



## NEVERTHELESS ... Acts 16:11-40

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### Background

The story we are looking at today takes place during Paul's second missionary journey. He and Barnabas had been sent out by their home church in Antioch. During his first journey, they travelled to the island of Crete (purple island) and then up into Galatia (dark green area), and then back to Antioch. After this journey, they went down to Jerusalem and told the church council there about God's work among the Gentiles and this council voted to affirm this work and set down some guidelines on how Jews and Gentiles could work together in the church. Paul sets out on his second journey from Jerusalem and goes up to his home base in Antioch. This time, Barnabas does not go with Paul and he has some new companions. You'll notice that our Bible reading today begins by talking about "we" and it is believed that this shows that the author of Acts, the physician Luke, is one of those travelling companions.

Paul then sets out to revisit the churches in Galatia to tell them what was discussed in Jerusalem. Paul wanted to go into the busy cities of Asia (orange area) but we are told that God prevented him. Later he will go into Asia and start churches in places like Ephesus and Colossae. Paul travels across the top of Asia and wants to go up into Bithynia (light green area) but once again, God says, "No". Paul eventually arrives at the port of Troas in the top west corner of Asia. There he has a dream of a man from Macedonia (part of today's Greece) calling him to come and share the Gospel with them.

In all this, we aren't told the "how's" or "why's" of God's direction – questions which immediately come to our minds! All we know is that God has a clear plan and Paul is responsive to His guiding. I think that it is interesting that Paul while Paul explores possibilities, he keeps asking God to direct his path as he goes along. In our desire to provide direction and certainty for the future, we like to

plan everything out, don't we? Because of this, I wonder if we sometimes miss out on seeing what God is doing and how He wants to involve us in His work. It's something to think about!

### **An auspicious beginning**

Once Paul receives the call to Macedonia, the team sets out again. This is where our reading this morning begins.

*<sup>11</sup>We boarded a boat at Troas and sailed straight across to the island of Samothrace, and the next day we landed at Neapolis. <sup>12</sup>From there we reached Philippi, a major city of that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. And we stayed there several days.*

*<sup>13</sup>On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we thought people would be meeting for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup>One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshiped God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying. <sup>15</sup>She and her household were baptized, and she asked us to be her guests. "If you agree that I am a true believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my home." And she urged us until we agreed. (Acts 16:11-15)*

They arrive in Philippi and, following their usual practice, they seek out any Jews living in the city. They go to a Jewish meeting place - a "place of prayer". In this case, it doesn't seem to be a formal synagogue. Maybe there weren't the required ten Jewish men in the city for this. In fact, in this report, all we hear of are women and at least one of them, Lydia, is not even a Jew, but only an interested non-Jew who is called a "God-fearer" or worshipper of God. Probably most men would have walked away on seeing a gathering of women like this. Women were not considered important, especially in Jewish religious life. However, Paul thinks it is worth his time to share the Gospel with them. God is at work and Lydia becomes the first believer in Europe. She opens her house to them and this becomes the birthplace of the first church in Europe.

This is an unusual, but exciting beginning to the work of God in Europe. Paul and his team are open to God's leading and go where He wants them to go. Then they just happen to encounter someone in whom God has been working and they are willing to share the Gospel with her even though she is an unusual person with whom to begin an evangelistic campaign! However, she responds wholeheartedly to the Gospel. Not only does she believe the truth of it, but she demonstrates her allegiance to the Gospel through her actions of hospitality. There were many places along this path where Paul and his team might have turned aside and gone a more expected route, but they followed God closely and had the blessing of being used by God and seeing Him at work. Again, I wonder ... do we miss God's plans for us because we don't stay flexible and allow Him to move us and use us as He wants?

### **A troublesome encounter**

On arriving in Philippi, Paul encounters two women. We've seen that the first one shows the evidence of God's work and is completely positive. The second one is very different.

*<sup>16</sup>One day as we were going down to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit that enabled her to tell the future. She earned a lot of money for her masters by telling fortunes. <sup>17</sup>She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved."*

<sup>18</sup> This went on day after day until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and said to the demon within her, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And instantly it left her.

<sup>19</sup> Her masters’ hopes of wealth were now shattered, so they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities at the marketplace. <sup>20</sup> “The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews!” they shouted to the city officials. <sup>21</sup> “They are teaching customs that are illegal for us Romans to practice.”

<sup>22</sup> A mob quickly formed against Paul and Silas, and the city officials ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden rods. <sup>23</sup> They were severely beaten, and then they were thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to make sure they didn’t escape. <sup>24</sup> So the jailer put them into the inner dungeon and clamped their feet in the stocks.

This encounter seems to start out positively. The Greek says “they just happened to meet” a demon-possessed slave girl. She proclaims that they have been sent by God with a message of salvation. Was this someone from the local religion turning to God? Was this the work of God again?

No, this woman has not been sent by God to proclaim the truth. Rather, she has been sent by Satan to harass and distract. We might wonder why she would be telling people about salvation, but as we saw in James, even the demons acknowledge God. They don’t choose to follow Him and accept His salvation, but they know Him and fear Him. It seems like Paul tried to just ignore her in the hope she would go away. But her constant shouting would have made it difficult for Paul to preach and people to listen. And Paul would not have wanted the message of the Gospel to be associated with her fortune-telling and the religious beliefs she represented. In the end he has to cast out the demon in order to be able to continue his ministry.

But this is not a positive development. We do not have any indication that the slave girl turns to God when she is delivered. Certainly, those using her do not believe because of what happens. When the demon leaves, their income also leaves, (same Greek word used) and this infuriates them. I’m reminded of when Jesus casts the demons out of the demoniac and into the pigs. All the villagers think about is the loss of their pigs! However, in that account, at least we read that the man believes in Jesus and tells others of his deliverance. Here, there is no indication of anything positive happening.

The owners of the slave girl are so angry they stir up the town against the Christians. But they are clever. Notice that they don’t mention their economic loss but complain that the Christians are doing things that are illegal for Romans. Philippi was a Roman city and the citizens had Roman citizenship. They would have been fiercely protective of this status and not want to do anything to jeopardise it. They seemingly react without stopping to ask any questions and inflict on Paul and Silas the worst punishment possible short of executing them – including imprisoning them in the most disagreeable conditions. The situation seems hopeless.

Have you ever felt like that? Have the circumstances of your life ever felt so negative that you can’t see a way forward? Maybe you have sought to follow God faithfully but have seemingly reached a hard place with no positive possibilities. Maybe this comes from issues with outside forces – bosses, neighbours, family members, COVID, natural disasters – the list goes on! Maybe it is just the reality of living in these finite bodies of ours which slow down and have glitches and give us grief. Sometimes, it seems like no matter what we do, life just doesn’t work the way we think that it should. We are left with more questions than answers.

## A miraculous salvation

Paul and Silas have hit bottom. But the story isn't finished yet!

*<sup>25</sup> Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! <sup>27</sup> The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted to him, "Stop! Don't kill yourself! We are all here!"*

*<sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*

*<sup>31</sup> They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household." <sup>32</sup> And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. <sup>33</sup> Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. <sup>34</sup> He brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God.*

One of the reasons I love working with young children is that they don't yet know the end of the story! They are hearing the Bible stories for the first time, and it is fun to see their joy at discovering the surprising ways God works. On the other hand, I am sure you have heard this story – and even taught it – many times. This is no surprise to you! However, let's try to look at it with fresh eyes.

Paul and Silas have been flogged and chained up and placed in a dark, dank cell with no idea what the future holds. However, instead of giving up, they are praying and singing hymns to God! How can they be doing that? Was it because their situation wasn't really that bad? Did they have some inside information that God was about to rescue them? Were they somehow protected from the pain of the flogging and the chains? No! Their situation was as bad as you can imagine, and probably worse. **Nevertheless**, they chose to keep their eyes fixed on God. This wasn't a new attitude for Paul, but one which had been cultivated through many trials and uncertainties – including being stoned and left for dead on his first missionary journey. By intentionally cultivating a strong relationship with God, Paul had developed an unshakeable trust in God. When Paul and Silas were singing and praying, they weren't seeking to downplay their hopeless situation. Instead, they were choosing to take that situation to God and place their faith in His ability to take them through it

And then God stepped in and did something totally unexpected. I am not sure where the biggest miracles lie in this event. Was it the perfect timing of the earthquake or that, as massive as it was, it didn't bring down the roof on top of them? Was it that the prisoners were freed from their chains by the earthquake or that Paul was able to stop them from running away? Was it the release from prison or the salvation of a whole household? They are all miracles!

Suddenly, everything is turned upside down. Notice that the jailer who had asserted his authority over Paul and Silas by locking them away in chains, now *"fell down trembling"* before them and called them *"Masters"* (stronger than the polite "Sirs" of our translation). There is some debate as to whether the jailer was seeking spiritual salvation or just salvation from punishment for escaped prisoners. In any case, Paul gives him both. None of the prisoners run away. It is hard to image how Paul convinced them to hang around, but maybe as they listened to Paul and Silas praying and singing praises despite their situation, the other prisoners came to respect them and were willing to go along with his suggestion that they not run away.

And then the jailer and all his household hear the word of the Lord and believe. The words used show the completeness of the salvation in both number and depth – the Gospel is shared with all the household, and everyone is baptised, and the entire household rejoiced because they all believe in God. This is before Paul and Silas are vindicated – there was no guarantee that the jailer and his family would not also be punished for becoming believers. But despite the possible danger, they are so strong in their belief that they are baptised and display public hospitality toward those the city had rejected.

Paul and Silas are in a desperate situation. **Nevertheless**, they remember their mission and seize every opportunity which God gives them to share the Gospel. They could have run away and saved themselves. But they choose to stay and be a channel of salvation to those who had once been their enemies. This shows courage and perseverance and compassion under duress. Because they trusted God to take care of them, they could focus on loving and serving others. And they continue to do this as the story finishes.

### **A final vindication**

*<sup>35</sup> The next morning the city officials sent the police to tell the jailer, “Let those men go!” <sup>36</sup> So the jailer told Paul, “The city officials have said you and Silas are free to leave. Go in peace.”*

*<sup>37</sup> But Paul replied, “They have publicly beaten us without a trial and put us in prison—and we are Roman citizens. So now they want us to leave secretly? Certainly not! Let them come themselves to release us!”*

*<sup>38</sup> When the police reported this, the city officials were alarmed to learn that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. <sup>39</sup> So they came to the jail and apologized to them. Then they brought them out and begged them to leave the city. <sup>40</sup> When Paul and Silas left the prison, they returned to the home of Lydia. There they met with the believers and encouraged them once more. Then they left town.*

Why didn't Paul and Silas just leave? I think it was because they had been accused of being anti-Roman and treated in a way designed to publicly shame them. This accusation and shame would have been attached to everyone else in the new church. By demanding their rights as Roman citizens (remember, the locals were very proud and protective of their citizenship) and forcing the officials to apologise and even beg, they were clearing the church of stigma and protecting them from similar accusations in the future. This was solidified when they returned to Lydia's house and met with the believers - including the jailer and his household – before leaving. They weren't run out of town; they left when they decided the time was right! This final vindication was for the good of the brand-new church and not for themselves personally.

### **Nevertheless ...**

Paul's first experiences in Europe were a real rollercoaster! He arrived as a direct result of God's leading, and this was affirmed when they have a convert as the result of their very first witness. It seems that God has prepared the way for them. But then they run into opposition and end up in a dark place. **Nevertheless**, they keep trusting God, praising God and open to the opportunities He brings across their path. They experience a miraculous rescue, and the church is strengthened before they head out of town. I think I would have been ready for a day off – or maybe two!

I think we can all agree that we are a bit tired with all that life has been throwing at us lately. How we wish that we could go back to the certainties of our pre-COVID lives! And yet, even then things were not as certain as we would have liked. For instance, sickness and aging were just as devastating then as they are now. Jobs were just as difficult, and relationships were just as fragile.

Even before COVID, we faced a difficult road as a church as we recovered from the failure of someone we trusted.

But it is true that these past couple of years have upset our world in some new ways. We are more worried by disease as we have seen that even modern medicine cannot eliminate threats. We are more aware of the vulnerability of our lives as we have seen fires and floods and COVID devastate communities and disrupt supply of things we have always taken for granted – like toilet paper and lettuce! We have felt the frustration of not being able to plan with certainty or count on things happening as they have in the past. There is a growing sense, as COVID continues to disrupt lives, that things may never be quite the same again.

How do we live with this reality? God does not expect us to cover up the hard times and pretend that everything is easy. Instead, although we acknowledge the difficulties, **nevertheless**, we can choose to trust Him and praise Him – to agree with Paul and Silas that God is worthy of our praise even when life is dark. This is only possible as we seek God and allow Him to fill our minds and hearts with His truth and His love. As we come to know Him deeply, we will learn to trust Him completely. By the time Paul and Silas were thrown into prison, their faith and trust in God were rock-solid as a result of all God had brought them through. And it is encouraging to see that God doesn't leave Paul on his own but gives him Silas as a companion in suffering and praise. We all have times when our faith wanes and we need someone to direct our hearts back to God again. I know this is true of me!

But it doesn't stop there. As we praise Him, we will begin to see that although the situation is dark, **nevertheless**, God is still at work. He will open our eyes to see what He is doing and the opportunities He is giving us to join Him in that work. We don't have to wait until everything settles down to share the Gospel and to love others in Jesus' name. In fact, sometimes it is the very difficulties of life which open up new possibilities and cause people to seek new answers to their problems. I think this is particularly helpful for us to realise in our current situation. The temptation would be to wait until things settle down before looking for ways to serve those around us and share the Gospel with them. I was so happy to see the way the church has taken up the challenge to support Padstow Community Care, as well as our usual ministries. Let's keep our eyes and ears open for other opportunities which God may give us in the coming days. As we trust God for ourselves, may this free us up to explore new ways we can help others.

If you are like me, I need reminders of things God has taught me – reminders to keep my eyes fixed on Him when life gets complicated. In your newsletter today you will find a card with the word "**nevertheless**" on it. It is purple in honour of Lydia, the purple cloth merchant, who was the first European believer. I'm going to put mine on the refrigerator to remind me that, although life may throw some difficult things at me, **nevertheless**, I can choose to trust God and look for the opportunities He gives me to serve Him. On the back, you might want to write down any difficult circumstances you are facing. A year from now you can look at it and be reminded of how God has been faithful.

Although life is difficult at times, **nevertheless**, we can choose to keep our trust in God and keep our eyes open to the opportunities He will bring across our path. This is how we can walk through these uncertain times with our God.