

Three Encounters with God

Lesson 7

villagebible.church/unstoppable

DEVOTIONAL

God uses some unusual means to bring people to salvation. Charles Spurgeon tells of a man who once went to a chapel to listen to the singing, but he didn't want to hear the preaching. So as soon as the pastor began speaking, the man put his fingers in his ears. But after a while, an insect landed on his face, and so he had to take one finger out of his ear to brush it off. Just as he did, the pastor said, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear." The man listened, and God met him at that point to his soul's conversion (*Spurgeon's Sermons* [Baker], 1:306).

A missionary to Africa many years ago told of a woman who came to every service, accompanied by her dog. She would sit on the outside, next to the aisle. At the end of the service, when the pastor gave the invitation to come forward for prayer, she would go forward, and the dog would come along beside her.

The woman's husband was a hard, abusive man. In fact, he beat her so severely because of her Christian lifestyle that she died. There must not have been any law enforcement in that part of Africa then, because the man was not arrested. So he was left alone with the dog. He began to notice that every Wednesday evening about 7 p.m. the dog would disappear for about two hours. Also, every Sunday morning, the dog would leave about 9 and return about noon. Sunday evening, again the dog would leave for a couple of hours and then return.

The man's curiosity was so aroused that he decided to follow the dog. He followed it to the church and he took a seat in the back to watch. The dog sat down near the aisle, in his usual place. After the service, he watched the dog go forward and take his place at the altar, where his wife had prayed. The man was so touched in his spirit that he, too, went forward and gave his life to Christ. So God used a dog to lead a hardened sinner to repentance!

We may not have any stories quite like that here today, but if we went around the room, we would hear some very different ways that God worked to bring each of us to salvation. Our text shows us three very different people who had different encounters with God. We cannot be sure that the second person, the slave girl, actually got saved, since the text does not say. But we can hope that she was saved, since God delivered her from demonic forces. But these three encounters with God teach us that...

God providentially works to draw very different people to Himself through the same gospel.

These three encounters may seem insignificant, but actually they were the beginning of a movement that changed world history. I'm sure that the Roman Emperor, Claudius, would have shrugged his shoulders in apathy if he had learned that a little Jewish man named Paul had set foot on European soil to tell people about Jesus Christ. Claudius had more important matters to attend to than this! And yet this was the beginning of Christianity in Europe, and its influence there changed the world. These three encounters should encourage us to be faithful to share our faith as we see how God uses the gospel to save different people.

OPEN IT

1. Take some time to briefly share how you first encountered God in a real and personal way.

READ IT

Acts 16:11–40 (You can follow along in Paul's footsteps with the help of the following map)



EXPLORE IT

2. What do we learn about Lydia from our text?
3. What caused the authorities in Philippi to incarcerate Paul and Silas? How did they respond to their incarceration?
4. What happened while they were in prison and what did the other inmates do as a result?
5. How did this affect the jailer?

APPLY IT

LET'S CHECK IN AND SEE HOW THINGS ARE GOING (Acts 15:36)

After experiencing the famous vision of “a man of Macedonia” imploring him to bring help to Europe, Paul and his companions undoubtedly reflected on their journey thus far. They had been driven west by crosswinds of failure and rejection, and they interpreted this correctly as God’s loving direction. God was leading them to Europe. “From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days” (vv. 11-12).

Philippi was an ancient town, having been renamed in 356 B.C. by Philip II of Macedon after himself. With the expansion of the Roman Empire, it became a Roman possession in 167 B.C. But its greatest fame came from the fact that it happened to be the place where the armies of Mark Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius in the decisive battle of the second Roman civil war in 42 B.C. It was from this event that Philippi derived its character in Paul’s day because for its part in the battle it was awarded the status of a Roman colony that answered directly to the Roman emperor. Roman soldiers were encouraged to retire there, and its citizens were exempt from provincial taxes. Paul and company were now in for a complete cross-cultural missionary experience! Rome did not know it, but the flag of Christianity was unfurled in the Empire that day, and the reigning Christ was about to win many to himself.¹

6. **For millennia armies have sought to conquer Europe, and while some have, they have done so for limited amounts of time. How does knowing that Christianity has persevered for the last two centuries encourage us to share the gospel in our world?**

The missionaries may have stayed a number of weeks (Stott, *Message of Acts*, 262). While probably several people were converted during this time (see v. 40), Luke only records three conversions—probably to display “how God breaks down dividing barriers and can unite in Christ people of very different kinds” (ibid.). These encounters should encourage us as we behold Jesus’s power and grace in transforming people. They should also instruct us as we consider how three different types of people, in three different events that led to their conversions, were reached by the one and only Savior.²

Consider this chart adapted from Tim Keller’s *Church Planter Manual* (pg. 102):

Converts	Ethnically	Economically	Spiritually	Event
Lydia	Asian	Wealthy	God fearer	Public exposition
Slave girl	Greek	Poor	Demon possessed	Dramatic exorcism
Jailer	Roman	Blue-collar	Indifferent	Powerful miracle

¹ Hughes, R. Kent. *Acts: The Church Afire (Preaching the Word)* (Kindle Locations 3879-3903). Crossway. Kindle Edition

² Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 5015-5025). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

MY FAIR LADY

Macedonian women were noted for their independence. Under Roman law a freeborn woman with three children or a freed-woman with four children had the right to own property and enter into legal transactions without the consent of a husband or father. Many Macedonian women became highly influential.

One such woman was Lydia, a God-fearing Gentile who heard Paul preach at the riverside prayer meeting. She conducted a successful business in purple cloth dyed with the secretions of a rare Mediterranean shellfish. So rare and costly was this dye only the wealthy could afford the cloth. Trading in this exquisite fabric had made Lydia wealthy. And she was head of her own household. The Lord opened Lydia's heart, and she believed in Jesus, becoming the first person on the European continent to turn to Christ. After she and her entire household were baptized she persuaded the team to stay at her home.³

11. Scholars seem to agree that Lydia was a very rich and influential member of Macedonian society. How can earthly wealth and prestige hinder the gospel's work within the upper class?

We don't want to miss the fact that the initial audience in Philippi was female. As Furneaux notes, "The 'man of Macedonia' turned out to be a group of women." While Paul often takes a lot of flak for being something of a chauvinist, it is interesting that he, with Silas, Timothy, and Luke, were quite comfortable evangelizing women. Through the spread of the gospel, Christianity did more to abolish slavery and to liberate women than any other movement in history! The language used here—"we sat down and spoke to the women"—suggests that each of the four missionaries sat down by the river and shared the gospel with the women present.⁴

12. The missionary team (which consisted of all men) interacted and dialogued with the women who had gathered to pray on the riverside. What benefit comes from the two genders dialoguing about spiritual things together?

What can make such interactions challenging?

³ Girard, Robert C.. *The Book of Acts* (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 3526-3531). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/gods-great-work/>

13. We are told that Lydia was a “God-fearing woman” (NET) and yet she was not a Christian. Is this even possible? Explain your answer.

How common is it for people today to fear God and yet not follow Christ and His Word? What types of things keep these “God-fearing people” from fully and truly believing?

Here we see God’s ordinary way of regeneration. God works sovereignly in bringing new birth through the means of the exposition of Scripture. There are other ways, of course: personal evangelism, reading a Christian book, a providence of God that draws unbelievers to consider the claims of God. But one way or another, an unbeliever reaches the point where he or she is addressed by God’s Word in Scripture about Jesus Christ. Lydia heard the truth of God’s Word, and as she did so, the Spirit enabled her to receive it. Lydia’s will was loosened from its bondage; her mind was clarified to grasp the coherence and logic of the gospel; her affections were drawn after Jesus Christ so that she took hold of him as he was offered to her in the preaching of the apostle.⁵

14. What fruit was exhibited in Lydia's life that validated her new-found faith in Christ?

Hospitality, by the way, is a biblical evidence of salvation. When God opens a person’s heart to Christ then they open their homes to Christians. As Barclay notes, When Paul is describing the Christian character he says that the Christian should be “given to hospitality” (Romans 12:13). When Peter is urging the Christian duty upon his converts he tells them, “Use hospitality to each other and never grudge it” (1 Peter 4:9). A Christian home is a home with an ever-open door. Hospitality, as defined biblically, is not opening your home to your closest friends. The word, as it is used in Scripture, literally means “a lover of strangers.” Christian hospitality extends to all of God’s people, whether they are known to us or not.⁶

15. What makes hospitality such a critical component of Christianity? What has made it such a lost art?

⁵ Thomas, Derek W. H.. Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries) (p. 457). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/gods-great-work/>

PSYCHIC FRIENDS NETWORK

In this passage we have the account of a demon-possessed woman who was converted. This happened “as we went to prayer.” Presumably, this means that, as in v. 13, they were going to the place of prayer, possibly on the Sabbath. As they did so, they encountered “a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination.” The phrase “spirit of divination” literally means “a pythonic spirit.” Longnecker explains the significance of this term:

The Python was a mythical serpent or dragon that guarded the temple and oracle of Apollo, located on the southern slope of Mount Parnassus to the north of the Gulf of Corinth. It was supposed to have lived at the foot of Mount Parnassus and to have eventually been killed by Apollo (cf. Strabo Geography 9.3.12). Later the word python came to mean a demon-possessed person through whom the Python spoke—even a ventriloquist was thought to have such a spirit living in his or her belly. Undoubtedly all who knew the girl regarded her as neither fraudulent nor insane but as demon possessed and able to foretell the future.

This young woman was not in some way mentally ill. She was not insane. She was demon possessed. And, like so many vulnerable women throughout history, she was abused by men who sought to profit through her evil behaviour. She was a tool and a toy of their depravity. As Erdman notes, “There are men today who are willing to acquire wealth by the degradation of womanhood, and who resent as impertinent intrusion every attempt to deliver their victims from the power of sin.”⁷

16. Why were people not only then but also today so infatuated with fortune tellers? What examples of this pursuit are seen today, and why are they unbecoming for a Christian to engage with?

17. Paul and Silas are beaten and imprisoned for ruining the business that these men had because of the young woman's demonic power. What businesses might be angry with our gospel endeavors today?

JAILHOUSE ROCK

Philippi's maximum-security cell was no Holiday Inn. It was colder than a witch's elbow and blacker than the ace of spades and smellier than road tar. The stocks were ingeniously designed to immobilize the feet and legs for maximum discomfort. This torture was often used on early Christians. Such were the accommodations enjoyed in the Philippian stockade. Backs bruised and torn, punished illegally for an act of mercy, these crazy Christian fanatics had no time for self-pity. Rejoicing was the order of the evening!

About midnight the stockade echoed with the sound of two Jewish-accented male voices singing hymns! As a kid in church, I remember an old fire-and-brimstone preacher saying, “Paul sang tenor, Silas sang baritone, and God joined in with a thundering bass that shook the prison so violently stocks fell off, locks shattered, doors flew open, and the prisoners' chains fell away!” All might have escaped, but none did. In the dungeon dark, the Lord Jesus touched people who could be reached no other way. “*The [other] prisoners were listening*” (Acts 16: 25 NKJV). Their chains broke too. They could have escaped but didn't. The jailer found Jesus. The other prisoners got a taste of the gospel.⁸

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Girard, Robert C.. The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 3580-3586). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

- 18. These men had very little to rejoice about from an earthly perspective and yet they sang their hearts out. What is it about our faith that allows us to rejoice amidst great suffering and trials?**

This must have been quite the sight. The other prisoners had no doubt seen a lot of cell mates, but never quite like these two. They had no doubt witnessed a lot of cursing and protestations of innocence, but their two newest cell mates “*were praying and singing hymns to God.*” And this was no private devotion, for “*the prisoners were listening to them.*”⁹

- 19. In what ways can our response to trials and tribulations serve as a witness to those around us? When have you seen this firsthand?**

- 20. The men had received a “get out of jail free card” in Philippi. Why didn’t they take it and what can we learn from their example?**

Our study sees three episodes of people changed by the sharing of the gospel. Who needs the power of the gospel made known to them this week? Ask God to open the hearts of those around you.

⁹Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/gods-great-work/>