

GOD'S METHOD FOR REACHING SINNERS
ACTS 16:16-40

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Our culture is "into" methods. We are often preoccupied with techniques. Whether we are involved with business or sports or health or education or churches, we are looking for an edge on the competition. We are on the lookout for methods that will increase sales, improve performance, help concentration, promote health, and raise attendance. According to one web site there will be 4379 seminars, round tables, conventions, and other meetings in Las Vegas this year. Many of them will deal with methods.

We are all exposed to snail mail, e-mail, and web sites that promote improved methods. Some of it concerns general subjects: time management, what non-profits need to know about tax law, how to use a particular computer program, losing weight, parenting, and how to manage employees. Much of the stuff that I get concerns church subjects: leading small groups, improving your worship service, boosting Sunday school attendance, developing spiritual gifts, strengthening your preaching, and increasing financial giving. I have read some of the books and been to some of the seminars. Some of the material has value.

But some of these opportunities are expensive. They all take time. So the important thing is to prioritize. What are the most important things that I ---that we--- need to know to be more effective?

The Bible says that one of the most important things that we Christians should be doing is reaching sinners with the gospel. The last statement of our Savior that we have recorded in the Gospel According to Matthew is commonly referred to as the Great Commission. (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 28:19) There Jesus says, **"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (MATTHEW 28:20) teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."** Jesus says that as Christians one of our key responsibilities is to reach sinners with the gospel and build them up in the faith.

I have suggested that the central theme of the Book of Acts that we have been studying is contained in v. 8 of #1. (ACTS 1:8) There Luke records the statement of Jesus, **"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."** The rest of the book describes how the witness about Jesus went out to the Roman Empire. Clearly reaching sinners was a top priority for Jesus and for the early Christians. It would seem that it should also be so for us.

Today then we are going to have a seminar that concerns a subject that has relevance for us. It comes from a training manual that God put together. This particular section of the manual is going to describe several methods that the Lord has used for reaching sinners. It is going to look at three encounters that three individuals had with God. We will hopefully find lessons here that will help us in doing our job.

I.

(I. HOW GOD REACHED LYDIA) First, in vv. 11-15, we are going to consider HOW GOD REACHED LYDIA. We looked at these verses last week. The events which happened here were part of the second missionary journey of the Apostle Paul. Paul and Silas left from Antioch (SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY) in northern Syria in about 50 AD to revisit churches that had been established in Asia Minor during Paul's first trip. After visiting them the missionaries headed west looking for opportunities to plant other churches. Somehow the Holy Spirit communicated to them that they were supposed to keep moving. So after coming to Troas Paul had a vision in which a man called him to come over to Macedonia.

Last week we saw how they arrived in the town of Philippi. (PHILIPPI) On the Sabbath they headed out to a Jewish place of prayer. There weren't enough Jewish men in town to have a synagogue. Beside the river they encountered a small group of women. We looked at how Lydia came to faith in Jesus there.

We saw that Lydia was a successful business woman. She was from Asia Minor. (THYATIRA MAP) So she was a foreigner, an immigrant. The fact that she is called a "worshiper of God" suggests that she was a Gentile who had been drawn to the God of Israel in her home town of Thyatira.

The Lord reached Lydia through the missionaries who simply presented the gospel to this small group of worshipers. (PROJECTOR OFF) But we also noted the statement that "the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." The important thing to understand about this is that God was directly involved in the process of reaching Lydia. He is also directly involved in reaching sinners today. It is not like selling widgets or thingamajigs where the sale is dependent upon my skill as a salesman and the value of the product. The model that we have here and the other two examples that we are going to look at teaches us that God is sovereignly involved in this process of reaching sinners. We are not out there alone. In fact He is initiating the whole process.

That has tremendous implications for our methodology in reaching sinners. If the Lord is doing the initiating, our responsibility is to be sensitive to those upon whom the Lord may be working. As with Paul and Silas our primary responsibility is simply to explain the gospel. The Lord will open the hearts of some. We don't need to be trying to manipulate people.

As for the manner of Lydia's conversion, notice that it apparently was not especially dramatic. There doesn't seem to have been any big emotional scene, any dramatic

transformation. Luke says simply that the Lord opened her heart. She believed, and she was baptized.

II.

In vv. 16-22 then we are going to see HOW GOD REACHED THE SLAVE GIRL. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. HOW GOD REACHED THE SLAVE GIRL) Verse 16 says, **“As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. 17 She followed Paul and us, crying out, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.’”** Most of what passes today as occult or psychic phenomena is nothing more than trickery and deceit. But Luke describes something that truly involved the demonic. The text says literally that she had a pythonic spirit. The reference is to a giant snake which supposedly represented the Greek god Apollo and which could predict the future. The masters of this gal were making money off of her because of her paranormal abilities.

According to v. 17, **“She followed Paul and us, crying out, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.’”** The testimony of this demon-inspired girl was true. The term that she used for God was used by the Jews of the God of Israel. It was also used by the Greeks to refer to Zeus. Salvation to the pagan Greeks had to do with release from the powers governing the fate of man and the world. Greeks were often worried that the fickle gods were mad at them for some reason. The salvation that Paul was preaching, of course, had to do with deliverance from sin and its penalty. But what the girl said about them and their message was true.

Paul doesn't like the testimony of this girl. Apparently there is something inappropriate about this witness coming from one who is associated with evil. The reference to the Most High God could also be misconstrued as being a reference to Zeus. Perhaps this girl was attracting attention to herself and taking it away from the message the missionaries were proclaiming. In any event in v. 18 Paul got annoyed and told the spirit to come out of the girl, and it did. Notice that there was no faith required from the slave girl herself in this exorcism. Contrary to the approach that faith healers often take today, many of the healings recorded in the Book of Acts required no faith on the part of the one being healed. Such is the case here. It was the Lord and Paul that pulled this thing off.

Verse 19 describes what happened next: **“But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.”** The masters of this girl didn't care about her. They didn't care that she was freed of her demonic problem. They were only concerned about their pocketbook. So they took action against Paul and Silas.

According to vv. 20 & 21, **“And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. 21 They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.’”** While the motive for these characters was obviously financial, the charge they lodged

against Paul and Silas was disturbing the peace and promoting unlawful customs. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman Empire at this time. Jewish evangelism was frowned upon but not strictly illegal. But what Paul and Silas were proclaiming didn't strike them as being orthodox Judaism either.

There was also an appeal that the bad guys were making to prejudice and nationalism. While Judaism was still a legal religion, about a year earlier the Roman emperor Claudius had expelled all of the Jews from Rome. The Philippians, being members of a Roman colony, picked up on these anti-Semitic attitudes. Now the owners were making an appeal to that prejudice. Such anti-Semitism is still around today.

Verse 22 adds, **"The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods."** Roman colonies like Philippi were governed by two magistrates, called *praetors* in Latin and *strategoi* in Greek. These magistrates handed Paul and Silas over to their attendants, called *lictors*, to be punished. (FASCES) These lictors carried bundles of rods for use in situations like this and also just to symbolize the power of the governing authority.

Paul and Silas suffered for delivering this girl from the power of evil. They endured a painful beating with these rods. Five or six years later Paul would write in his second letter to the Corinthians that he was beaten with rods on three separate occasions. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But because of this situation a poor slave girl encountered the power of God. Did she become a follower of Jesus? The text does not specifically say. But having been delivered from a terrible situation by one who proclaimed the name of Jesus it might be that she did.

The way that the Lord reached this slave girl was through a gifted apostle who boldly called upon the demon to come out. It was a sudden and radical transformation. Probably it was a dramatic scene. In the Gospels when Jesus cast out demons, the human victims typically screamed and fell into convulsions. This girl's transformation also must have created a big stir. The girl's masters by nabbing Paul and Silas and dragging them before the magistrates made an even bigger deal of it.

III.

In vv. 23-34 we learn about HOW GOD REACHED THE JAILER. (III. HOW GOD REACHED THE JAILER) In vv. 23 & 24 we are told, **"And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. 24 Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks."** With bruises and open wounds and much pain Paul and Silas suffered further punishment. The magistrates had the pair hauled off to jail and thrown into the inner part of it. This was the dirtiest, smelliest, most unsanitary part of the whole place. Typically there was little if any light and little if any air that circulated. The Christians were put in chains and their legs were put in stocks.

Paul and Silas were entrusted here to the jailer. This was the third main character at Philippi who was going to encounter the Lord. Jailers were often retired Roman army soldiers. They dealt with a lot of low lives, and they were not known to be especially compassionate. Notice that our text says that this guy “threw” Paul and Silas into the inner prison. Paul and Silas were bleeding and wounded. He didn’t care. They got the same treatment as everyone else. The magistrates wanted them locked up securely. He did what they wanted.

In spite of this painful, humiliating, discouraging situation Luke tells us in v. 25, “**About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them...**” In the midst of the filth and stench and pain and humiliation Paul and Silas were praying and singing. That was not a normal reaction. The other prisoners had never seen anything like it. It attracted their attention. The convicts were impressed.

To further heighten the drama v. 26 tells us, “**...and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened.**” Probably the chains were unfastened from the wall so that they were still on their arms and legs but hanging free.

Verse 27: “**When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.**” A Roman guard from whom a prisoner escaped had to suffer the same penalty that the prisoner was due to receive. This jailer was the chief guard of the whole place. Doubtless there were some in his charge who were doomed to be executed. Usually the jailer lived on the same premises as the jail. When this guy saw that the doors of the prison were open, he knew that his fate was sealed. The prisoners had escaped. He would be blamed. So he was about to do himself in.

Before he could do that, v. 28 says, “**But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!’**” The jailer was stunned. Who was this man? Why hadn’t the prisoners escaped? Some of them were due to be executed probably. How could this guy get them to stay? Why didn’t he flee himself? Why would he stop me from killing myself? I manhandled him earlier in the day.

Verses 29 & 30 tell us, “**And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’**” Here was this tough jailer, perhaps an army veteran. A few hours earlier he was throwing the two wounded missionaries into the worst part of the prison with not the least concern for their well-being. Now he was falling down before them and crying out for salvation. What was the deal?

Probably he had heard about Paul and Silas. In addition to their preaching, the possessed slave girl had caused a ruckus by crying out that they were proclaiming the way of salvation. No doubt the officials who hauled Paul and Silas to the jail gave some

explanation about what was going on. Perhaps he heard the prayers and praise from the missionaries in jail. At least he would have heard about it from the guards. Then also he would not have heard the typical cursing and complaining and objections from these Christians. None of this was normal behavior.

Then there was the earthquake. Most Romans were superstitious. Earthquakes were often regarded as a sign of displeasure from the gods. Why would the gods be displeased? A pair of guys who were declaring a way of salvation had just been dumped in his prison a few hours before. Then when the earthquake happened, and the jailer found the prison gates open, and this Christian character proclaimed that all of the prisoners were present and accounted for and tried to keep him from killing himself. It was just too much. These guys had to be servants of the gods, or of a God.

As a broken man, he asked them what he had to do to be saved. It was a profound question. The jailer didn't fully understand what he was asking. He just knew that somehow he had to be made right with heaven, and these guys had an "in" with the divine that he did not.

Unfortunately the terminology of being saved is often ridiculed in our culture. People are basically good. Sure we have problems. But what we need is education, or help to get out of poverty, or a better self-image, or therapy. So goes the thinking of modern man. The truth is that individuals need to be saved. They need to be saved from their situation of lostness. They need to be saved from their separation from God. They need to be saved from the penalty of sin. They need to be saved from the course that they are following toward an eternity in hell.

In v. 31 Paul and Silas stated the simple answer to his question: **"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."** Trust in Jesus is the answer. Verse 32 indicates that the two Christians gave further explanation about that to the man and his family and servants. They eagerly responded.

Luke reports in vv. 33 & 34, **"And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. 34 Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God."** This tough jailer took Paul and Silas and washed their wounds. Then the two missionaries baptized him and his household members in the name of Jesus.

How did the Lord reach this sinner? He used two faithful servants who persevered in the face of suffering. He sovereignly used an earthquake to get the guy's attention and create a sudden need. He also used an explanation of the simple gospel message. Then this tough jailer was transformed--- instantly. This hardened man became a compassionate Christian.

IV.

Consider next vv. 35-40 and HOW GOD PRESERVED A CHURCH. (IV. HOW GOD PRESERVED A CHURCH) Luke says in v. 35, **“But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, ‘Let those men go.’”** The magistrates apparently decided that a good beating and a night in the slammer were sufficient to teach these guys a lesson and get them out of their hair. But it was not going to be so easy. In v. 37 Paul responds, **“They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.”**

Paul and Silas were both Roman citizens. In the turmoil the previous day they had been identified as Jews. Most people who lived in the Roman Empire were not Roman citizens, although in the Roman colony of Philippi many of the residents would have held Roman citizenship. Even fewer Jews were Roman citizens.

Roman citizens were exempted from certain forms of punishment such as the kind Paul and Silas had received the previous day. Most importantly they could be punished only after having a trial. That had not happened. Why didn't Paul and Silas make their citizenship known? It may well be that they tried to. Our text indicates that there was an angry crowd present at their beating, and perhaps things were so chaotic that no one heard them.

Notice the reaction of the magistrates in vv. 38 & 39: **“The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. 39 So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.”** To treat Roman citizens as these magistrates had done was a serious offense. If Paul and Silas had complained about their treatment to higher authorities, the magistrates would have been in trouble. So these Philippian officials suddenly became very accommodating. But they also wanted Paul and Silas to leave town. If the two missionaries hung around, the magistrates still had to deal with an angry crowd. They were also in a tough situation because of the offense that they had committed against Paul and Silas. After visiting the other Christians the two did decide to move on.

The citizenship of Paul and Silas played an important part in the ministry of these two missionaries. It will be even more important later in the book. But already here we see it have a prominent role. The violation of their rights gave these Christians leverage in Philippi. The magistrates would remember this incident with some trepidation. Paul and Silas didn't press charges against them at the time. But the Philippian officials would probably think twice before being too rough with their Christian friends in the city. If word of mistreatment at the hands of the magistrates were to get back to these two Roman citizens, who knows but what they might still bring charges against them. Stressing their status as Roman citizens probably brought some protection to the newly planted church at Philippi and enabled Paul and Silas to have future ministry there.

V.

Finally, then, consider GOD'S METHODS FOR OUR USE. (V. GOD'S METHODS FOR OUR USE) This is by no means an exhaustive list. But through God's sovereign work and through His use of these missionaries with three individuals in Philippi we can learn at least three methods that we can employ in reaching sinners.

A.

The first thing that we Christians need to do is REACH OUT TO PEOPLE WITH FELT NEEDS. (V. GOD'S METHODS... A. REACH OUT TO...) The Bible says that all of us have a spiritual need. We need salvation from our sin and from the penalty of sin. We need to be drawn into a right relationship with God. People do not always consciously sense this need. But in the crises of life, they often become more open to their deepest spiritual need. So it is that we often see as a church the greatest evangelistic opportunities in our prison ministry, in our widows' ministry, in our nursing home ministry, and in our veterans' home ministry.

The other thing that we must keep in mind is that God is sovereign and that He works on people to draw them to Himself. We have seen that to be true with each of the three individuals who encountered Him in Philippi. So we need to be on the lookout for people around us who have felt needs and upon whom the Lord may be working.

At times these people will be outwardly seeking spiritual truth. Lydia in our passage seems to have been such a person. She was a Gentile. But she had been drawn toward the God of Israel. She seems to have been a spiritual seeker. God was sovereignly at work in preparing her, and a couple of missionaries came along who were sensitive to those with felt needs.

Then there was the slave girl. Exactly what she felt we are not told. But she had obvious psychological and spiritual needs. She was messed up. Psychiatrists today would have given her condition a psychological label. The truth was that she was demon possessed. Paul and Silas reached out with divine power to deal with her need.

In a similar way there are people whom we encounter with felt needs requiring direct intervention. There are people with addictions, with alcohol problems, and with drug problems. There are some with great psychological problems. These people have felt needs. They need divine help and are often open to spiritual truth.

Then there was the jailer. The Bible doesn't suggest that initially he had any felt needs. But suddenly he faced a grave personal crisis. Because of an earthquake that lasted only a few seconds he thought that his job was gone and his life was at stake. So he was about to do himself in. He had a sudden felt need that resulted from a personal crisis.

There are people like that around us. A loved one dies, a cancer test comes back positive, the pink slip comes at work, or a mate begins divorce proceedings. There is a felt need. People in these situations are open to spiritual truth. We need to be sensitive to these situations and be ready to point them toward Jesus..

B.

A second method that we can use to reach unbelievers is to PERSEVERE IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING. (I. A. B. PERSEVERE IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING) In the midst of a stinking prison, having been treated brutally and unfairly and illegally, Paul and Silas persevered. They demonstrated Christian virtues in the face of difficult circumstances. This had a tremendous spiritual impact upon the jailer and his family and the other prisoners.

Yale University was only thirty or forty minutes away from where we lived in Connecticut. Occasionally I went to hear scholars who spoke at the divinity school there. On one occasion I learned that Robert Coles was going to be speaking there. He is a famous psychiatrist noted for his work with kids.

I was disappointed when I showed up and found out that he was unable to attend. Instead there was a pediatric oncologist who was standing in by the name of Diane Komp. My disappointment turned to fascination as I heard her story. She turned out to be a Christian witness like Dr. Luke.

As a result of her education Dr. Komp became an atheist and an existentialist. But then she began encountering children who exhibited an amazing faith in the midst of suffering. In her book *A Window to Heaven* she writes, **“The first time I sat at the bedside of a child dying of cancer, I sat from duty rather than anticipated joy. Before she died, this seven-year old, who had suffered for five years with leukemia, found the final energy to sit up and say: ‘The angels--- they’re so beautiful! Mommy, can you see them? Do you hear their singing? I’ve never heard such beautiful singing!’ The thought that stuck in my head for weeks to follow was: ‘Have I found a reliable witness?’”**

Then there was Mary Beth, a six-year-old cancer victim. During a routine hospital visit Mary Beth’s mother said she was bothered by a dream that her daughter had shared with her. **“She said Jesus had come to her with one of her grandfathers, who had died before she was born. Together, Jesus and her grandfather told her of her impending death and encouraged her not to be afraid. Mary Beth awoke with peace and assurance.”** What perplexed Mary Beth’s mother was that her daughter had never met that grandfather. The child’s serenity astounded everyone. The stories continued. Dr. Komp was converted to Christ as a result of the faith and perseverance in the face of suffering of her young Christian patients.

Unbelievers watch how we handle times of suffering. As we trust in God, we may exhibit something that those around perceive as being unusual. In these situations we may also have opportunities to reach out to needy people.

C.

The third thing that this passage teaches us is that it is appropriate to CLAIM OUR RIGHTS WHEN THE GOSPEL MAY BE PROMOTED. (V. A. B. C. CLAIM OUR

RIGHTS WHEN...) When standing up for our legal or social rights helps to further the gospel, then it is good to do that. Paul and Silas had their legal rights violated. They endured mistreatment. They weren't bitter and complaining and depressed. But when the appropriate time came, they claimed their legal rights. In doing so they exerted pressure upon the ruling authorities that helped the cause of Christianity in Philippi. Those officials were pressured by Paul and Silas not to mistreat their fellow Christians in the city.

In a constitutional and representative democracy such as we have it is appropriate for Christians to speak up for our constitutional rights, especially in regard to freedom of speech and freedom of religion. We ought to exercise our right to vote. Sometimes it is appropriate to go to court. Our church has membership in the ADF, which this week before the Supreme Court defended the rights of a Christian counselor to speak truth to minors who are confused about their gender identity. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Techniques and methods have their place. But methods are only as valuable as the objective that they are designed to accomplish. God has given each one of us who are Christians an objective that has eternal value. That objective is reaching sinners with the gospel. Is that objective near the top of our priority list? It should be. Jesus Christ has commissioned us to reach sinners. If it is near the top of the list, then we should tune in to God's methodology for reaching sinners. We need to reach out to people with felt needs. We need to persevere in the face of suffering. And we need to claim our rights when the gospel will thereby be promoted.