

## The Power of the New Birth

Acts 16:11-24

**Main Point:** *The new birth transforms the hearts of people, delivers them from Satan's realm, and impacts society.*

### Introduction:

Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 16. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 15 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)...

### Orienting the Text: Where we are in the story

Last week we saw how the Lord Jesus guides Paul and his team to a new place for ministry: Macedonia! (the continent of Europe). We saw how God's GPS works in history for the sake of the gospel, or as I put it: *the gospel is the guide*. We also saw how Paul picks up two new team members: Timothy and Luke (i.e. "we").

Today, we will see what happens in the first city Paul's team goes to: Philippi. If you look on a map, you will see that Philippi is in northeastern Greece. You can go there today and see the ruins. It was a Roman colony named in honor of Philipp the Second, who was the father of Alexander the Great. In Paul's day, it was a retirement city for former soldiers (what we today would call veterans). So it was a strongly patriotic city, proud of its Roman/Greek traditions and heritage.

However, as we will see, it is about to become the first center for the gospel on European soil. More specifically, Philippi will become the first city on this new continent to experience the expulsive power of the new birth, which the Spirit of God works in our lives as we submit by faith to the lordship of Jesus.

Some of you are familiar with the terms "born again", as its one of the hallmarks of our evangelical tradition. Some of our Protestant forebears referred to the new birth as "the one thing needful" for an authentic Christian experience. No one is born a Christian – you can be born into a Christian family and express faith in Christ at a young age through the influence of your parents/church; some of you have grown up believing (and that's a huge gift!). But at some point, your faith must become your own; that is, it's something you hold to not because you are told to believe in Jesus or are expected to believe in Jesus, but because you yourself love the Living Jesus Christ. And that's the sign of the new birth.

Others of you are like me: you came to faith in the Living Jesus Christ in a more direct fashion and you can divide your life into two periods: before Christ and after Christ.

Regardless of where faith occurs on your life's timeline, the new birth is the means for how you become a Christian, a follower of the Living Jesus Christ. Today, we will examine how the new birth transforms our hearts, delivers us from Satan's rule, and even impacts and changes society.

### Exposition of Acts 16:11-24: Conversion of Lydia and the Slave Girl

*Lydia becomes a believer* - Acts 16:11-13

So Paul's team makes its way to Philippi, which provides them with a strategic center for plant the gospel, with the hopes that as a church is established here other can take the gospel out to the surrounding regions. Paul's custom was to always begin with the synagogue. This is for two reasons, one practical and one theological. Practically, the synagogue is what we might call "low-hanging fruit", where Jews are already gathered, scripture is taught and read, and an easy point of entry for the gospel. The second is theological. As we learn from Romans, Paul believes that the gospel is for the Jew first, and the Gentile second. That is, the Jewish people have the privilege and the calling to be God's people, from whom the Messiah has come. They get "first dibs" so to speak. So to establish a synagogue you needed a minimum of 12 men (representing the 12 tribes).

Obviously not enough men, so the group would gather for prayer on the sabbath – sort of like a house church would.

Acts 16:14-15 - Luke tells us that one of the leaders of this group is a Jewish woman named Lydia, a seller of purple goods. The term “purple goods” probably refers to some kind of textiles or clothing dyed in purple – which was a prized color which the wealthier classes would have used and worn as a sign of privilege and power. So she was a successful businesswoman, which would have been quite a feat in her day given her (potentially lower) societal status as a Jewish woman. But in v. 15 Luke says that the “Lord” opened her heart to pay attention to the things said by Paul. Another way to translate this phrase would be, “receive” the things said by Paul. In other words, her heart is opened to believe the gospel and become a follower of Jesus (as evidenced by her hosting them in her home, thus suggesting that this might have been where the first Christians would have gathered for worship).

**This is the transforming power of the new birth:** you hear the message and suddenly believe and surrender your life to Jesus. How does this happen? Well, according to Luke, it happens as the Lord opens our hearts. Now I realize this raises questions and debates about the role of free will (human choices) and the sovereignty of God in conversion. The church has debated this issue for the last 2,000 years and I’m not going to pretend to resolve it for you this morning (sorry to disappoint!). But what I do want to do is ask the question: how does Luke, as an inspired writer of scripture, want us to understand the new birth? Let me give you some suggestions from his own writings:

- In Luke 10, after the return of the 72, Jesus makes the following statement: Luke 10:21-24. Here Jesus chooses who He will reveal Himself to.
- In Luke 24, the resurrected Jesus appears to some disciples and instructs them. Look what happens: Luke 24:31-32.
- When Jesus gathers the disciples, He does the same thing: Luke 24:44-45

So, according to Luke, the human heart on its own cannot receive the things of God, but it must be revealed to them supernaturally by the Lord. But don’t mistake that for assuming that the necessity of faith is not an important theme for Luke. Remember in Luke 18 when Jesus talks about His return as the Son of Man, He asks if he will find “faith on earth.” After Jesus makes His triumphal entry, He weeps over the unbelief of Jerusalem. So why does Luke seem to contradict Himself here?

Friends, I want to suggest that Luke is making a biblical and theological point for us, one that is rooted back in the Old Testament. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses calls the people to faith and for them to have a “circumcised heart” to love God.

Deut. 10:12-16 - As we know from the story, the people aren’t able to do this on their own power. Instead, they continue with stubborn, uncircumcised hearts towards God. There is a curse and a blindness over the hearts of the people due to sin – sin that originates with Adam, yes; but also a sin of which they are accountable for, not because it started with them, but because they willingly participate in it. The blind heart chooses to rebel and refuses to listen to the truth!

However, at the end of Deuteronomy, Moses makes a prediction that one day, God will be the one who will circumcise their hearts. Deut. 30:6. Later on the prophet Jeremiah and Ezekiel make the exact same predictions: Jer. 31:33-34, Ezek. 36:26-27 - Fast forward to Acts. When the Spirit of God empowers the preaching of the Word, one of two things always happens: either the hearts of the people get harder, and they reject; or the hearts become softened and they receive. If the heart is hardened, it’s the fault of the person. But if the heart is softened, it is the result of the Spirit. Now, this is a mystery friends that I am not able to fully resolve. The best analogy I can come up with is this: as some of you know, I teach classes for Corban University. One of the places I teach is at OSCI. The men I teach have committed crimes of which they are accountable for. That’s

10-22-23

Pastor Grant Clay

why they are there. But when you hear their stories, about the way they grew up, the disfunction of their families, the addiction to drugs, it's heartbreaking. It seems like for many of them, the deck was stacked against them from the beginning. But that doesn't excuse their choices and actions, right? They are accountable moral human beings, despite the traumatic environments they come out of. So it is with us: afflicted and broken by sin, but accountable for that sin. What do we need? A rescuer to come from the outside to save us.

And so we see here with the new birth – by stating the matter the way he does, Luke is telling us that the promise of God has come to both Jews and to Gentiles.

*The slave girl is delivered - Acts 16:16-18*

The next episodes show us the deliverance the new birth brings. This young woman, whom Luke does not directly name, is afflicted with an evil spirit that allows her to tell people's fortunes. And wicked men, being wicked men, see an opportunity to use her to make money. It's first century human trafficking! But Paul gets tired of this spirit, and casts it out of her. Now, we need to be careful in how this term gets translated in English. The ESV says, "greatly annoyed", which in our vernacular comes across almost dismissive. I think the old KJV gets the translation better: "grieved". The verb means "to be disturbed by," or "burdened by" or "to be troubled, displeased, offended, pained, [cf. colloquial English to be "worked up"]".

Now, we aren't told what happens to the fate of this young woman. But it's entirely possible that she, being delivered from this spirit, joins up with this little church in Lydia's home, and was quite possibly taken in by them. In short, the evidence points to her becoming a follower of Jesus. Why do I say that? Well, let's read on...

*The social impact of the gospel - Acts 16:19-24*

Somehow, her employers find out she's not available anymore to be their fortune-teller. And somehow they find out that it's because of Paul and Silas. The most likely scenario is that she is now hanging out with these Christians, being cared for and disciplined by them, and is no longer afflicted with this evil spirit but is now filled with the Spirit of Jesus. They get upset and accuse Paul and Silas of being disloyal to Caesar and introducing foreign gods not prescribed by Roman culture, which could be capital offense in the Roman system because it was acting with sedition (against the good of the state, the good of the community). In other words, they were being bad citizens. We will explore this whole idea of being a bad citizen in the coming weeks, especially in the next chapter.

But what I want you to take notice of is the social impact that the new birth has on this society. This young woman is delivered, and in being delivered she no longer brings income to these men. And their economy is upset. Furthermore, the accusations made against Paul and Silas show how the whole structure of the Roman system is potentially upset when people begin turning away from the false gods they worshipped and turned to Jesus. The point here is that the power of the gospel and the new birth is not only an individual experience but can also make a wider impact on society when people begin changing their social behavior and practices for the sake of the gospel.

**Main Point:** *The new birth transforms the hearts of people, delivers them from Satan's rule, and impacts society.*

**Application: Experiencing & Celebrating the New Birth Today**

The New Birth transforms hearts

The New Birth delivers from Satan's rule

The New Birth impacts society

## **The Power of the New Birth**

### **Acts 16:11-24**

**Main Point:** *The new birth transforms the hearts of people, delivers them from Satan's rule, and impacts society.*

#### **Exposition of Acts 16:11-24: Conversion of Lydia and the Slave Girl**

*Lydia becomes a believer*

Acts 16:11-15

*The slave girl is delivered*

Acts 16:16-18

*The social impact of the gospel*

Acts 16:19-24

#### **Application: Experiencing & Celebrating the New Birth Today**

*The New Birth transforms hearts*

*The New Birth delivers from Satan's rule*

*The New Birth impacts society*

#### **Questions for Reflection:**

- 1) Reflect on your own "new birth" experience (if you've had one). How did God "reveal" Himself to you?
- 2) Why do you think Luke emphasizes that it was "the Lord" who opens Lydia's heart and not her own self-will?
- 3) What is one way you have experienced deliverance and freedom from Satan's rule and/or the bondage of sin in your own life?
- 4) How do you see the gospel impacting/transforming society's norms today?