

OPPORTUNITY COMES FLOGGING

ACTS 16:16-24 AUGUST 5, 2020

Richard Branson is known for bold new ventures and snatching success from the jaws of ruin. He credits some of his achievements with his willingness to not avoid risk, but instead to say “yes” to opportunities when they come along. He once wrote: “If somebody offers you an amazing opportunity but you are not sure you can do it, say yes – then learn how to do it later!”¹

Paul and his partners were the kinds of people who were willing to face risk for the opportunity to glorify God and advance the Gospel. And, because they made decisions according to the leading of the Holy Spirit, they were able to find remarkable opportunities wherever they were. They could be in Asia or Europe or the Holy Land, they could be among many or few, in the courts of the governor or down by the river bank. No matter the circumstances, they said “yes” to God, sometimes having to figure things out as they went.

But this is one of the most wonderful parts of the book of Acts. It should make us smile to see that there is no necessary ingredient, no essential prerequisite, for ministry to happen. You’re alone on a desert road? Sounds like a great start to revival in Ethiopia. You’re stuck in a dungeon, tied to the ground? Sounds like the perfect way to inspire countless millions throughout human history.

At the same time, the Devil keeps himself involved. He was just as much an adversary to Paul as he had been from the beginning with Adam and Eve. And he’s just as much *our* adversary today. He works many schemes to bring opposition to our lives and the work of Christ. But, one of the great comforts shown in Acts is that what the Devil intends for opposition, God can use as opportunity.

We see that power on display as we begin a very significant story, which I already alluded to. This story will culminate in a magnificent act of God, an astonishing statement from an unbelieving jailer, and a fantastic turning of the tables. Most of us are familiar with the last half of the chapter. But to get there, well, that’s a *different* story. Not so magnificent. In fact, it’s sad and sorry. A tale of human trafficking, injustice, prejudice and real hardship for God’s faithful servants.

But, once again, we’ll see that no matter the situation or circumstances, you and I as Christians can be used by God and further His work, even just one life at a time.

As we begin, our brothers find themselves in the Roman colony of Philippi, which is in modern day Greece, and have been preaching the Good News of salvation to the people there.

Acts 16:16 - ¹⁶Once, as we were on our way to prayer, a slave girl met us who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She made a large profit for her owners by fortune-telling.

I’m comforted by the setup here. Because, as I said, most of us are familiar with what’s about to unfold, both immediately and in the long night ahead. But, for all their spirituality, Paul and company still couldn’t predict what was about to happen. They walked by faith just like we’re called to walk by faith. And we see it here: They thought they were headed to prayer. In reality, they were headed to a problem. But, as usual, when they were presented with opposition or a change of plans, they weren’t derailed by it. They were able to adapt and respond in a flexible way. That’s part and parcel with the Christian life. Some efforts require flexibility. There are no gymnasts who aren’t flexible, right?

¹ <https://www.virgin.com/richard-branson/y-yes>

In spiritual matters, we cannot predict what the day holds. Whether it's prayer or problem, harvest or hostility. We *can* be confident that there will be temptation and opposition and resistance of some form or another, but we don't need to be feared by that or paralyzed by it. Because our God is greater than all of those things and He can turn all of those things into opportunities to accomplish eternal good.

But, the reality is, sometimes things don't go as planned. That's ok. Keep moving, keep trusting the Lord.

Let's take a look at this girl. In Luke's description of her, it's obvious to everyone around her that she was possessed by some other worldly spirit. We know it was a demon. The pagans around her thought it was the "python" spirit. That has to do with their worship of Apollo and some of his mythology.

Since she was such a lucrative business for her masters, it *seems* that she was actually successful (at least sometimes) in telling the future. What are we to make of that? In the Bible we see that demonic spirits have pretty significant power, some which fall outside of our limited boundaries of space and time. For example: The demons in the Gospels could take one look at Jesus, who was by all accounts just another guy in the crowd, and they *immediately* knew He was the Holy One of God. They knew who He was, they knew what He was about. The Bible teaches that Satan and his demons can influence the minds of human beings. Of course, they are not all-powerful or omnipresence or all-knowing. Only God is. But, it seems that, either through limited revelation or by super-intelligence, this demon was able to at least *somewhat* accurately tell fortunes. So, while we don't live in a particularly occult culture, demon possession still happens and it's not all fake.

Setting aside from the supernatural aspect, this poor girl is a good picture of the enslavement of sin. People don't realize that sin is a destructive tyrant. That it consumes and makes sport of people trapped under its power. Look at this girl: On the one hand, she seems to have fantastic ability. *Bankable* skills. "Hey honey, let's go get some life advice from that one girl." "Which one?" "You know, the one *enslaved* to those guys downtown." If she could tell the future, why can't she escape and become her own boss?

From the Christian perspective, we want to remember how desperately trapped people are. Sin does to unbelievers what we see happening to this girl. Maybe not outright demon possession, but they're still captive. Still being slowly exploited to death with no hope unless someone rescues them. We want to be a part of *liberating* people like this.

Acts 16:17-18a - ¹⁷As she followed Paul and us she cried out, "These men, who are proclaiming to you a way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God." ¹⁸She did this for many days.

When you can't beat them, join them! Whether it was in the synagogues in the Gospels or here at the prayer meeting, we learn that Satan has no problem going to church. He's got a lot of strategies and is willing to do whatever he can to tear down the Lord's work.

Now, back with Paul and company. Not only do you *not* want to be endorsed by demons, imagine the impact this situation might have on the new converts there in Philippi. "Wait a minute...I thought you've been telling us how we need to turn from paganism and live a *different* life? But if there's no

disagreement from python girl here, maybe we don't need to be so un-pagan after all." Or some might think, "Oh, ok. You've been talking to us about the filling of the Holy Spirit. Is that the same as how the python spirit takes hold of this girl and makes her say and do weird things? Is that the filling I should be expecting?" Lot of problems here.

We note that this kept happening, day after day. Which means that Paul and the guys were showing a great deal of patience and grace. Based on what we know of these python priestesses in that area,² she was probably doing weird and wild things. But, they were long-suffering, like their Lord, they didn't throw her out or fight her off. Why didn't they just exorcise her on the first day?

This is one of the many passages which expose the fact that Godly miracles or miraculous gifts are not powers that Christians can wield at will. It's not like Superman's laser vision. Miracles were and are special outpourings that happen according to *God's* will and timing and purpose, not ours. This is a big problem when you look at modern "faith-healers." I was on the website for a prominent faith healer the other day. All his events have been cancelled due to COVID...but you can go back and look at his previous schedule. And there, throughout 2019, you could see how on *this* date he was going to be in a certain city for a "healing service." And then, a few weeks later he was going to be in another city for a "miracles service."³ But that's not how it works in the New Testament. If *anything* that individual is behaving more like the girl and her wicked masters than the apostles.

Acts 16:18b - Paul was greatly annoyed. Turning to the spirit, he said, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out right away.

She kept disrupting and distracting and causing a scene. One source gives it this way: Paul was "thoroughly worn out with annoyance."⁴ And so, under God's leading and power, he casts the demon out.

This is an example to us of a few principles. First, we see here an example of "be angry and do not sin." Paul was upset, rightly upset, but his response wasn't ungodly. He didn't sin. He would later be the one to say "Be angry and do not sin" to the Ephesians,⁵ so it's good to see him living it out here.

But a second principle we can take to heart is this: While grace is the way, the direction we're pointed in, the method we use, the lifeblood of ministry, that doesn't mean that we always show grace at the expense of everything and everyone else. There came a point where enough grace had been poured out in this situation and it was time for the disruption to stop. In this case, putting a stop to the disruption meant exorcising a demon. And it was very simple and matter of fact. No holy water. No crucifix. Just faith and truth and the authority of Jesus Christ.

But, as we live out the Christian life and live out our callings there are times when grace needs to give way for the sake of others. Two practical examples: First, in parenting. If you're a Christian parent, you're called to train up your kids and love them and teach them about the Lord and to do so with the kind of grace that God shows us. Lots and *lots* of grace. But, at some point, a tantrum has to be dealt with.

² Vincent's Word Studies / CSB Study Notes

³ https://www.bennyhinn.org/events/?tribe_paged=1&tribe_event_display=list&tribe-bar-date=2019-05-01

⁴ Cambridge Bible For Schools And Colleges

⁵ Ephesians 4:26

Or, let's think about it on the church level. In the church, we believe in the importance of the reading and preaching of God's word. If there's someone causing a disturbance, whether innocently or not, on and on, over and over, we're to show grace and long-suffering, but at some point that needs to end so as not to damage the rest of the people in attendance.

Acts 16:19 - ¹⁹When her owners realized that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities.

We think of demon possession as particularly dark and evil and horrifying, and it is, no doubt about that, but think of how wicked these men were. They had enslaved some poor girl, subjected her to torments unspeakable, exploited her suffering for their own personal gain and now, seeing that she was *free* of that hell on earth, their instant desire is violent revenge.

Sin is a vile poison that turns men into monsters. We need to recognize that and be wary of it and call sin what it is.

There are some pursuits in this life that enrich people through the exploitation of others. For example, you'll hear it said that pornography has no victims. That's absolutely not true. It has *many* victims, the viewer included, but as an industry it is built off of exploitation. We don't want to have anything to do with an industry like that.

At the same time, there are other industries that are in a grey area when it comes to exploitation. There are hard issues when it comes to things like sweatshops or child labor, those sorts of things. As Christians, we should seek the Lord and be tender to His leading and ask Him to show us what our liberties are and what they aren't. We want to make sure our hearts aren't becoming anything like these men in verse 19. We don't want to have *any* similarity to them.

Why weren't Luke and Timothy dragged through the streets as well? We have no idea.

Acts 16:20-21 - ²⁰Bringing them before the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are seriously disturbing our city. They are Jews ²¹and are promoting customs that are not legal for us as Romans to adopt or practice."

We know this was *really* about money, but these guys couldn't claim that. The magistrates would've had to have said, "Well, get a *new* enslaved python girl." So they start with a lie: "The city is seriously disturbed! There's an uproar!" That wasn't true. But what about their second charge, that the Christians were promoting illegal customs?

Well, in Rome, it was illegal to introduce new gods or religions.⁶ One reference states: "The Romans would indeed allow foreigners to worship their own god, but not unless it were done secretly, so that the worship of foreign gods would not interfere with the allowed worship of the Romans."⁷

But, naturally, this was not a rule that the Christians had any interest in following. They weren't revolutionaries in the political sense, but their affiliation to Christ and *His* law superseded all others. That needs to be true of us. God certainly does not call us to overthrow our governments, but if you're a Christian, then you have a King. His name is Jesus. After Him there are leaders and rulers,

⁶ Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary

⁷ Barnes' Notes On The Bible

established by God, that have certain amounts of authority in this world. As a Christian, God's word is your law. After that, there are laws of the land. If they conflict with God's law, they are not to be followed. As a Christian, your life is pledged to Jesus and His will. After that you may be affiliated in citizenship or fraternity in some group here on the earth. But our relation to our Savior King is first, foremost and final when it comes to our rule of life.

That doesn't mean we are supposed to renounce our American citizenship. Paul didn't renounce his Roman citizenship. He *used* it in some cases. But Paul never walked around thinking, "I'm a Roman." He thought, "I'm a servant of Jesus Christ." And so, yes, they *were* promoting customs that were unlawful. Unlawful for Romans, but not for Christians.

God has given us truths and laws and customs and a way of life. These are not only to be *lived* privately, but shared and preached publicly. And if the world around us rises in opposition, we need not fear because God is with us and He has overcome the world.

These human traffickers close with the epithet: "They are *Jews*." There has been anti-semitism as long as there have been descendants of Abraham. In context, we know that Emperor Claudius had issued a decree to throw all the Jews out of Rome. So, there was a high tide of prejudice throughout the empire.

One more note before we move on: We see a lot of *shouting* from these guys, from the demon possessed girl. Let's not be people who are angrily shouting at others, either literally or digitally. The Christian is meant to be a peacemaker. Meek, kind, generous, patient, slow to anger.

Acts 16:22 - ²²The crowd joined in the attack against them, and the chief magistrates stripped off their clothes and ordered them to be beaten with rods.

This was a horrible and humiliating thing. Stripped naked, these two men were beaten without mercy. Rome had no boundary like the Jews had. They wouldn't flog you more than 39 times. The Romans would. Paul, it seems, felt that (of his many sufferings) this was one of the particularly bad ones. Describing it later on in his letter to the Thessalonians, he said it was shameful and outrageous.

Again, let's imagine what a *new* convert to the faith might have thought. "Wait...*this* is what Jesus allows to happen to apostles?" But we know these people were rooted and grounded in real truth and therefore suffering like this would neither surprise them nor drive them from the faith. We want to have our faith rooted in the truth of God's revelation. Not in styles or personalities or trends. Truth. That's what leads to a robust, storm-ready faith.

When we see Christians and Churches losing court cases in the era of COVID, as we have been recently, we can think back to this scene and remember that injustice is nothing new. And our hope has never been in the courts anyway.

Acts 16:23-24 - ²³After they had severely flogged them, they threw them in jail, ordering the jailer to guard them carefully. ²⁴Receiving such an order, he put them into the inner prison and secured their feet in the stocks.

Dr. Luke saw what they suffered and said, “This was severe. They’re in bad shape.” And, indeed they were. When believers around us are suffering, resist the urge to dismiss it or make light of it. A lot of suffering is incredibly severe. Weep with those who weep.

Luke and Timothy weren’t allowed to help out. They weren’t even allowed to wash their wounds. Instead, Paul and Silas were swiftly dragged into a dungeon. There’s a similar prison that can be seen in Rome. It’s described this way: “[The cell is] damp and cold, from which the light was excluded, and where the chains rusted on the prisoners.”⁸

The Devil, from his vile throne, was probably pretty pleased with himself. His plan to infiltrate hadn’t quite worked, but though he lost possession of one pawn, it seems he had taken out a few knights. No more teaching or preaching for them. Not even anymore standing and walking. They’re stuck in the dark.

Of course, we know that his opposition was going to be shaped into one of history’s greatest opportunities for the light of the Gospel to shine in and change the world.

These things were possible because God was using people who lived with high standards of grace, humility, meekness, truth and flexibility. No one chooses flogging, but if it comes, we can still trust our Lord who loves us and can use us in any circumstance. Let’s say “yes” to Him today, tomorrow and in every opportunity we find ourselves in.

⁸ Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary