

Possessed: By God or By the World

Acts 16:6-19

This past Wednesday night, as we were going through the short Epistle of 3 John I shared with you that there was a lot of drama going on in those 14 verses. The impact, both for good and for evil as seen through the lives of men such as Gaius (on the good end) and Diotrephes (on the evil end). We also spoke of another individual in John's letter, a man by the name of Demetrius - a man highly commended by the Apostle John.

The names of these three men, although only listed in the short letter, remain enshrined throughout the ages here in the Word of God. Their names now connected with their character, personality, and their spiritual impact - and, once again for good or for evil.

This morning we are actually in the book of Acts, chapter 16. Acts, is an historical book. Just like the Gospels, it is filled with individuals who were touched by the message of the Gospel. Some of the names we know... they were written down for us. While other names we don't know. But as I shared on Wednesday evening, rather man knows your name or not just isn't important. The important thing is rather of not your name has been written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Here in Acts 16 we will be looking at three other people, and some of their families; some whose names are written in that Book of Life. One of the individuals we know by name, she is known to us as Lydia, the seller of purple garments in the city of Philippi, a woman who had come from the city of Thyatira.

There is another, a young slave girl who remains nameless. We aren't certain of her status in the Lamb's Book of Life, but we do know that God touched her and impacted her life dramatically.

The third and last is known primarily by his occupation... he's known to us as the Philippian Jailer. All three of these individuals and at least two of their families were touched and changed by the message of the Gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit.

And how this all came about is nothing short of the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit.

So, let's look in Acts 16, actually backing up a bit into last week's verses before we move forward... giving us a running start if you will. Acts 16, beginning in verse 6-10

Acts 16:6-10

⁶ Now when they (the missionary team of Paul, Silas, Timothy, and soon to be Luke) had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. ⁷ After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them.

You'll remember we spoke of that last week. And I asked the question: *How do you respond when God moves in a way you don't expect and can't explain?*

I believe we firmly laid down that the best thing we can do is

- Trust in the Lord, that His plans are more complete than ours ever will be.
- And... wait patiently while He does the work around us or through us or in spite of us.
- We can't even begin to compare our plans or the things of this world to the benefits of His plan, being worked out on His schedule.

So, with that in mind, let's press into verse 8 —

⁸ So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. ⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Troas was a major Roman port city on the western shores of Turkey, on the Aegean Sea. With a population of about 100,000 during the First Century, it had been made a Roman Colony by Augustus. Later on, around AD 300 the Roman Emperor Constantine had plans of making it the capital City of the Empire instead of Rome. There's no doubt the Apostle Paul and his team could have had a powerful impact in that city for the Gospel.

What a great place to begin a campaign of sharing the Gospel, right? Not so much. At least not yet, because once again, the Holy Spirit of God had other plans...

Apparently the missionary team hadn't been in the city of Troas for long before Paul received a vision during the night. A "man from Macedonia" appeared to him, **pleading** with him, **urging** him to travel across the Aegean Sea to the area of Macedonia, "...and help us."

First of all, to help you understand where Macedonia is, you can think of southeastern Europe or more particularly the area of Greece, Bulgaria, and even a portion of south eastern Serbia — that's Macedonia.

It's here in these couple of verses where we see the personal plural pronoun change from third-person "they" to the first-person, "we" as most scholars believe Luke was now a part of the Mission's team.

*...immediately **we** sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them..*

So, after hearing of the vision, the team wasted no time. They didn't send a messenger back to the home church in Antioch, they simply moved as the Spirit led them, and they felt He was leading them to Macedonia.

¹¹ Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days. ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there.

As they sailed west across the Aegean, *Samothrace* was a large island with mountainous peaks, the highest being over 5,000'. It was a right in line with their course to *Neapolis*, the port city of "*Philippi, ...the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a (Roman) colony.*"

And as a Roman Colony, Philippi enjoyed a great history and ongoing reputation...

More than 400 years prior to Paul and the team walking into the city of Philippi, the area had been overrun and conquered by Philip of Macedon, the **father** of Alexander the Great. As a very humble and unassuming man, Philip ended up renaming the city for himself.

Later, it came under Roman domination in 168 b.c. and by 31 b.c., it was granted the status of a colony. It soon became known as the retirement city of a number of military veterans as they settled into the area to enjoy the climate, **the excellent golf courses and the first all you can eat buffet.**

Okay, they didn't have golf courses, and Golden Corral hadn't been invented yet, but a large number of retired military personnel still found the place very favorable to live out their remaining years.

As the missionaries got settled into the city, there is no doubt they sought out the local synagogue. Luke tells us they had been *in that city for some days* but apparently they didn't find a synagogue. One of the rules of Judaism is that you need to have at least 10 Jewish men to have a true and recognized synagogue. Apparently in all of the city of Philippi, there were not 10 Jewish men to be found.

So, undoubtedly after some investigation and questions around the area, the missionaries found out that on the Sabbath, several women would regularly gather down by the river to have a time of prayer. And so *on the Sabbath day, they went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and (they) sat down and spoke to the women who met there.*

How large the group was, Luke doesn't relay to us. How many of these women were Jews, we have no way of knowing — perhaps none of them. One thing we do know, because Luke makes it very clear, there was a woman there named Lydia and she was not a Jew, she was a Gentile, and she loved and worshiped the one, true God.

*¹⁴ Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The **Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.** ¹⁵ And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us.*

As the missionary team sat down with the women, and as the Apostle Paul began to share with them, **the Lord began to move...** particularly in the heart of the woman Lydia.

Even with what little we get from Luke's report, we realize that Lydia is a unique woman. First he tells us, "*she was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira.*

The city of Thyatira was located back on the other side of the Aegean Sea in the western region of the area we know of as Turkey. Thyatira was known for its various opportunities for commerce. At this time in its history, it boasted of more industrial guilds than any other contemporary city in the Roman province of Asia. Archeologists have found ancient inscriptions mentioning wool-workers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, (hmmm, no candlestick makers?) slave-dealers, and bronze-smiths.

In particular the purple dye was of great value and always associated with royalty due to its expense. Very time consuming and labor intensive, the color was either extracted from the glands of the **murex snail** (the process used in the area of Sidon, north of Israel); or as in the region of ancient Thyatira, they extracted the dye from the juice of the root of the rubia plant.

Again, very time consuming and labor intensive, thus very expensive. Lydia had a very profitable business. But Lydia wasn't possessed by the business and profits, she was one *who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.*

And as she received the Gospel message as spoken by Paul, she received the hope of the Gospel, and so, she received the knowledge of the forgiveness of her sin. And in obedience to the Word of God, *she and her household were baptized.*

As a sign of her changed heart and an outpouring of her new life in Jesus, she begged the missionary team saying, *“If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” So she persuaded us.* All that she had was the Lord’s and she allowed Him the rule over every one of her possessions, for she herself was possessed by God

There was no doubt that there had been an immediate and evident change in Lydia’s life. Whatever it was and however it was demonstrated, it was apparent to those who knew her and to the missionary team.

No doubt, hospitality was a major portion of Lydia’s life in Christ. Inviting the four missionaries to stay at her house, was symbolic of her status in the city. Apparently she was prosperous enough to have a household, not only a house physically big enough to house the four men, but with enough servants to take care of the feeding and other needs to the travelers.

It would appear from verse 40 that the Church actually met at her house, at least for a season –

*⁴⁰ So they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia; and **when they had seen the brethren**, they encouraged them and departed.*

The Church at Philippi and their relationship with the Apostle Paul was like none other. Their support of his missionary work and their concern for the ministry was evident even in Paul’s letter to the Church. Philippi, more than any of the other Churches Paul had either begun or ministered to seemed to have a special and close connection. No doubt a large portion of the support for the ministry probably came from Lydia.

How long Paul and the others were in Philippi **before the trouble started isn’t clear**. But we can be assured of this one thing, if God is actively working in individual lives, Churches, and communities, it **won’t be long before Satan** will do all he can to knock things off track or stop them completely.

There’s no doubt that most ministries take the opportunity to let the community know about their ministry work. Today, in our culture we use Social Media in a variety of ways; but still, the best

connection with the community comes **by word of mouth**. As the old saying goes, “*One begger telling another begger where to find bread.*”

But what happens when the advertising or publicity about your ministry isn’t the kind you want? When it appears as though it is a mocking or some evil intent behind the communication. Politicians might say, “*Any publicity is good publicity*”, but that’s not true when it comes to the work of God. And when the enemy of the work of God is advertising to the community, there must be something wrong.

Luke writes for us, beginning in verse 16 —

¹⁶ Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation.” ¹⁸ And this she did for many days.

This young girl was demon possessed and was being used those who owned her to make money through fortune telling. What a sad condition this young girl was in. Not only was she a slave to ungodly masters but she was also demon possessed.

The fact that Luke brings out that she had a plural of masters, gives us a hint as to how much money she may have been making for them. It seemed to be a joint commercial venture.

In the Greek, it tells us she had the spirit of *pythonos*. A particular spirit familiar to the Greeks and the Romans for fortune telling. As a matter of fact, the python was the symbol of the oracles who represented the god Apollo. The Greeks and the Romans put great stock in the words of an Oracle. No emperor or even a military commander would ever step out in a campaign without first consulting an oracle. Businessmen, before launching into a new venture would consult an Oracle. And all of them paid dearly for this “divine” insight. No doubt, a lot of money was made by the abuse of this young girl.

Apparently it had taken a few investors to purchase this girl from a previous owner. Whatever the case, Luke makes it clear, she was **possessed by a multiple of earthly** masters, but she was ultimately controlled by a demonic master, even Satan himself.

This whole situation was strange. Apparently for several days this gal would follow the missionary team around proclaiming, “*These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation.*”

You might be tempted into thinking, *“Hey, that’s not a bad thing. Free publicity for the work of the ministry!”* But, there were many problems in not only who was saying it, but in actuality, what she was saying.

First of all, although she may have been declaring what appears on the outside to be the truth, within the Greco-Roman culture, the phrase *the Most High God* would have been immediately connected with Zeus: in other words, the people of the community would have heard *“These men are servants of Zeus.”* So, not too much for the Roman culture to get excited about here, let’s just move on.

Even the fact that she declared, *“These men... proclaim to us the way of salvation.”*

Some translators say that she was actually saying, *“These men... proclaim to us ‘A’ way of salvation.”* Thus once again confusing the situation with the plethora of Greek gods, each of them proclaiming ‘A’ way of salvation. So, as a Roman, there were multiple options, you can choose this god or that god, or you can choose the god these men are speaking about.

At times demons can and will speak the truth, but even then it will be a veiled truth. Luke shares with us the response of the Apostle Paul –

¹⁸ ...But Paul, being greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And he came out that very hour.

¹⁹ But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities.

Before we get to our third person in this narrative (the Philippian jailer), we actually come in contact with a separate group of men.

- These are the men who were the owners this young girl.
- These are the men who put profit before compassion.
- These are the men who had taken advantage of her condition as one possessed by a demon.
- And so, these are the men who although they possessed the girl, they themselves were possessed by the world, and in reality possessed by the god of this world, Satan himself.
- The young girl was set free, these men remained in their bondage.

Lydia was a woman of great possessions, but she had already recognized that all that she possessed was truly the Lord’s. So she was willing to be free with and of those things. She controlled them as she was controlled by the Holy Spirit of God.

The young woman was in a position of not having a choice – she was the possessed one – possessed by demonic forces and by these men. How and when she became demon possessed, we can't even guess. But these men had a choice and their choice was for the things of this world. Without compassion and without care.

When this girl was set free, rather than rejoicing in her freedom, they were angered at their personal loss of profit.

How important are the things of this world to you?

How hard do you hold onto the very things that God has blessed you with?

Are you possessed by your possessions or desire for more? Or are you possessed by the One who knows your every need, who clothes the Lilies of the Valley and feeds the smallest of sparrows?

If you are truly possessed by the Lord Jesus Christ, then you know that all that you have is His anyway. And once you know that, you truly are set free.

We will look at this more next time.

Soon we will see a Philippian jailer, a man who had a government job yet put everything on the line as he moves in compassion to assist the disciples.

There is so much to see in these verses. And we will pick it up here next time.