

You Will Be Of Me Witnesses-- To The Ordinary People

by Ron R. Ritchie

Last week I spoke at a singles' conference in Mt. Hermon. I went there with my usual agenda in mind, i.e., asking the Lord to pick out some men to whom I might teach the Word, to excite them about the ministry by sharing with them their inheritance from the past, and to encourage their hearts that they were the wave of the future. I have been very blessed by the Lord in following that agenda at many conferences. I soon realized, however, that my hidden agenda was about to go out the window at that midweek conference because 90% of the people attending were women! That is just not my idea of a singles' conference at all. I felt I was wasting my time; I had no joy in my heart. But the Lord quietly gave me eyes to see that I was there to minister to his people, regardless of their sex. When I realized that, the whole week opened right up. I had a wonderful time as I ministered among God's people--not his women!

In Acts 16 you might say that the apostle Paul had the same problem I had last week, but he too experienced most exciting results from his ministry. Following Pentecost, the church of Jesus Christ had been growing for some 18 years through the preaching and the teaching ministries of the apostles and disciples. During this time, God made use of a number of persecutions to spread his people out into the country and into the world. God even took the greatest persecutor of the church, Saul, and led to himself this man who once had sought to destroy the Christian faith. In a most amazing turn of events, Saul became Paul, a preacher of the gospel.

The incidents in Acts 16 took place around 51 A.D. The converted and commissioned apostle Paul was on the second stage of his second missionary journey. We read that Paul wanted to go to Asia, but the Holy Spirit did not permit that so the apostle went instead to Troas, which was on the west coast of what is today Turkey. There Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia saying to him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us," so the apostle immediately set out to preach the gospel there.

This sets the stage for the fifth in our series of stories from the Book of Acts, centered on Jesus' words spoken to the disciples just before his ascension into heaven: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be of Me witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." My reason for choosing these stories from Acts is to encourage and remind us that we are still in the age of the Spirit, which began on the day of Pentecost and will go on until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. In this day, it is my turn and your turn to weave our threads into God's beautiful tapestry, his plan of redemption. All who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, his person and his power, to enable them to be witnesses so that other men and women can learn of this plan of redemption. We are Christians because someone witnessed to us about Jesus; our lives have never been the same since. Now God asks us too to witness, to open our mouths to witness, but also to make ourselves available to witness through good deeds.

The Book of Acts shows us how authentic Christianity is lived

The Book of Acts shows us how normal, authentic Christianity should be lived. If these passages make us nervous, that's good. They should make us nervous if we're not living our lives as God wants us to live them. We need to have our eyes, our ears and our hearts opened up to see and hear what God is doing among us. We need to realize that we are filled with the resurrected Jesus Christ; we are part of his plan of redemption, moving out into the community as salt and light, under the power, the direction and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is being used by the head of the church, the resurrected Jesus Christ, to control what goes on in the age of the Spirit as he moves men and women to, as Jesus said, "be of Me witnesses."

So Paul is about to set sail from Troas to Europe ("to the uttermost parts of the earth"), to witness to whom I would call the "ordinary people."

1. Witness Of Me By The River Acts 16:11-15

Therefore putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; 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. 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. 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. 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.

The city of Philippi was named by Philip of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great, after himself. In 42 B.C., Augustus (who was to become Caesar Augustus), came to the city and fought against Brutus and Cassius, and because he was aided in this battle by the people of Philippi, Augustus made the city a Roman colony, with all the privileges that that entailed. These colonies were administered by veterans of the Roman armies. The inhabitants had special passports which meant that they had the same privileges as the residents of Rome itself. Philippi was one of the leading cities of Greece. It had a major road which ran north and south, the same road which Paul took when he travelled to Thessalonica, Corinth and Athens.

Traveling with Paul to Troas were Luke, his physician, Timothy, whom he picked up in Galatia on this second missionary journey, and Silas, who came up from Jerusalem to make this trip. Like any tourists, they checked out the city, and discovered that there was no synagogue there. The rabbis taught that ten men were required in order to have a synagogue. Lacking that, they taught that the next step for people seeking a place of prayer was to meet by a river. That is what these four disciples did; they went outside the gate of the city to a river.

But if they went expecting to meet God's men there, they were surprised instead to find a group of women. Unlike my first thought at Mt. Hermon, however, these men did not say, "Oh, a group of women." They said, "We'd like to teach you from the Old Testament. We have met the Messiah, the Holy One, the Servant of God. His name is Jesus." Lydia, a businesswoman from Thyatira, in Asia Minor, listened intently to what Paul was saying, and, the text says, "The Lord opened her heart."

We are called by God to simply teach and preach the Word when an opportunity arises. We do not have to open hearts to receive the Word. That is not our responsibility. We never have to manipulate or force the message. We don't have to go to sleep at night worrying if the seed of the Word of God had taken hold. Our business is to show up, plant the seed, go to bed, and let the ground produce the crop, how, we do not know. The Lord opened Lydia's heart and the hearts of her household and all of them were baptized. Writing to the Philippians some 19 years later, Paul says,

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.
(Phil 1:3-5)

Not only does Lydia open her heart, but she opens her home too to these four disciples of Jesus.

At the Mt. Hermon conference I was introduced to - woman from Germany, who was not a Christian. I watched her listen very intently to the message next morning, though, and I saw that she was listening intently all through the day. Later, she came over to me and said, "I can't thank you enough for sharing as you did." Then I had an opportunity to witness to her. Now I didn't set this up. I shared with her who Jesus Christ was, what he wanted to do for her and what he had done for me, then I left her in the hands of another woman to pray for her.

The next morning at communion, this woman who had listened intently stood up and said, "May I speak? I need to say something. When my young son was born I was living with a man who has since left me. A Christian girl then came and literally bathed my feet. I'm at this retreat because she paid my way here and is

taking care of my child while I'm here. I thought I'd bring my tennis racket and my jogging shoes and take advantage of this stupid opportunity that was offered to me," she said, "but now I want to thank you for this time." The group presented her with her first Bible, and the woman asked someone to sing "The Old Rugged Cross," because she remembered that her father had sung that hymn in Germany.

I do not know the end of this story because I'm not to be involved in the end. The question is, are we available for the part which God wants us to play in the story of men and women whom he is calling out for his namesake? I had the opportunity to weave one small thread in God's tapestry when I witnessed to this woman. What a joy to be involved in such events! God is calling out a people and he wants to use you and me. I don't know why he does so; he could do it all without us, without our complaining, "I don't want to show up. I hate going to church. That guy is making me nervous by asking me to go out there and talk to real people. I'd rather watch Dallas." But God has a wonderful plan of redemption and he wants us to be involved in it.

So a beachhead is established for the gospel in Europe. The enemy, however, is not asleep. There follows an amazing little episode, recorded by Luke, the writer of Acts.

2 Witnessing In The Market Place Acts 16:16-18

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. 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." 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.

This may have been a week or so later. The disciples are going back to the river to have a time of prayer when they encounter this slave girl. In this first century, there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Slaves had no rights over their own lives, they were treated like animals. The masters of the slave girl had lucked out because she had a demon in her who had the ability to prophesy the future. This woman followed after the four disciples, crying out, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way [or a way] of salvation."

That was absolutely true; this demon was really in touch with reality. Perhaps the demon wanted to blow the disciples' cover. The disciples were not bothering anybody. They wanted to be salt in the community by quietly leading a Bible study in Lydia's house and having a prayer meeting at the river. Perhaps the demon said these words because he wanted to associate the apostles with the occult, so that the people of Philippi would say, "Of course, those guys are into the occult because they have the same message." This happened to Jesus all through his ministry. The enemy always wants to align himself with us as an angel of light by using the same words we use.

Paul was greatly annoyed by this. He was "worked up," it says. And the woman did this for "many days"; this was not a one-time deal. But the apostle addressed the spirit, not the woman, because he recognized that the woman had been victimized by the enemy. The demon, Satan, is the enemy. We have to remember that. People who attack Christianity are not the enemy, they are the victims of the enemy. Paul said to the demon, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." Note that Paul did not try in his own power to cast out the demon. He put his trust in the power of the resurrected Lord to overcome the demon, and, because demons are subject to the resurrected Lord, the spirit came out immediately. I listened to a tape of an exorcism of a demon, where people sang songs, yelled at and taunted the demon in a person, but the demon did not come out. I saw a documentary about a town in Wisconsin where some Christians tried to cast out demons, thinking they were responsible for all kinds of minor illnesses, even colds and earaches. These misguided people would plead, "Oh, Jesus, please get the demon to leave this woman." But that is manipulating God. Paul would have nothing of that. He didn't yell, sing, torment or pray. He commanded the demon, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out of the slave girl, and the result was that the demon instantly came out. The captive was set free from the spiritual enemy. She was still a Roman slave, but was no longer a demon-possessed slave.

After studying this passage one day at Mt. Hermon last week, I was walking by a swimming pool and a woman who was sitting at a table by the pool said to me, "Thanks for the messages; they really mean a lot." I sat down at her table, and she began to tell me her story, which went on for about two hours. She was really uptight, held totally captive by the sin in her life. I discovered that we had attended the same seminary back in 1962, and that she had married a man who sold me a car once. They had a child, a daughter, and later she divorced her husband, married a non-Christian, had two more daughters, and then divorced him too. She was now living with a man because, she said, it met a need which she had. She was tough, bitter and uptight, justifying everything she had done. Following two long hours of listening, I said, "Can I get a word in now? I want to tell you something: Jesus Christ still loves you. Jesus Christ is willing to take this messed-up life of yours and salvage it for his namesake. All he wants you to do is confess your sins and come back to him." You should have seen the tears flow. This was the woman I later asked to pray for the German girl. She had a ministry of healing and salvation with another sinner. The next day she came to me, again with tears in her eyes, and said, "I am so free now. Thank you." But I just showed up by a poolside and listened for two hours. I had nothing to do with this thing except show up. The Holy Spirit did the rest.

Satan now moves from this visible, overt tactic of using a demon possessed slave girl to using the hearts of evil men. First Peter says,

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. (1 Peter 4:12-13)

3. Witnessing In The Midst Of The Persecution Acts 16:19-24

But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans." And the crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them, and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison, and fastened their feet in the stocks.

The slave master are not rejoicing over the fact that this woman was healed, nor are they curious about the power which Paul used to cast out the demon, because they are not open to the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are angry, in fact, because their meal-ticket is gone, so they seize Paul and Silas. We don't know where Luke and Timothy were. They probably were where I would have been, behind a car, watching the whole thing. I can hear them say. "There goes Paul again--another riot. He's always in trouble." Paul did no wrong--he did a good work--but the slave masters seized him, dragged him before the magistrate and charged him on three counts. First, the men said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion." Second, they said, "These men are Jews and we are Romans." The issue of prejudice is showing up a little here. And third, these men were breaking the law, they said, by trying to proselyte Romans, which was illegal. The real motive of the slave masters, of course, was that they had lost their livelihood when Paul had cast out the demon. The crowd present at the trial "rose up together against the disciples." They didn't think to ask Paul if he was a Roman citizen, which he was, and which meant that he could not be beaten; Paul would even have had an opportunity to appeal to Caesar. The result of the phony charges, however, was that Paul and Silas had their robes torn off, they were beaten with rods, thrown into the inner prison, and put into stocks.

When you sign on for the gospel, you will share Christ 's sufferings

You just don't know what the resurrected Lord will do with you if you happen to walk down by the river one day! You may think you are going from A to B, but God sometimes has planned a little detour, called prison. Don't sign on if you do not understand the gospel, because you are going to enter into the sufferings of Christ

if you do. Paul knew about Peter's prison experiences, but this was the first time for him. He was not used to this, but he would get used to it in time.

So Paul and Silas were beaten and then put into stocks. They couldn't move, they couldn't touch each other. It was Paul's first prison experience, but not his first riot.

IV. Witnessing Of Me In Prison Acts 16:25-34

But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; 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. 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. But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!" And he called for lights and rushed in and, trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in Cod with his whole household.

It's midnight, a fearful time, a time of emptiness, a time when you can start thinking, "Where is God? He has deserted me." My fearful time is not midnight, but three o'clock in the morning. I am filled with an incredible fear of dying at three in the morning; I have a sense of worthlessness at three in the morning. At those times I cry out, "Father, save me from these destructive thoughts I do count; I am worthy; you have gifted me. I'm one of your sons. I'm doing the right thing. Flood me with confirmation from your Spirit and from my brothers that all is well."

Now the first word in this section is the word, "But." Whenever you see that word in Scripture, just stop, pause, and put a circle around it, because it means that a change is coming. It's midnight. Paul and Silas are in the stocks. There's no TV, no late show to watch, "but" they start "praying and singing hymns of praise to God." They're not praying, "Lord, get me out of this mess," they're praising the Lord. And guess who is listening intently? A captive audience--the other prisoners!

Then there is an earthquake. Who planned that, I wonder? But what a time to have an earthquake. The walls come tumbling down, the doors open, and the prisoners are set free. This is a very exciting time if you happen to be on God's side, but a very fearful time if you're not. The earthquake awoke the deputy sheriff (the jailer), and he is about to kill himself, but Paul yells out, "No problem, we're all here." Then the pagan deputy sheriff bows down worshipfully before Paul and Silas. I think he's superstitious and fearful. He was just about to kill himself, but then he asked this incredible question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

I can't figure out where this question came from. What was it about Paul and Silas that made this man ask a question about salvation? Is he asking for political or for spiritual deliverance? The word "saved" here means to be saved from danger, from suffering, or from spiritual damnation. Because the guard has been prevented from killing himself, I think he is asking, "How can I be saved from eternal damnation?" He is asking for a plan, but Paul and Silas give him a Person. They give him the Person of Jesus. "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household," he is told. Place your faith in Jesus, Paul and Silas tell the jailer, the Savior who demonstrated by his death on the cross that he was the Lamb of God who would take away the guilt and shame of man. He is the One who saves people from the power of sin. The disciples tell him, "Place your faith in Jesus, who demonstrated by his resurrection from the dead that he is the only One who can fill your emptiness with his wholeness, his peace and his joy. Place your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; he will give you the gift of the Holy Spirit who will empower you to cope with reality. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believed in him would not perish but

have everlasting life.' There is salvation in no one else," they tell him, "for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." Many of you too are asking, "What must I do to be saved?" The answer is the same today as it was in that first century day.

Paul and Silas explained the Scriptures in more detail to the jailer and his household. The results were that each one in turn accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. The jailer washed the disciples' wounds, and he and all his household were baptized. All of this probably took place down at the river, which is where Paul and Silas were originally headed before God intervened with a small detour involving a demon being cast out, a riot, an arrest, a beating, a jailing, and an earthquake! Then, following the baptism, the jailer invited the disciples to his house for a meal, and they "rejoiced greatly."

We are living in the age of the Spirit, and we have been given the Person and the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians are to "be of Me witnesses," Jesus said, so that God can call out a people for his namesake. This will involve suffering for the sake of the gospel at times, but all that is part of our Lord's plan of salvation. Our attitude should be one of knowing that he is in total control of our lives. We are to rest in him, regardless of the outward circumstances, and join with Paul and Silas in praise and hymns. "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be of me witnesses"--down by the river, in the marketplace, in the midst of persecution, and in prison.

Catalog No. 3804
Acts 16:13-34
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September 5, 1982

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