

EUROPE CHALLENGES: ACTS 16.16-17.9



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A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Introduction to Acts 16.16-17.9

The ongoing work of Christ, launched into the European theater, follows the same pattern as we have seen thus far in the book of Acts. Preach the Gospel, do good works, gain some converts, start some churches, get in trouble with the authorities, suffer reproach and worse, establish the believers and their churches, and move on to the next town.

This pattern of launch, establish, disperse, and replicate will continue for the remainder of the book of Acts, becoming yet another template for how we should expect the ongoing work of Christ and His Kingdom to progress in places and times beyond the New Testament.

The Gospel knows no limitations of culture, geography, or worldview. It enters into all, bringing the light of Christ and His truth to bear against the darkness of unbelief, oppression, and the Lie. And, as we shall see, the power of the Gospel works on the hearts of all kinds of people, in all kinds of situations.

We're happy to offer a series of brief videos to introduce each portion of this study. You can view each one by [*clicking here*](#).

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We hope you find this study of Acts instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Not All Publicity is Good Publicity

Read and meditate on Acts 16.16-18.

Back in the 1970s, when TV evangelists were as ubiquitous as reality shows are today, Malcolm Muggeridge, the esteemed British journalist and late convert to Christ, wrote a book entitled, *Christ and the Media*. In it he argued that, had TV existed in the Roman Empire of Jesus' day, and had Jesus been offered a one-hour per week, prime-time slot to do whatever He wanted, to be shown throughout the Roman world, Jesus would have declined. TV, Muggeridge explained, is associated with what is *not real*. TV is a medium for *entertainment* and *advertising*, not for representing *truth*. Jesus, Muggeridge insisted, would have had nothing to do with it, just as Paul wanted nothing to do with this young girl, whom everyone recognized as being under the influence of some sort of evil spirit.

For reflection

1. Most people understood in those days that all forms of divination and fortune-telling were bogus or demon-inspired. Fun, and maybe a little scary, but ultimately folly. Yet this little girl was proclaiming the truth! What could be the harm in that?
2. If this little girl kept this up, two results might have ensued, neither of which would have been good for the ongoing work of Christ. First, folks might have come to think that Paul and his team of evangelists were of the same sort as that little girl – just part of the act. Would this have been good for the cause of the Gospel? Explain.
3. Alternately, if people realized that this girl was telling the truth about Paul and his team, would they then have concluded that maybe some *other* things she might have prophesied would be truthful as well? How would that have clouded the work of the Gospel?
4. So Paul delivered the little girl from her demon (Greek: *python*) and preserved the integrity of the Gospel. Well done, Paul! Well, sort of. Wasn't Paul *meddling* in other people's business? Should Christians do such things? Should Christians stand up against immoral, Gospel-compromising practices?
5. The problem Paul created was not of a religious sort. It was pure economics. The men who owned this poor child were making money off her hand over fist. They may have seen Paul and Silas as a kind of opening act for their star prodigy. And they doubtless passed the hat continuously to reap the benefits of their new, enlarged, act. So Paul's refusal to go along with the show would have been a problem. Is it possible that churches today sometimes send mixed messages to the watching world? Explain.

Summary

The Gospel is the truth of God, and those who live and proclaim it must be ready to guard and defend it against every adversary or cheap imitation. Paul had to confront this situation openly and boldly so that his work of preaching would not be compromised. How should we expect to have to do this in our own Personal Mission Fields?

Closing Prayer

The words of the LORD *are* pure words,
Like silver tried in a furnace of earth,
Purified seven times.
You shall keep them, O LORD,
You shall preserve them from this generation forever.

Psalm 12.6, 7

2 Slandered, Beaten, Jailed...

Read and meditate on Acts 16.19-24.

As we might have expected, the owners of this now demon-free little girl became irate at Paul's having brought their little gambit to an abrupt end. So they dragged him and Silas before the local authorities and trumped up some half-truth to get even with them.

For reflection

1. These men weren't mad because Paul and Silas were Jews and not Romans. The Roman world was very familiar with the Jews, and they knew they weren't like everybody else. So they phrased their charges in a way designed to provoke the fury of the people and the rulers. The charges were false, but for believers, what else is new? What are some half-truths that you hear people say about Christians and the Gospel?
2. Still, there was some truth in their charge. The Romans enslaved and exploited the helpless, the Gospel liberated them. The Roman economy ran on money, no matter how one made it. The Kingdom economy of God operates on grace. What other differences does the Gospel present that people today find objectionable?
3. As the crowd heated up, the magistrates stripped and beat Paul and Silas. Is that Roman justice? No, and Paul, of course knew it was not (he'll speak to this a bit later). So they beat them with rods and threw them in jail – no hearing, no trial, no opportunity to explain themselves. Think Paul and Silas will write a letter to their Senator, protesting this breach of their religious rights! What would you do in such a situation?
4. Paul and Silas are reminded of one important truth: Hatred of the Gospel is universal. Just as it is true that people from every tribe and tongue will come to faith in Jesus – the argument of chapters 11-15 – so it is true that among those same people are folks who will do anything to silence the Good News. Because the Good News is not good news to those who are devoted to self-interest above all else. In what ways today should we expect to experience resistance and opposition because of our faith?
5. Should we hold back on talking about the Gospel, doing the good works it requires, and exposing the moral evils of our day, just because some people don't want to hear it? Explain.

Summary

Living for and proclaiming Christ and His Kingdom always carries a certain amount of risk. We've seen that from the beginning of Acts; we see it here in Philippi; and we can expect to see it as long as the ongoing work of Christ continues in this world. How should we as Christians prepare and help one another to bear up under threats and risks associated with our faith?

Closing Prayer

Save me, O God, by Your name,
And vindicate me by Your strength.
Hear my prayer, O God;
Give ear to the words of my mouth.
For strangers have risen up against me,
And oppressors have sought after my life;
They have not set God before them. *Selab*
Behold, God *is* my helper;
The Lord *is* with those who uphold my life.

He will repay my enemies for their evil.
Cut them off in Your truth.
I will freely sacrifice to You;
I will praise Your name, O LORD, for *it is* good.
For He has delivered me out of all trouble;
And my eye has seen *its desire* upon my enemies.

Psalm 54

3 ...Let's Sing!

Read and reflect on Acts 16.25-30.

Really, what would you and I have done? Probably sulked in our cell and feared what tomorrow might bring. Perhaps we would have prayed, but the prayers would have been for our safety and wellbeing, I suspect. Paul and Silas? They sang.

For reflection

1. This is a perfect illustration of what James commends in James 1.2-4, and what Paul exhorts in Romans 5.3-5. Why is rejoicing the best place to turn in the face of trials and troubles? What can keep us from doing this?
2. Paul and Silas sang (Greek: *praying a hymn*) to help them rejoice – perhaps Psalm 67. This psalm is described as a *hymn* and focuses on the salvation of the Lord for the world. Beaten, bruised, and bound, Paul and Silas did not lose sight of their mission. Their focus was on the Lord and the salvation of lost sinners, even those jerks who'd beat them up that day. Can you see how singing to the Lord is a good way of summoning strength and rejoicing? Explain.
3. Can singing also be a form of witness? The jailer's question suggests he'd heard about the goings-on in his prison before he arrived at the inner prison where his most dangerous detainees sat. Luke tells us the other prisoners were listening to Paul and Silas as they sat clapped in irons. Or used to sit clapped in iron. Now *no one* was clapped in irons. The doors of the prison were all open and everyone's chains had fallen off. How stupefied were those prisoners? No one bolted for the door. No one even seems to have *moved*. Do you think God likes to hear his saints sing? Do you think the singing of Paul and Silas might have had some effect on those around them?
4. I'd say that God's thunderous, earth-shaking response to the singing of Paul and Silas was a resounding indication of His approval of their faith. The jailer prepared to kill himself because that would have been easier than the punishment he expected from the Romans (cf. Acts 12.19). Paul stayed his hand, however, and the jailer fell down before him with that classic question: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" How would you answer someone who asked you that question?
5. It does not please the Lord for His evangelists to be supplied with "earthquake in a jar" to set people up for the Gospel. It pleases Him for us to live by faith and to respond in faith and rejoicing to all the outward circumstances of our lives, be they ever so dire. Paul and Silas were singing about the salvation they possessed and they longed for others to know. The jailer did not ask about how they pulled off that earthquake or managed to set all those prisoners free. He was fixated on the larger, more important issue revealed by Paul's and Silas' unflappable faith. How should we expect people today to see our faith at work in ways that provoke interest in the salvation we possess? What does *hope* look like that causes people to ask about it (1 Pet. 3.15)?

Summary

This is another one of those scenes which, if it had appeared in a play by Shakespeare, would have had the audience in stitches. God moved heaven and earth to reach one man and his household with the Good News of salvation. Meditate on Psalm 18.4-19 (see the *Closing Prayer*). David considered

that God moved heaven and earth to save him as well. Is that how you see your own experience of having come to know the Lord? How would you share that experience with an unsaved friend or co-worker?

Closing Prayer

The pangs of death surrounded me,
And the floods of ungodliness made me afraid.
The sorrows of Sheol surrounded me;
The snares of death confronted me.
In my distress I called upon the LORD,
And cried out to my God;
He heard my voice from His temple,
And my cry came before Him, *even* to His ears.
Then the earth shook and trembled;
The foundations of the hills also quaked and were shaken,
Because He was angry.
Smoke went up from His nostrils,
And devouring fire from His mouth;
Coals were kindled by it.
He bowed the heavens also, and came down
With darkness under His feet.
And He rode upon a cherub, and flew;
He flew upon the wings of the wind.
He made darkness His secret place;
His canopy around Him *was* dark waters
And thick clouds of the skies.
From the brightness before Him,
His thick clouds passed with hailstones and coals of fire.
The LORD thundered from heaven,
And the Most High uttered His voice,
Hailstones and coals of fire.
He sent out His arrows and scattered the foe,
Lightnings in abundance, and He vanquished them.
Then the channels of the sea were seen,
The foundations of the world were uncovered
At Your rebuke, O LORD,
At the blast of the breath of Your nostrils.
He sent from above, He took me;
He drew me out of many waters.
He delivered me from my strong enemy,
From those who hated me,
For they were too strong for me.
They confronted me in the day of my calamity,
But the LORD was my support.
He also brought me out into a broad place;
He delivered me because He delighted in me.

Psalm 18.4-19

4 Hospitality (Again!)

Read and meditate on Acts 16.31-34.

The jailer probably lived at the jail, perhaps in an adjoining apartment – one of the perks of the job. He had a family, and Paul’s response to his desperate question indicated that the grace of God would reach through the faith of the jailer to embrace all those within his household.

For reflection

1. Let’s not get into questioning how that happens; it is the power of God’s covenant and the promise of His Word (Acts 2.39). We also note that the whole house – all the family members – were baptized. Even the children? And hold on, surely these people didn’t own a pool or even a bathtub? Paul was baptized right after he believed. Now the same with these folks. Why is baptism so important?
2. We note again how the Gospel powerfully changes people. Just hours before, this jailer had thrown the apostles into the slammer without so much as a “Sorry ‘bout this, guys.” He was a brutal man, and that’s why he was a jailer! But now, how tenderly he and his wife and family cared for Paul and Silas! How powerful is the grace of God! This man’s hospitality is the first proof of his conversion. According to Ephesians 2.8-10, how do we *prove* our conversion each day?
3. We can almost *feel* the rejoicing all around. Paul’s and Silas’ hymn/prayer had been answered right in front of their eyes, and a family of lost souls found a new and eternal reason to live and love. What could be more fun than this? The coming of the Kingdom is a witness of *joy* (Rom. 14.17, 18). How should we expect to show that joy to the watching world?
4. Was it just something about the Philippians? Lydia had responded to the inward work of God’s grace with love and hospitality, and now here we see it again. No, it’s not the water supply in Philippi; it’s the *living water* supply of the Spirit and grace of God which, quickening lost souls, melts and renews their hearts and teaches them how to love. How is the Lord teaching you to show His grace to the people in your Personal Mission Field?
5. How can we share the Gospel in such a way as to help people get off on the right foot – the loving and hospitable foot – in their new journey with the Lord?

Summary

The Gospel has power to save and transform. Jesus makes all things new as He rescues a lost soul for His Kingdom. We should expect the Lord to do new and transforming works of grace in and through us every day. How are you seeking the transforming grace of the Lord for today?

Closing Prayer

Happy *is he* who *has* the God of Jacob for his help,
Whose hope *is* in the LORD his God,
Who made heaven and earth,
The sea, and all that *is* in them;
Who keeps truth forever,

Who executes justice for the oppressed,
Who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD gives freedom to the prisoners.
The LORD opens *the eyes of* the blind;
The LORD raises those who are bowed down;
The LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the strangers;
He relieves the fatherless and widow;
But the way of the wicked He turns upside down.
The LORD shall reign forever—
Your God, O Zion, to all generations.
Praise the LORD!

Psalm 146.5-10

5 The Gospel and Public Policy

Read and meditate on Acts 16:35-40.

Paul and Silas spent the rest of the night in jail. Why? Why didn't they flee? Why did they choose to continue to submit to injustice? Probably for the sake of the jailer and his family.

For reflection

1. They continued to suffer indignity so that their brethren would not suffer death. The grace shown them by the jailer thus returned to the jailer through Paul's and Silas' willingness to continue in bonds. How would their decision have likely affected that jailer?
2. The city had quieted down by morning, so the magistrates sent the cops over to tell the jailer to let Paul and Silas go. Now the fun begins. It was public policy in Roman cities to act pragmatically at times rather than always follow the letter of the law. Roman magistrates had a good bit of power to ignore law when order was at stake. That was public policy. But pragmatic public policy, when it does not coincide with the ongoing work of Christ, must not be obeyed. Was Paul acting unwisely here? Explain.
3. Paul rejected Roman pragmatism. He would stand by the *written public policy* of Roman government, namely, that you don't beat and jail Roman citizens without first trying, hearing, and formally condemning them. No. He would not go. Let them come and make nice to him. Let them be humbled by their own breach of Roman policy and their own terror of the law they so freely abused, just to maintain order in their town. Paul intended to strike fear into these local magistrates, if not of God, at least of Caesar. How does doing this fit with proclaiming the Kingdom of God?
4. Can you see these magistrates, hats in hands, heads bowed, muttering their "We're sorry" and asking – *asking, for crying out loud* – the apostles to move on. Does the Gospel have power? It certainly emboldened Paul to enter the public policy arena, challenge local practice, and insist on justice. And it humbled those who in their hearts knew he was right and they were wrong. Paul and Silas did not immediately leave the city. First, they had to attend to the needs of the brethren. Do you suppose the strength they had shown made an impact on the Philippian believers? Paul and Silas would leave Philippi, but on the time-table of their Kingdom agenda. Do you think our world today would be different if more believers lived on the Kingdom agenda of Christ, rather than the pragmatic agenda of a politicized, materialistic culture? Explain.
5. Late in the fourth century an ostensibly Christian emperor, Theodosius, would pull that pragmatic bit in Philippi, slaughtering a bunch of folks who didn't please him. When he showed up in church in Milan after that grisly event, he was publicly called out, humiliated, and excommunicated by the pastor, Ambrose. Theodosius repented, was restored, and became an able and godly ruler of the Empire. The Kingdom of God has rules, and not even emperors can act above them. Paul had made that clear in Philippi, and Ambrose was simply following suit. Should Christians today expect their faith to have an impact on public policy? In what ways?

Summary

Policy, shmolicy – when the Gospel and Law of God are our guiding light and power, we don't have

to live by the standards and practices of an unrighteous age. Paul ran another risk in standing up to those local magistrates, but he knew what he was doing. Do you ever find your Christian beliefs to be at cross-purposes with our unbelieving age? Explain.

Closing Prayer

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

While I live I will praise the LORD;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

Do not put your trust in princes,

Nor in a son of man, in whom *there is* no help.

His spirit departs, he returns to his earth;

In that very day his plans perish.

Happy *is he* who *has* the God of Jacob for his help...

Psalm 146.1-5

6 Explaining and Demonstrating

Read and meditate on Acts 17.1-4.

Paul and his team moved on to the west and south, stopping in Thessalonica. Because a Jewish community was there, they resorted to the synagogue. Even though he had turned to the Gentiles as his primary mission field, Paul never gave up on the Jews.

For reflection

1. We note Paul's patient and deliberate approach: reasoning, explaining, demonstrating from the Scriptures – the Old Testament – for three Sabbaths, and we can imagine, during the weeks between those Sabbaths. Evangelism is about communicating, and communicating involves all the tools and methods of reason and human relations. In what ways would you like to improve your witness for the Lord?

2. As we've seen, and will see again, Paul was a master at adapting his message to his audience, without compromising the message in any way. We also note that the focus of his message was the historical facts regarding Jesus, not – as we might expect these days – the felt needs of the people or the moral and social issues of the day. The Good News is Jesus and His Kingdom. Get Jesus, like that Philippian jailer, and everything falls into place over time. What does it mean to keep Jesus central when we're sharing the Gospel?

3. We also note that Paul's arguing from the Old Testament Scriptures was persuasive, not merely to Jews, but to devout Greeks and high-born women. The Word of God is living and powerful. We must keep it in the forefront of our witness for the Lord at all times. How do the Scriptures fit into the way you share the Good News?

4. We note that Luke seems to be focusing especially on the cities to which Paul would later write epistles – Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus. Luke would have had the advantage both of Paul's companionship and his writings in putting his history together in a way that would complement Paul's ministry. What are some of the most important lessons Luke seems to have wanted us to learn?

5. What do you consider to be the most important historical facts and Biblical references to include in a Gospel presentation? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

Summary

The ongoing work of Christ goes on, as more people hear the Good News, and more people believe. Is there a pattern here? One we should be seeking to emulate in our own churches and communities? Explain.

Closing Prayer

Praise the LORD!

Sing to the LORD a new song,

And His praise in the assembly of saints.

Let Israel rejoice in their Maker;

Let the children of Zion be joyful in their King.
Let them praise His name with the dance;
Let them sing praises to Him with the timbrel and harp.
For the LORD takes pleasure in His people;
He will beautify the humble with salvation.
Let the saints be joyful in glory;
Let them sing aloud on their beds.
Let the high praises of God *be* in their mouth,
And a two-edged sword in their hand...

Psalm 149.1-6

7 Practicing the Kingship of Jesus

Read and meditate on Acts 17.5-9.

The actual charge levied here is that Paul and his team “practice another King, saying Him to be Jesus” (as the Greek actually has it). Their message, their way of life, the nature of their companionship – all these spoke to the people of Thessalonica. And what they lived and spoke was a threat to their comfortable *status quo*.

For reflection

1. Paul and those who followed Jesus were different. They proclaimed a new Kingdom and a new King, and they lived as though what they preached was really true. How does their example encourage us in our witness for the Lord?
2. Jealousy has a way of showing up when leaders see their followers being drained away in devotion to something other than their cause. Jealousy can lead to lies and all kinds of nasty things. This time they couldn't find the apostles in order to beat them, so they laid hold on Jason, who had harbored them in his house – the first house church of Thessalonica? – and extracted money from him – also a breach of Roman public policy. The fear is that these people and this message would transform the world as the Romans knew it. As it turned out, they were right. Should we expect our lives and churches to turn our communities upside-down? Explain.
3. What do you suppose it means to *practice* Jesus as King?
4. It's interesting to see how the enemies of the Gospel frequently try to get someone else to do their dirty work. Someone is always appealing to “civic order” or “custom” or “Caesar” in order to take a whack at the believers. When arguments fail and hearts remain hardened, what can you expect? Jesus promised they would hate us. He didn't say they'd have good reasons. Or the courage to face us on the strength of their own worldview. They can always find some court or statute to shut us up. Or so they think. What would tell you that the presence of the Gospel in your community was beginning to have an effect similar to what we see in Thessalonica (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1.1-10)?
5. What are some ways that the Gospel turns the world rightside-up? How have you experienced this? What evidence can you cite from history to explain and demonstrate the world-changing power of the Gospel? How might you include such things in your Gospel presentation?

Summary

What we've seen from the beginning continues to be the case: The Gospel is preached, people believe and are changed, but not everybody's happy about it. What is it about the Gospel that threatens some people, even to the point of causing them to react violently against believers? Should every Christian expect at least some opposition to his or her faith? Explain.

Closing Prayer

“Yet I have set My King
On My holy hill of Zion.”
“I will declare the decree:

The LORD has said to Me,
‘You *are* My Son,
Today I have begotten You.
Ask of Me, and I will give *You*
The nations *for* Your inheritance,
And the ends of the earth *for* Your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron;
You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.’”
Now therefore, be wise, O kings;
Be instructed, you judges of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear,
And rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest He be angry,
And you perish *in* the way,
When His wrath is kindled but a little.
Blessed *are* all those who put their trust in Him.

Psalm 2.6-12

For reflection or discussion

1. How many different ways can you see the power of the Gospel at work in Acts 16.16-17.9?
2. Again we find that the Gospel often runs counter to the temper of the times, and as it does, we learn something about the nature and scope of the Kingdom of God. What stands out in your mind as characteristics of the Kingdom from this section of Acts?
3. Which aspects of Paul's life and witness would you like to see more of in your own life? Explain.
4. What next steps for working your Personal Mission Field can you derive from our study of this section of Acts?
5. What's the most important insight or lesson you've learned from Acts 16.16-17.9?

Glory to Glory

We are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ *from* the glory we encounter in God's Word to the way we *live for His glory* in the world (2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Cor. 10.31).

What have you encountered *of* God's glory in our reading and meditations in this week's studies? How has He shown Himself to you more clearly? How can this help you live more consistently *for* His glory in the daily details of your life?

What have you learned about yourself from Acts 16.16-17.9 to help you in knowing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom?

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Thank you.