

growth and conversion

Acts 15:22 - 16.15

thought for the week

Here we see the Early Church wrestling with disagreement and difference, yet seeing God bless the outcome because it was rooted in prayer, dealt with in love and guided by the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul is sent with a letter to address the new believers in region of Antioch, accompanied by Barnabas and Silas (v22). Here are two men who are like brothers. Paul owes his inclusion in the mission to Barnabas, and together they had taught, travelled hundreds of miles into the northern mountains in ministry together. What's more, recently they had returned from Jerusalem, their vision and ministry approved and vindicated against their opposition. And yet, at this very moment Paul and Barnabas argue and part company over Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. The Bible does not 'clean up' this mess – they are both flawed – yet God continued with His work. He will make a way and make straight our crooked lines.

Later Paul and Silas travel throughout the region taking the letter with them (v4). They are directed by a vision (v9) to travel north into Macedonia (modern day Greece). Eventually they arrive in the Roman colony of Philippi, where they meet Lydia (v14), the first known, convert in Europe.

verse for the week

*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit
and to us...*

Acts 15 verse 28

image for the week



prayer for the week

*Heavenly Father,
help me to maintain the faith I
have in you,
which may be as small as a
mustard seed.*

*But I ask that you water it,
so it will flourish into beautiful
righteousness.*

reflection for each day

day one

We heard that some went out from us without our authorisation

Authority in the New Testament flows from the life of Jesus into His chosen disciples and then into those appointed by them in the early Church. This authority and the accountability it produces are very important in discerning correct belief and practice. Who are you accountable to in your ministry?

day two

*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit
and us not burden you.*

Discerning the right course of action is a combination of prayer/Holy Spirit's leading and human wisdom. *'Pray as if there were no such things as plans; plan as though there were no such thing as prayer.'* Reflect upon this understanding.

day three

*... in Antioch where they and
many others taught and preached
the word of the Lord.*

Antioch became an important centre of Christian mission and learning. What special places have been important to your spiritual growth and ministry?

day four

*They had such a sharp
disagreement that they parted
company.*

Strongly held views often produce disagreements and arguments. How can we disagree well with other believers who don't share our views?

day five

*So the churches were
strengthened in the faith and grew
daily in numbers.*

Sometimes we see God's providence even in disputes and conflict. Paul and Silas helped the churches in Syria and then Macedonia, whilst Barnabas and John Mark helped those in Cyprus. Think about how good can come even out of conflict?

day six

*'Come over to Macedonia and help
us.'*

The Holy Spirit intervenes through a dream or vision to direct Paul and Silas towards Macedonia (modern day Greece). Where are you feeling nudged to start some new work or area of ministry?

day seven

*We went outside of the city gate to
the river... to find a place of prayer.*

Places of prayer don't need to be buildings. We can encounter God and meet people by divine appointment in many locations. Where do you find it most helpful to pray? Try to cultivate particular locations for prayer.

for the group

as you gather...

- How do you understand the idea of accountability among your own group of fellow believers? How can you guard against unhelpful teaching? How can you ensure unhelpful or harmful practices are avoided or safeguarded?
- How can we ensure the right balance between prayer and human wisdom (v28)? Is relying upon prayer always counter intuitive or can it work together with human wisdom or common sense? As we grow in our faith and become more Christ-like, what we want and what the Holy Spirit wants come closer to each other. How can we check whether what we want and what the Holy Spirit wants are the same?
- What disagreements have there been among your group? Were these disagreements about important or trivial matters (v37)? How did you resolve them? What did you learn from the experience?
- Lydia was already a worshipper of God (v14). Sometimes we encounter people who are on another spiritual track, yet are very close to Jesus and receptive to His teaching. Jesus called such people, 'men/women of peace' (Luke 10.6). Share your experiences of seeing God at work in such circumstances.

prayer for the group

*Dear Lord,
 thank You for our Church leaders
 and we pray that Your Holy Spirit would lead
 and guide them in all the duties that they
 are called upon to do.
 Lord keep them ever open to hear Your
 voice and give them hearts that seek to
 draw ever closer to Your heart of love,
 day by day.
 AMEN.*



continue the conversation

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Apprentice

imprisonment and release

Acts 16:16-40

thought for the week

Philippi was a Roman colony, named after Philip, the father of Alexander the Great and was a fiercely loyal Roman outpost in a foreign land. Paul and Silas fall foul of Roman, rather than Jewish power. The Roman citizens of Philippi would have been unable to distinguish between Jewish and Christian beliefs (v20), but saw their ministry as a threat to the pagan, Roman culture. When Paul and Silas confront the slave girl (v18) their actions have the effect of challenging not just religious culture, but also economic interests (v19). This twin threat of the gospel to underlying culture as well as to economic interests is seen again when Paul and Silas visit Ephesus in Acts 19. The story then turns into a personal and family encounter between the Paul and Silas and the Philippian jailer and his household. Fearing that he will be killed for allowing his prisoners to escape (v28), the jailer's life is turned around as his whole family accept Christ and Paul and Silas are eventually released to return to the new church community that now meet in the house of Lydia, a wealthy new believer.

verse for the week

*'Men, what must I do to be saved?'
They replied, 'Believe in the Lord
Jesus, and you will be saved – you
and your household.'*

Acts 16 verses 30-31.

prayer for the week

*Dear Lord
I thank you that there is no fear in
love.
But perfect love drives out fear,
Help me to live in that love.
AMEN.*

image for the week



reflection for each day

day one

Once when we were going to a place of prayer

Philippi did not have a Jewish community or synagogue, so Paul and Silas improvise a place to pray. It appears that Luke, the narrator of the story, must have joined them in Philippi as the language of 'we' is used here. A divine appointment follows, in which a complete outsider encounters the power of God. Pray for a special encounter today with someone who doesn't know Christ.

day two

'These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.'

In a manner similar to the ministry of Jesus (Luke 8.28), an outsider recognises the power of God at work. Think about how to make connections with people who don't know Jesus, yet who recognise His work.

day three

When the owners... realised that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas.

The owners only cared about making money from the girl. Consider what role we have in confronting economic injustice?

day four

There was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken.

While Paul and Silas were praying and worshipping the ground literally shook. What does this tell us about the impact of prayer and worship?

day five

'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household'

In the early history of the gospel, people often became Christians in groups. Today we tend to think about ourselves as individuals, rather than part of a group or collective. What can we learn from this?

day six

He and all his family were baptised.

Identifying with Christ often took place in family groups and even among tribes – showing that the whole group came under the name of Jesus. How can you share your faith within your family or friendship group?

day seven

'Now you can leave. Go in peace'

Paul and Silas are released, yet it is the jailer and his family who have also been released, from fear and unbelief. They are full of joy and thanksgiving (v34). What do you see in the world today, that people need to be released from in order that they might experience the joy of knowing Jesus?

for the group

as you gather...

- Paul prays ‘in the name of Jesus’ (v18). This was hugely significant for the early believers – they were both identifying closely with the ministry of Jesus and also claiming His spiritual authority of sin, disorder and opposition. Consider what it means to pray ‘in the name of Jesus’? How can we use such to identify with Jesus’ ministry and claim His authority?
- The twin threat of the gospel is both to people’s spiritual and economic allegiances (v19). Often when Jesus called people to follow him, it involved leaving certain attachments behind. Do we present a similar challenge to people today? What are the attachments in modern life that following Jesus should challenge? Do we duck the issue of what it costs?
- The violent earthquake is a symbol of the release that Jesus brings – everyone is set free (v26), including, ultimately the jailer and his household. The jailer is in fear for his life – his plea for salvation was physical, not spiritual (v30). What do people fear most today? How can the gospel release people from such fears?
- Paul and Silas are released, yet the magistrate want to do this secretly, without taking responsibility for the injustice of their imprisonment (v37). What does this tell us about whether there can be peace without justice?

prayer for the group

Father God, we live in a world where injustice is rife,
freedoms are rapidly being removed and persecution of
believers is on the increase.

We come to You Father, to lay before You all the men and
women who have had their freedoms removed.

Be with all who are suffering injustice and loss of their
freedoms, whether through government restrictions or
groups that are intent on harming them.

Thank you for our salvation in Christ, and thank you Father,
for the freedom we have in Him.

Thank you, that we have been released from this world’s
system and can rest in You. Amen.



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Apprentice

the mission journey continues Acts 17:1-15

thought for the week

There was some serious opposition coming from certain quarters in the synagogue in Thessalonica! Opposition that caused trouble to stir amongst the people not only in Thessalonica itself, but also in neighbouring Berea. What are we to make off this all these years later? The history of the growth and spread of the Christian faith from its early beginnings is littered with troubles if not persecution. There is a malevolent force at work in the world that is being displaced by the growing of the Kingdom of God and it won't lie down and give up quietly. Often we see this is the ministry of Jesus. As we see in these verses Paul and his followers were wise and took action to avoid trouble but sometimes it cannot be avoided and then we need to 'stand'.

verse for the week

As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures

Acts verse 2

prayer for the week

Help us Lord Jesus to be strong in you through your mighty power. Instruct us to put on the armour of God so we can take a firm stand against all strategies of the devil.

For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

As we follow you Jesus,
help us we pray.

Amen.

image for the week



reflection for each day

day one

As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures.

Reflect today on how you help fellow believers to further understand the scripture. Ask Jesus to help you in this.

day two

'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,' he said.

Remember today the core of the message of Good News that God has met us in Jesus and showed us the way to live in Gods presence all the days of our lives both on this earth and beyond.

day three

But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city.

Jealousy is not good! Seek out any jealousy in your own soul and give it to God for his healing. Seek to be content in what God has given you in the present moment.

day four

and Jason has welcomed them into his house'

In the midst of great trouble Jason found the grace to welcome these troublesome people into his house. What grace can you offer today to those who might trouble you?

day five

As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea.'

Sometimes we need to escape (rather than stand) Ask God to reveal to you the times when you need to move on rather than stand.

day six

As a result, many of them believed

The good news that we share and live will bring people to faith through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Remind yourself today that the Good News does change lives.

day seven

Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens

Ask Jesus to give you people to walk alongside you to help you arrive where Jesus would like you to arrive

for the group

as you gather...

- Discuss as a group how you know when to stand or when to move on.
- In the group reflect on difficult situations where you had to make a stand. What happened?
- Share some stories of thanksgiving where Jesus has helped you to avoid a trial.
- How do you show grace to people in the way that Jason did in this account?

prayer for the group

Jesus
lead us from temptation
and deliver us from evil
and give us eyes to see and hearts to obey
where temptation and evil arise in our lives
Amen.



continue the conversation

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the sermon in Athens

Acts 17:16-34

thought for the week

If the task were to create an image to represent God, how might you start? What materials might be incorporated? Surely the finest resources like gold and platinum and diamonds would only suffice? For perhaps the whole of human history, many have felt the need to represent their understanding of the divine through various imagery - art, song, drama, literature, and architecture are all ways that people have attempted to represent God. Some of these have worked better than others. However, the truth remains that this desire seems central to the human condition.

verse for the week

For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

Acts 17 verse 23

image for the week



prayer for the week

God, keep me from straying.
 You are the one who holds me together.
 My Lord, I have pledged myself - my life - to you.
 I have declared you to be the source of all good.
 Abandoning you for the things of the world would only increase my sorrows.
 I will not, in the strength you give me, search for relief outside of you or entertain thoughts of lesser joys.

Help me I pray. AMEN

reflection for each day

day one

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

Ask the Lord to make you aware, like Paul, of the idols that surround us in everyday life.

day two

So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks... in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there

Help us Lord Jesus to reason with those who are looking for a response from us that will glorify your name.

day three

'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious'

Just as Paul made an immediate connection with those around him, look out to make similar connections with those you come across

day four

'For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.'

Look out today for signs of God appearing in lives of those around us.

day five

'So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship'

Where do you see worship being given outside of God in your life. Offer repentance for this and look to make an appropriate change of life.

day six

'The God who made the world and everything in it, is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.'

Look out today to meet God where you are in each moment of the day.

day seven

'For in him we live and move and have our being.'

Worship God today for the gift of life given you by His grace.

for the group

as you gather...

- Discuss as a group what idols are prevalent in this day and age.
- In the group reflect on how these idols take a grip in your lives? How do you respond to this?
- Share some stories of how you have overcome the temptation to worship idols
- Share testimony of how you ‘move and have your being’ in God.

prayer for the group

Lord God
lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
AMEN.



continue the conversation

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Apprentice