

**NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - PART SEVENTEEN - CHAPTERS 16 & 17**

Timothy's mother and grandmother had been converted during Paul's first seemingly disastrous visit to Lystra, (14:8-20; II Tim.1:5) and Paul had led Timothy himself to Christ when he returned to Lystra a short time later. (14:21-23; II Tim.1:6) In marrying a Greek, Timothy's mother had compromised her Jewish faith as shown by the fact that she had neglected to have him circumcised. (Exod.34:16; Deut.7:3,4; Gen.17:12) In circumcising Timothy, Paul was helping the family to show fruit of repentance as wayward Jews, not compromising the principle of salvation by faith alone. (16:3)

Timothy was ready for missionary training. His life and ministry were already highly regarded in his own town as well as in the neighbouring one. (16:2) Teaching that confirmed that we are saved by faith alone strengthened the church in faith. Growth in faith brings growth in numbers. (16:4,5) Verse 5 brings Luke's fourth major section of his letter to a conclusion. (Compare with 6:7; 9:31; 12:24) Problems had been overcome and the gospel continued to spread. The next step was Europe.

For a short time, Paul, Silas and Timothy struggled with God's guidance. The next obvious move seemed to them to be Ephesus, capital of the province of Asia, but God knew that Ephesus was not yet ready for the gospel. Zigzagging uncertainly northwest they came to Troas, ancient Troy, famous for its wooden horse. Only a short strip of sea separated them from Macedonia and Europe but to Paul it was a mental barrier preventing him seeing the obvious. It took dramatic intervention in the form of a vision of a Macedonian calling for help to break through that barrier. Paul was later to describe it as 'a door was opened for me in the Lord'. (II Cor.2:12) All too often we talk about God opening doors for us in terms of circumstances becoming favourable, when the doors He really wants to open are doors of expectation in our imaginations, despite difficult circumstances. (16:6-10)

From 16:10 until Paul and Silas are arrested, the narrative is in the first person, 'we' and 'us'. Luke, the doctor, joined the group. He met Paul in Troas where Paul may have led him to Christ. If so he had a short time of teaching as they travelled, and a few weeks to observe Paul and the others in action before being left behind in Philippi, presumably as the first pastor of the little fellowship. It is interesting to consider how well he must have learned from Paul the secret of continuing to learn on his own, with the Holy Spirit as his teacher, after such a short training.

Philippi was an ancient town named after Philip II of Macedon, founder of the Greek empire. It was enlarged by the Romans who settled ex-soldiers there after the civil war in 42BC to guard Rome's frontier. It had a famous medical school where it is possible Luke had trained. If so he would be returning home. He is likely to have practised medicine in Philippi to support his pastoral work. (16:11,12)

Beside the city is a fast flowing stream where Paul found the Jewish women's prayer group. As always he started with those who had some knowledge of the scriptures. There is a lovely sequence of ideas; Paul opened his mouth; the Lord opened Lydia's heart and she opened her home. The whole family came to Christ as did the jailer's family later in the chapter. (16:13-15)

The Christians continued to meet for prayer and teaching beside the river where all were welcome, but soon they were receiving some unwelcome publicity. Presumably the demon possessed girl's tone of voice was mocking even though her information was almost true. As is so often the case with spiritist teaching, what she literally said was 'a way of salvation', not 'the way'. John 14:6 has always brought such hostile reaction from other religions and cults for this very reason. The presently popular New Age movement which is simply spiritism in a new guise says that Jesus provides a way among many to God. Paul's command to the demon to leave her was obeyed but there is no record of whether she became a Christian. It was for the sake of the freedom of the gospel that Paul did this rather than to meet the girl's spiritual need. Jesus Christ would be waiting to enter her life on the basis of her repentance and faith, exactly the same as the conditions for Him entering anyone else's life. (16:16-18)

As was so often the case, Paul and Silas' persecutors found excuse in national pride to cover their real motive of financial loss. As usual there was a willing mob who did not need to know reasons for violence against two innocent men. (16:19-23)

The jailer's conversion was a wonderful example of the trouble God will go to for just one family who need Him. Being a jailer was a full time, live-in job so the preachers had to come to him. They probably could not have come except as prisoners. The Lord planned a special earthquake just for this family.(16:24-29)

God spoke to him through the joy of Paul and Silas as much as through the horror of his own situation. The loss of a jailer's life would be the price of a prisoner escaping. His Roman masters would not accept an earthquake as an excuse. It was not these things which converted him but a response of faith to the word of God.(16:30-32)

Again we are shown how the Lord is very interested in whole families trusting Him. Lydia's and the jailer's homes were obviously the first two bases from which the Christian church reached out in Philippi.(16:33,34)

Paul's initial refusal to leave jail until the magistrates personally released them was not a matter of pride but to allow maximum conviction in the magistrates' hearts which might provide some protection for later Christian workers in Philippi.(16:35-40)

From Philippi, Paul, Silas and Timothy moved south through three very different places, Thessalonica, Berea and Athens.

17:1-4 Q.1 As usual Paul started in the synagogue whenever there was one. What can we learn from these verses about Paul's methods of persuading people there to become Christians? Isn't intellectual reasoning contrary to faith? Why are people often not persuaded by our witnessing?

17:5-9 Q.2 What motivated these Jews to persecute the Christians? What does this story demonstrate about the divisive effect of the gospel? What charges were brought against Paul and the others? Were they true? What does it tell us about the effectiveness of their ministry? What conclusion should we draw if the first half of this charge cannot be brought against our ministry?

17:10-12 Q.3 How was the response in Berea different from that in Thessalonica? What is a 'noble-minded' congregation? How can we recognise one today? What was the effect of being 'noble-minded'?

17:13-15 Q.4 What does this section teach us about the evangelistic zeal of opponents of the gospel? Was Paul a coward to leave as soon as there was opposition?(14:3) Why did Paul leave Silas and Timothy behind for a while?

17:16,17 Q.5 What was Paul's first impression of Athens? What would be a similar place today? What were the two prongs of his strategy to reach such a city? Why were they so appropriate?

17:18-21 Q.6 What different kinds of response did Paul meet when he first preached the gospel in Athens? Was the Athenians' interest to hear more an indication of a spiritual openness or something else? How do we encounter the same attitude?

17:22-27 Q.7 Why did Paul not immediately attack their sin of idolatry? What was he recognising in the Athenians and making use of that we may also recognise and use today? What was Paul's gospel for the Athenians? How was his message here similar to the one in Lystra? (14:15) How and to whom might it be appropriate for us to present a similar gospel today?

17:28,29 Q.8 Having drawn on the Athenians' inner knowledge of God and the evidence from creation Paul now drew on a third source of previous understanding of truth. What was it? How then did Paul lead them towards a conclusion which would prepare them to hear of Jesus? How can we do the same today bearing in mind the different cultures from which people come?

17:30-34 Q.9 What did Paul tell the Athenians of Jesus and the response they needed to make to God and God's judgement? What are the absolutely essential things people need to know to become Christians? What three responses were there to the gospel preached at Athens? What forms do these same three responses take for us?