

Creekside Community Church  
Primal Church: The Acts of the Apostles  
March 29th, 2015  
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**The Many Ways We Meet Jesus**  
**Acts 16:1-40**

My friend Trey and I used to work together in youth ministry. Trey has an unbelievable conversion story. It's thrilling. It involves mansions, and drugs, and even a murder plot. And, by contrast, my conversion story isn't very thrilling. So Trey was always a tough act to follow. He'd get up and speak. And he'd talk about fame, and fortune, and drug cartels. And then I'd get up, and say, "*well, I came to Jesus as a kid. And since then, I've kinda kept on existing.*" It was anticlimactic. And at times, I envied Trey. I wanted that *dramatic* conversion story. But over time, I've realized that God meets each of us in a unique way.

I'm reminded of this every time we do a membership interview. At Creekside, we interview new members. And we ask them, "*how did you get saved?*" And I love that question; because I'm always surprised by the answer. There's no formula. God saves random people, randomly. People have different ethnicities. They come from different cultures; different socio-economic backgrounds. Some were secular. Others dabbled in new-age spirituality. Some people converted after having a knockdown, drag-out intellectual fight with Jesus. Others converted after seeing a vision. Some people almost experienced pre-natal salvation; they just shot out of the womb, and into the worship service. Others got saved very late in life. People meet Jesus in many different ways.

And the Bible attests to this. In today's passage, three very different people meet Jesus in three very different ways. And I think we can glean two things from this: first, that God meets us right where we are; at our point of deepest need. And second, we should meet people in the same way. We're Christ's representatives. And just as there's no formula for coming to Jesus; there's no formula for sharing him with others. We must be sensitive to God's leading; and, to the uniqueness of each person we encounter.

If you have a Bible, turn to Acts 16. Acts is the New Testament history of the earliest Christians. And up to this point in our study, we've focused on the big picture. We've seen how the gospel has advanced among groups; how it has spread to Jews, to Samaritans, and to Gentiles. But Acts 16 is more personal. It's not so much about groups, as individuals. In this passage, an affluent businesswoman meets Jesus. And Jesus meets her intellectual need. A marginalized, demon-possessed slave-girl meets Jesus. And Jesus meets her spiritual need. And,

then a despondent city-jailer meets Jesus. And Jesus meets his moral need.<sup>1</sup>

**1. Meeting Jesus at the End of Our Righteousness:** The first convert in this chapter is Lydia. But we don't meet her until verse 14. Before meeting Lydia, Paul and his team trek across Asia Minor, and sail across the Aegean Sea. And there are several lessons we can glean from their roundabout journey. Let's look at the passage. *"And he came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, <sup>2</sup> and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. <sup>3</sup> Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. <sup>4</sup> Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees, which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. <sup>5</sup> So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily."*

Last week, we read about a very important meeting in Jerusalem. The church's leaders assemble to debate a crucial issue; do Gentiles – non-Jews – have to be circumcised in order to be saved? Do they need to become Jews in order to be right with God? And the council ultimately decides that the answer is, *"no."* Gentiles don't need to become Jews. They only need to trust in Jesus. The leaders send a letter to the Gentile churches, explaining their decision. They commission people to deliver the letter. One of them is Silas. And at the end of chapter 15, he and Paul team up. And they begin travelling through Asia Minor, delivering the council's decision. And the letter is well-received. According to verse 5, churches are *"strengthened"* as they hear the council's ruling.

So, it appears that the church has reached a consensus. Gentiles are saved by faith; not by the Law. And that makes verse 3 incredibly odd, doesn't it? Paul meets a young believer named Timothy. He recruits him for ministry. But then, Paul circumcises him. And that's weird, isn't it? Really, it seems like a blatant inconsistency. In chapter 15, Paul is adamant; *"Gentiles do not have to be circumcised to be saved."* Now, it seems like he's saying, *"well...maybe Timothy does."* Paul preaches a circumcision-free gospel. But does he deny it in practice? No. He's doesn't. Actually, it's quite the opposite. And here's why.

The issue here isn't salvation, it's contextualization. Timothy is a believer. He's already saved. But, remember Paul's context. He's trying to reach Jews. And Timothy's cultural status is ambiguous. His dad is Greek. But his mom is Jewish. Now, some Jews would have considered him Greek, on account of his dad. But others would have considered him Jewish, on account of his mom. So Timothy could have become a major distraction. Some Jews would have said, *"This is an uncircumcised Jew! He's an apostate! Why should we listen to him?!"* But others would have said, *"He's not a Jew, He's a Greek!"* Timothy could have become a source of contention. And Paul doesn't want to make *this* the issue. And the gospel motivates this decision. The

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from John Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, The Church and The World* (TBST: Leicester, UK: IVP, 1990); 268-70.

gospel frees us; we are saved by faith, not laws or rituals. But the gospel also constrains us. When we taste God's goodness, we're compelled to tell others about it. And so, we gladly enter someone else's cultural world, so they can hear our message; and, hear it free from distraction. And that's convicting! This is costly for Timothy, isn't it? *"Timothy, I want you to join our team. Here's the plan. We'll preach the gospel in extremely dangerous and hostile places. But first, you need to undergo a very painful surgical procedure."* I mean, *"where do I sign up?"* right? Only the gospel could motivate this.

Paul is building his team. He wants to continue ministering in Asia Minor. But God has other plans: *"And they passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; <sup>7</sup> and when they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; <sup>8</sup> and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. <sup>9</sup> And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a certain man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." <sup>10</sup> And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."*

God redirects this team, and sends them to Macedonia. Here's a rough approximation of their travel route. Let's look at Paul and Tim's excellent adventure (and if you don't get that reference, you're not a child of the 80's). The team begins in South Turkey. They go through Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. Then, they want to go southwest, to the province of Asia. But God says, *"no."* So, they pass through Phrygia and Galatia. They come up here to Mysia, in northwest Turkey. And they want to head north, towards the Black Sea. But again, God says, *"no."* God won't let them go southwest. He won't let them go north. And presumably, they don't want to go east, and return home. So, they travel northwest, to the coastal city of Troas. And there, God opens a door. Paul has a vision. He sees a Macedonian man pleading for help. So the team decides to sail across the Aegean sea, and go to Macedonia.

I think this travel-narrative has some important implications for us. First, God's plan doesn't always seem efficient. Why does God make this team wander across the country? Why doesn't he just say, *"go to Macedonia!"* Honestly, I don't know. But it's a good reminder. God has his own timetable. And he isn't rushing. We live in an efficiency-obsessed culture, don't we? Android had a commercial several years ago. A man is working on his Android phone. He's multi-tasking. And he's getting tons of work done. And then, he begins turning into a robot. And the voice-over says, *"this phone will turn your hands into instruments of efficiency."* And I thought, *"wow, do I really want to become an instrument\_of efficiency?"* *"I want to become a productivity cyborg."* Really? We love instant things. But God's path isn't instant. Often, it's not even straight. God can effect outcomes quickly, or slowly. But what he's after is *faith*; and faith grows slowly. And that's so important to remember. God is taking us where he wants to go. He's just not taking the route we would have chosen. So we must relax, and learn to enjoy the roundabout journey.

God doesn't work on our timetable. Here's a second implication; we discern God's will *together*. Some people assume that God's will is basically a private matter. God leads us through private impressions, or inaudible messages. I think people want that kind of leading, especially when faced with a big decision. I went to a Christian college. Occasionally, someone would end a dating relationship. And they'd say, *"I'm sorry. God told me not to marry you."* And that's like the worst form of rejection, right? As my wife says, it's like saying, *"Not only am I rejecting you. So is God!"* We need to be very careful with private feelings, and impressions. Look at how God leads this team. It's clearly supernatural. But it isn't private. The team goes to Macedonia, after *"concluding"* (v. 10) that it's God's will. That word *"concluding"* refers to making a decision *after* considering all the relevant data. Paul has a supernatural vision. But he doesn't presume to know God's will. Instead, he discusses his vision with the team. And they make a decision based on all the available evidence. They discern God's will together. We see this time and again in Acts. In chapter 13, the Spirit speaks to the whole church. In chapter 15, the church's leaders discern God's will after deliberation, and argument. So what's the application? Well, I think it's wise for us to make major decisions in dialogue with other Christians. After all, the same Spirit who dwells in you, dwells in them. And we're all reading the same Bible. So, I need to take the counsel of godly believers very seriously. I can't just punt to my private impressions, and say, *"sorry, God told me to do it."*

Paul and his team set sail. But first, they also recruit Luke to join their team. Notice verse 10. Luke doesn't say, *"they set sail."* He says, *"we set sail."* Apparently, Luke was living in Troas. And now, the author steps into his own story! And that's significant for two reasons. First, it's significant historically. Luke now claims to be an eyewitness. And it's clear that he's intimately acquainted with the geography, politics, and culture of ancient Macedonia. So this is one argument for the historicity of Acts. Second, this explains the personal feel of chapter 16. Luke tells us how the church in Philippi began. But he doesn't give a generic description. Instead, he tells three conversion stories. These are people he actually met.

And the first is Lydia. *"Therefore putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis;<sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days.<sup>13</sup> And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled.<sup>14</sup> And a certain woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.<sup>15</sup> And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us."*

Paul and his team arrive in Philippi. It's the Sabbath; the Jewish day of worship. The team searches for a synagogue. They hope to find Jews, gathered for worship. But as they're

looking, they meet Lydia, along with some other women.

Lydia is an impressive individual. She's originally from Thyatira, a city renowned for its purple dyes. She may have represented a Thyatiran manufacturer. Purple cloth was extremely popular in the Roman world. And Lydia is a successful saleswoman. She's wealthy. She owns a large house. And, she works independently of her husband. That means she's either widowed, or divorced. In any case, she supports her household. Lydia is also impressive morally. She's a God-fearer; a Gentile who sympathizes with the Jewish faith, and prays to Israel's God. So even though Lydia is a Gentile, she's seeking the one true God.

As Paul and his team explain the gospel, Lydia hangs on every word. And as she listens, Jesus opens her heart to believe. In Scripture, your "*heart*" is the center of identity. And it encompasses what we would call, "*the mind*." So Lydia isn't necessarily having a "*heartfelt*" experience. Rather, God is working through her intellect. He causes her to grasp the content of Paul's message. He persuades her of Paul's argument. Soon after, she and her household are baptized. She hosts Paul and his team. And her house becomes the base of missionary operations in Philippi.

Some people meet Jesus at their lowest point. Others meet him at their highest. But they realize that their "*highpoint*" isn't that high. Lydia is morally upright. But she sees her need for Jesus. I was talking with a Creeksider recently. He was sharing his testimony. And he said, "*in High School, I set out to get every girl I wanted; to get the best grades; and to be the most popular.*" And I asked, "*so what happened?*" He said, "*the worst thing possible; I got exactly what I wanted. I got every girl. I got the grades. Everyone liked me. And it left me totally empty. It didn't satisfy.*" Jesus saves us from destructive things. But he also saves us from the futility of good things; from the things we thought would satisfy us, but don't.

And notice, God meets Lydia's intellectual need. For her, the truth question is crucial; "*is Jesus who he says he is? Is this plausible?*" And if you're skeptical of Christ's claims – if you're questioning – we're thrilled that you're here. And I hope we have a chance to honor your questions, and your objections. According to Scripture, faith isn't whistling in the dark. Faith involves the intellect. It *seeks* understanding. Faith reasons and explains. So at Creekside, we never want to divorce faith from inquiry, or rational discussion.

**2. Meetings Jesus at the End of Our Wits:** Some people meet Jesus at the end of their righteousness; at the end of their success, or goodness. But others meet him at the end of their wits. They meet Jesus after they've lost control. That's true of the second convert in our story. "*And it happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a certain slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortunetelling.*"<sup>17</sup> *Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation."*<sup>18</sup> *And she continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment."*

As the team makes their way back to the synagogue, they encounter a slave-girl. Luke says she has a “*pythonic*” spirit. The python was the symbol of the Greek god Apollo. People believed that Apollo sent spirits of divination into people’s bellies. And these spirits would tell fortunes. But Luke believes this girl is oppressed by Satan. As the team ministers, this girl follows them. And she continually screams, “*these people serve the Most High God! They preach the way of salvation!*” And we’re not sure what that means. It’s confusing. In one sense, her words are true, aren’t they? But this may be a satanic strategy to distract people from the gospel message. After all, it was probably difficult for Paul to minister as this girl screamed in his ear.

The girl follows the team for days on end. Finally, Paul has had enough. The text says he’s, “*annoyed*” (v. 18). That might be a mistranslation. It could be that he’s “*greatly disturbed*” by Satan’s grip on this girl’s life. So he casts out the demon. And instantly, this girl is delivered. Now, Luke doesn’t say she trusts in Jesus. But given her inclusion in this chapter, many infer that she eventually joined the Philippian church. For Lydia, the truth question was central. But for this girl, the power question is central; “*Is Jesus powerful enough to free me from evil?*” Jesus delivers this girl from demonic oppression, and from economic exploitation. She’s released from her masters, who can no longer profit from her.

For many cultures, the question isn’t, “*Is Jesus real?*” It’s, “*is he powerful?*” “*Can he protect us from ancestral spirits? Or, from the local shaman?*” And even in a secular culture like ours, I think the power question remains relevant. I have several close friends in 12-step programs. And they tell me that, in many ways, the 12-step process is very *un-western*. In fact, it’s downright *un-American*! Think about it. You have to admit you’re powerless; that you can’t control yourself; that autonomy has failed. And then, you have to submit to a transcendent power, and to a well-defined process. And you can’t do this alone. You must do it in a community of strict accountability. So even within our culture, people sense the transcendent power of evil. And they see the need for outside help. And maybe you’re asking the power question today. You say, “*Jeff, I’m not hung up on the intellectual thing. But I need to know if Jesus works. Can he deliver me?*” And I hope you can experience Celebrate Recovery; to see how Jesus is changing people there. I hope you can speak with someone here who had that train-wreck conversion; who was delivered from destruction. Trust me, there are many.

**3. Meeting Jesus at the End of Our Rope:** Jesus meets some of us at the end of our righteousness; at the end of our wits; and finally, at the end of our rope. The slave-girl’s owners are angry. They’ve lost their fortune-teller and thus, their revenue stream. So they grab Paul and Silas. They drag them before the proconsuls; the two city judges. And then, they drum up some false charges against the missionaries. They say, “*These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews,* <sup>21</sup> *and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.*” Philippi was a Roman Colony. And at this time, the Romans had strong anti-Jewish sentiments. (We’ll see why in a few weeks). Additionally, there was a revival

of traditional Roman religion. The Romans were quite proud of their heritage. And this verse just reeks of nationalistic pride, doesn't it? *"Who do these Jews think they are, telling us Romans what to do?"* So Paul and Silas aren't merely charged with disturbing the peace. They're accused of teaching things that upset the religious and political order. And before they can mount a defense, they're declared guilty. The crowd rises against them. The proconsuls tear their clothes off. The lictors – the Roman guards – begin beating them. And then, the people throw them into prison. And that's where we pick up the story in verse 25: *"But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; <sup>26</sup> and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains were unfastened. <sup>27</sup> And when the jailer had been roused out of sleep and had seen the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!" <sup>29</sup> And he called for lights and rushed in and, trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas, <sup>30</sup> and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup> And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup> And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup> And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. <sup>34</sup> And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.*

It's midnight. Paul and Silas have been in prison for 12 hours. They're in stocks. They're legs are cramping. They've been falsely accused, and severely beaten. They have open wounds. They're locked with other prisoners in a maximum security cell. The stench is horrible. It's pitched black. But the only sound in the prison comes from them. They aren't cursing the Roman political system. They aren't even praying for deliverance. They're just singing. They're just praising God. And everyone is listening.

The earth begins to shake. Chains fall off. Doors open. The jailer sees what's happening. He assumes that everyone is fleeing. His one job was to keep these men secure. If he failed to do that, he forfeited his life. So he draws his sword. He's about to kill himself. And Paul says, *"stop!"* God has saved Paul and Silas. But they are intent on saving the jailer! They somehow convince the other prisoners not to flee. Think of the impact their faith had on these men.

But now, the jailer is *really* scared. He knows this is supernatural. He knows Paul and Silas' God has vindicated them. And the jailer is scared of this God. He's a Roman. He practices Roman religion. And he would have offered sacrifices to placate various Roman gods. So he asks, *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"* In other words, *"how can I be saved from the wrath of your God? I've imprisoned you. Therefore, I've opposed him. How can I avert his anger?"* In response, Paul and Silas say, *"Just believe."* No ritual is required; no act of service; no payment;

no sacrifice. Just believe. That's it. And it's enough. The jailer is overjoyed. He washes Paul and Silas' wounds. And they wash him with the waters of baptism. His whole house is baptized. And then, they all eat together, celebrating what God has done.

Some of you are guilty, or ashamed. And like the jailer, you're asking the *grace* question; *"Will Jesus love me?" "Will he embrace me; and tell me I'm valued?"* God says that to you in Jesus. He says, *"In Christ, I forgive you. I accept you. I value you so much that I gave my one and only to get you. And all you have to do is believe it."* If you feel worthless, there simply be couldn't be better news. It's not advice! It's not morality! It's just news.

The next day, the proconsuls order Paul and Silas to be released. But Paul does something very provocative. He says, *"You just beat and imprisoned two Roman citizens without a trial. And now, you want us to leave secretly? No way! You come down here and release us!"* The judges didn't know Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. As citizens, they were entitled to a public trial. But they were denied this right. And when the judges realize what they've done, they're terrified. In fact, they beg Paul and Silas to leave the city! So the missionaries return to Lydia's house. They encourage the young church. And then, they depart.

So why does Paul do this? And why didn't he appeal to his citizenship earlier? This is actually a *brilliant* move on Paul's part. Remember the accusation. Paul is charged with preaching an anti-Roman, pro-Jewish message. The accusation is framed in nationalistic terms. If he had said, *"now wait a minute, I'm a Roman citizen!"* it might have been interpreted nationalistically. Paul could have been considered pro-Roman; and anti-Jewish. But Paul didn't want to alienate the local Jewish community. After all, he was trying to reach them. In addition, Paul and Silas can now be publicly vindicated. The Romans were obsessed with honor and shame. Paul and Silas have endured a shameful imprisonment. But now, they receive honor. They're vindicated. Thus, there's less of a stigma associated with their message. And this gives the young Philippian church a measure of protection. The political authorities are terrified of Paul and Silas. And they're more than happy to leave the young church alone (at least for the time being). Do you see the pattern of Paul's life? He understands culture. He observes Jewish customs to reach Jews. He understands the honor-shame dynamics of Philippi. He enters culture to meet people where they are; and, to advance the gospel. And that's what this passage is about. God meets us where we are. And as God's representatives, we're called to do the same. So how do we do that? Let me give you two brief applications.

First, we need to be sensitive to people's objections to Christianity. In his book *Questioning Evangelism*, Randy Newman suggests that we respond to facts with facts, and feelings with feelings.<sup>2</sup> I think that's wise. People have intellectual objections to Christianity. But they also have emotional objections. When someone shares a personal tragedy, and they say, *"why did God allow that to happen?"* they're expressing emotional pain. That's not the time to say, *"well, God gave us free-will. Without freedom, a love-relationship is impossible. We chose*

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<sup>2</sup> *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).

*to rebel. Consequently, the world is fractured...*" No. That's the time to empathize, not to rationalize. Conversely, we shouldn't dismiss intellectual objections. Saying, "*well, you just need more faith,*" isn't helpful. It doesn't honor the person's intellect.

So we need to be sensitive to the various objections people have. Finally, we need to show how the gospel meets a person's deepest need. Think about a person you're trying to reach. What question are they grappling with? The truth question? The power question? The grace question? Can you explain how Jesus meets *their* deepest need? That's the question I'd encourage you to grapple with.

We meet people where they are. Why? You already know the answer; because that's how Jesus meets us. If anyone has a right to demand conformity, it's Jesus. He is our creator, and judge. He could demand that we jump over bars; that we accommodate him. And yet, he accommodates us. He humbles himself. He comes as a helpless baby, so that we can know him and relate to him. And he identifies himself with us. He lives our life. He dies our death. And then he rises, so that we can be identified with him forever. And then, after conforming himself to us, he enables us to be conformed to him. Jesus comes all the way to us; to bring us all the way back to his Father, so that we might know his love forever. Let's pray.

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