst dead end of all. Stripped, whipped, beaten and bleeding they are shackled in the stockade in the darkest place in the dungeon. There is no way out. If it were me, I'd be crying about the injustice, I would be crying for my lawyer, I'd probably just be crying. What do Paul and Silas do? They sing.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Acts 16:25

They use the opportunity to praise God and declare Him Lord even in this dark dead end. During their hymn sing, the jail cell is rocked by an earthquake that breaks their chains and busts open the doors. When the guard sees his jail split wide open he prepares to do the only honorable thing for a Roman soldier: take his life. But Paul and Silas, who could have let their enemy do himself in, reach out in love to deliver even him.

But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. Acts 16:28-32

In this dark dead end, Paul declares the Good News. That night, the Jailer takes Paul and Silas home. First he washes their wounds. Then they wash away his sins with baptism.

This week I challenge you to Share Joy. Help the people in your life see that Dead Ends are not the End. With God, they can be a Breakthrough. I challenge everyone at Woodside to reach three people with the Good News of Jesus. Pray for them to be delivered from whatever pain, hurt, doubt or disbelief prevents them putting their faith in Jesus. Declare the Good News that Jesus went to the ultimate Dead End, a death on a

Cross, to save all of us from sin and open the door to eternal life. And then invite them to make a decision and declare Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Savior.

That's how Levi found the Light. He was living in the tent city with other homeless neighbors. During the coldest nights of the year he was a guest in our Vineyard for Code Blue. Finally he told someone he was tired of living like this. He signed up first for rehab and then joined the Whosoever Gospel Mission. They taught him job readiness, computer skills, and decision making. Yet even more essential

They teach you how to get closer to God. They helped me find peace of mind and joy. They taught me how to be patient and humble, how to have integrity, devotion and most of all perseverance. They taught me to trust in the Lord. Now I know the plans the Lord has for me. He wants me to prosper, plans to give me hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). Nobody can go back and start a new beginning. But anyone can start today and make a new ending.

That was the testimony Levi gave on the stage of the Vineyard at a Recovery Worship service. God took a homeless guest and turned him into a hopeful guest speaker.

Let Jesus turn your dead end into a new ending.