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Philippians #1

God Opened Their Hearts

Acts 16:6-40

I don't know how I'd go about it, but I would love to learn *how Christianity first came to Oklahoma City*. When was the gospel first preached in our city and by whom? What was the response of those who heard? Was there initial opposition to the truth? Were those who spoke of Jesus persecuted? If so, how did they react? *Where was the first church planted?* How large was it? How quickly did the gospel spread to the surrounding area? I would love to know the answer to these questions.

As frustrating as it is *not* to know how the first church was planted in OKC, it is remarkably satisfying to know *how the first church was planted in the ancient city of Philippi*. We aren't left to guesswork nor do we have to piece together bits of historical data to get a picture of what happened so many hundreds of years ago. We actually have a fairly complete and inspired record of *when the gospel first penetrated into Macedonia and how the church in Philippi came into existence*. Luke provides it for us in Acts 16. It all took place somewhere around the middle of the first century a.d. (scholars say sometime between 49 and 52 a.d.).

So before we jump into the book of Philippians itself, I think it would be instructive and encouraging for us to take a moment and consider how the gospel first came to this city and how the first church was first planted there. To do this *I want us to look at Acts 16 in terms of five "encounters" that Paul experienced*.

(1) Paul's encounter with an angelic being (Acts 16:6-10)

We begin with *several remarkable supernatural encounters* that Paul had both with the Holy Spirit and with an angel! We are told in v. 6 that the Holy Spirit had forbidden them to preach the gospel in Asia. This is stunning, to say the least. It was only natural that their eyes should turn southwest along the route that would have led them to Colossae and eventually to Ephesus. They may even have begun to head in that direction, but were interrupted by the Spirit. We don't know *how the Spirit spoke to them*: was it by some inner impression felt by several simultaneously? By an audible voice from the Spirit? By a dream, vision, or trance? Or perhaps the Spirit simply used some providential or tangible circumstantial obstacle.

We simply don't know, but in any case they were convinced the Holy Spirit didn't want them in Asia, at least at this time. They do eventually make it to Asia, but God's timing was crucial. So, with the southwesterly route now blocked it was only reasonable that they turn north, toward *Bithynia*, a province situated on the southern shore of the Black Sea.

But again, according to v. 7, **“the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them”!** They must have been utterly perplexed by this, maybe even a little frustrated. They knew God had sent them out as missionaries but every time they set out the Holy Spirit said “No!”

Since the Spirit said no to Bithynia, they came to the port city of Troas, not knowing which direction to go. There were several possibilities, but the decision was immediately taken out of their hands when an angel showed up in a vision one night (vv. 9-10).

How Paul knew this was a “man of Macedonia” isn’t clear, but perhaps his appearance gave him away or he may have stated this explicitly to Paul. In any case, it was most likely an angelic being who took on the identity of a citizen of Macedonia and urged Paul to “come over” and provide help.

Paul would likely have conferred with his traveling companions, **Silas, Timothy, and Luke**, and together they concluded that God wanted them to preach the gospel in Macedonia, that is to say, in Greece.

It’s instructive to note that they received a **double guidance**: both prohibition and permission; both restraint and constraint; both a No to this and a Yes to that. Don’t go there, but rather come here. We see this sort of thing in the lives of several famous missionaries. David Livingstone tried to go to China but God sent him to Africa. William Carey planned to go to Polynesia in the South Seas but God led him to India. Adoniram Judson first went to India but was driven to Burma. More recently, Jackie Pullinger simply heard the Lord say, “Go, and I will guide you with my eye.” Embarking from England, she literally got on a “slow boat to China” and prayed at each port city until God said, “Stop. Get off. This is the place.” She ended up in Hong Kong! This was in 1966 and she continues to minister there to this day.

This initial encounter of Paul with the Spirit and the “man of Macedonia” led to his second important encounter, this time with a woman in Philippi called “Lydia.”

(2) Paul’s encounter with Lydia (Acts 16:11-15)

Luke describes Philippi as a “leading city.” The population at that time was well in excess of a quarter of a million people. The city itself had been named after Phillip II (358-57 b.c.), the father of Alexander the Great. Philippi was famous for many things, chief of which was that it served as the site of the battle in 42 b.c. between Brutus and Cassius, on the one hand, and Antony and Octavia on the other. You may recall that Brutus and Cassius were responsible for the assassination of Julius Caesar.

Philippi is also described as a **“Roman colony”** (v. 12). The citizens of Philippi were actually quite proud of their ties with Rome, proud of their customs and laws, proud of themselves in every way. And as we will later see in Philippians 3, the man who wrote to them counted all such human accolades and achievements as mere rubbish in comparison with knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.

Luke describes how they **“remained in this city some days”** (v. 12), doing what we don’t know. But they may have been looking for work, or studying the town, perhaps getting acquainted with as many people as possible and

learning their customs. Undoubtedly they would have spent time praying for the people to whom they were about to preach the gospel.

According to his custom, Paul waited until the Sabbath and made his way to the place of Jewish worship. This would normally have been a synagogue, but there wasn't one in Philippi because Jewish law required 10 men to constitute a quorum. No amount of women would suffice. So the unofficial meeting place was outside the city, approximately 1½ miles west by the banks of the Gangites River. If you're wondering why they met beside a river, it was probably due to two factors: first, the Romans likely prohibited Jewish religious gatherings inside the city limits, and second, they needed water for ceremonies of religious purification.

In any case, it was there that they encountered a woman named **Lydia**. "Lydia" may have been her trade name, "The Lydian Lady," rather than a personal name, but there's no way to know for certain. She was from the city of Thyatira (see Rev. 2:18-29) and evidently served as the Macedonian sales representative of a Thyatiran manufacturer. Her product was both exquisite and expensive. The purple dye used on these garments was extracted either from the juice of the root of an herb called "madder" or from the secretion of the shellfish.

There's no mention of a husband, so it's likely she was either single or a widow. In either case, she was a brave and industrious woman to travel as she did and to support herself in a predominantly patriarchal culture and economy.

She was "*a worshiper of God*" (v. 14), which is to say that as a *Gentile* she both believed and behaved as a Jew. The most important thing for us to see is that "*the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul*" (v. 14). This is obviously a reference to her conversion, for she is immediately baptized and opens up her home to Paul and his companions.

Consider three things here: **(1)** The human heart is by nature and choice *closed* to the things of God. There was in Lydia, as there is in all of us, an inborn antipathy and opposition to the gospel. **(2)** If the heart is to open, God must do it. Paul didn't open Lydia's heart. Lydia didn't open Lydia's heart. God opened it. He regenerated her heart. That is to say, by God's sovereign saving work through the Spirit, he caused her to be born again, in response to which she put her faith in the Jesus whom Paul preached. **(3)** The fact that the human heart is closed and can be opened only by God does not preclude the need for prayer and preaching. See Romans 10:14-15!

So what had happened to Lydia? No one answered this better than Charles Wesley in the words to one of his hymns:

“Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
Amazing love, how can it be,

That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?"

It must be noted, however, that *not all of the women* in that city were grateful for Paul's presence.

(3) Paul's encounter with a demonized girl (Acts 16:16-24)

A young slave girl, obviously demonized, followed Paul wherever he went, screaming aloud like a sideshow barker: "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." At first Paul ignored her, but soon became increasingly annoyed.

[Although nothing explicitly is said about this, we may be witnessing in this case an expression of the spiritual gift of "discerning of spirits," that ability of some to discern the presence and activity of demonic spirits.]

So *why was Paul irritated by her?* It seemed as if she was providing them with free advertising for the gospel. Perhaps her presence was becoming a distraction, diverting attention away from Paul and his gospel to her repeated outburst. Or perhaps *Paul feared that if he said or did nothing the people would think he approved of her supernatural ability and link the power of the kingdom of God to demonic activity.*

Paul takes quick and decisive action. His approach is worth noting:

First, he didn't appeal to his apostleship as the basis for confronting the demon. He appealed to the name of Jesus Christ: his person and power and authority.

Second, Paul didn't address Satan, but he did speak directly to the demonic spirit, commanding it to come out of her.

Third, Paul's action is not unique to an apostle. There is every reason to believe that what he did, we can do as well. We operate and minister in the authority of the risen Christ no less than he. See *Luke 10:19!*

The reaction of her owners is not unexpected. It's not unlike what happens when a prostitute is converted and her pimp suffers the financial loss. But instead of honestly describing what had happened, they cleverly conceal the fact that their objection was financial and cast it in terms that suggest Paul and his companions are a threat to the peace of Philippi and are promoting anti-Roman customs.

If you're wondering why only Paul and Silas were arrested and not Luke and Timothy as well, it may be that they were the leaders or the spokesmen, or perhaps because they were Jewish while Luke and Timothy were Gentiles.

Their treatment was swift and brutal. They were stripped, savagely beaten with rods, thrown into prison, and had their feet put in stocks. This was only one of the three times Paul was beaten with rods (see 2 Cor. 11:25). It's hard to imagine either ***the physical pain*** or ***the emotional confusion*** they must have experienced. The stage is now set for Paul's fourth encounter, this time with the Philippian jailer who was put in charge of his imprisonment.

(4) Paul's encounter with the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:25-34)

I don't know about you, but I fear that my reaction under those circumstances would have been somewhat different from that of Paul and Silas. What would you have expected of them? Anger? Indignation? Bitterness? Self-doubt? Doubts about God? Doubts about his goodness? After all, they had given up everything to be missionaries.

You might think they would have blamed each other for the decisions that led them to Philippi:

Paul: "Darn it, Silas, I told you we should have gone into Asia instead!"

Silas: "Don't blame me, Paul; you're the one who thought the Spirit said No."

Paul: "Yeah, sure, put it all on me. So why didn't you insist we go into Bithynia when we had the chance?"

Silas: "As I recall, it was a joint decision we all made not to go there. And before you blame me for our coming to Philippi, you're the one who 'claimed' he had a vision of an angel telling us to come here."

Paul: "Yeah, well you should have had the courage and common sense to tell me it was a demon and not an angel who led us here."

Or did they *blame God* for it all: "This certainly wasn't in our job description. If we had disobeyed like Jonah in the OT then I can understand why you let this happen. But we did precisely what you told us to do!"

No! No complaints, no doubts, no resentment or disillusionment. Instead of groans we hear songs! In place of men cursing God we hear them praising and extolling him!

Look again at v. 25 – "***And the prisoners were listening to them!***" Joyful, exuberant, adoring praise of God baffles unbelievers. But it can also open them to the gospel!

The result of their worship is a "great earthquake" (v. 26). Yes, God moves in powerful ways, both in nature and in the human heart, when his name is exalted and extolled!

Utterly contrary to what we might have expected, ***none of the prisoners tried to escape***. For heaven's sake, why not? This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for them. Evidently, the story of the slave girl's deliverance had reached their ears. But more important still was ***the impact on their hearts of the incredible devotion to God that they witnessed and heard in Paul and Silas***. It's almost as if they said to themselves: "I could have my freedom. But I'd rather stay and find out more about a God who can inspire that kind of love and adoration in his followers."

Dear friends, don't ever underestimate the impact your devotion to God can have on unsaved friends, family members, or even on complete strangers!

The jailer's response is understandable. He simply assumes that all the prisoners entrusted to his oversight would have escaped, knowing that for him this was a capital offence, punishable by death. But before he can end his life Paul intervenes. From what follows it is obvious that Lydia's heart wasn't the only one the Lord opened that day!

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

“And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”

Lest anyone think that what happened next proves the existence of *infant baptism* in the NT, look closely. His “household” is as much responsible to “believe” as is the jailer. Thus, according to v. 32, Paul preached the gospel not only to the jailer but “to all who were in his house.” Whoever was in his house, of this we may be sure: ***they were old enough to listen, understand, and respond to the gospel!*** Moreover, we read in v. 34 that “his entire household” rejoiced at what happened, indicating yet again that whoever they were they were old enough to understand and rejoice that the jailer had believed in God.

(5) Paul's encounter with the governing authorities (Acts 16:35-40)

Paul's fifth and final encounter was with the governing authorities in Philippi, but we will not take time to examine it. I will only point out one thing: it is clear from how Paul reacted that it is perfectly legitimate for a Christian to appeal to the law and avail himself or herself of the privileges and protection that it provides.

So, that, dear friend, is how the gospel first came to Philippi. That is how the first church was planted there.

Conclusion

Before I close we need to consider again ***the sovereignty of God the Spirit in bringing the gospel to Philippi and eternal life to Lydia, the Philippian jailer, and perhaps several prisoners.*** There can be no question but that ***God orchestrated*** Paul's journeys precisely because he had been tilling the soil of Lydia's soul, preparing her heart for the planting of the seed of the gospel, and no doubt doing the same with the Philippian jailer. When I think of how God providentially brought Paul to Lydia and the others, I can't help but think of ***Charles Spurgeon***, who was converted some 1,800 years after these incidents in Philippi.

In February of 2008 I was in Colchester, England, and my host asked me if I wanted to go in search of the tiny chapel where Charles Spurgeon was converted.

It took us a while, but we found it. The chapel is quite small, perhaps capable of holding seventy-five people. There is nothing to distinguish it physically, but spiritually, well, that's another matter. As I walked in, I immediately

noticed a large bronze plaque on the wall which indicated that it was supposedly near that very spot where young Spurgeon sat on **January 6, 1850**, although he never planned on being there.

Spurgeon lived a few miles away in the village of Hythe. On that Sunday morning he was intent on attending another service, desperate as he was to be rid of the guilt of sin that burdened his soul. "I sometimes think," wrote Spurgeon, that "I might have been in darkness and despair until now had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm." The unexpected shift in weather forced him to seek shelter in what was then a non-descript Primitive Methodist chapel where no more than a dozen people were in attendance.

Said Spurgeon, "I had heard of the Primitive Methodists, how they sang so loudly that they made peoples' heads ache; but that did not matter to me. I wanted to know how I might be saved, and if they could tell me that, I did not care how much they made my head ache."

The minister was not present, evidently snowed in. Finally, a thin-looking man went up into the pulpit to preach. "Now, it is well that preachers should be instructed, but this man was really stupid [Spurgeon's words, not mine!]. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say." The text he selected was: "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." There was, Spurgeon thought, "a glimpse of hope for me in that text." The "preacher" continued:

"Now lookin' don't take a deal of pain. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just, 'Look.' Well, a man needn't go to College to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. . . . Look unto Me; I am sweatin' great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin' on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to Heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin' at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!"

After about ten minutes, "he was at the end of his tether," noted Spurgeon. In other words, he had run out of things to say! "Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I daresay, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, 'Young man, you look very miserable.' Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. . . . He continued, 'and you always will be miserable – miserable in life, and miserable in death – if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.' . . . I saw at once the way of salvation. . . . Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him. Oh, that somebody had told me this before, 'Trust Christ, and you shall be saved.' Yet it was, no doubt, all wisely ordered, and now I can say –

'E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And shall be till I die.

And what, then, is left for you to do? The answer is no different today from what it was when Paul said it in the first century: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved!"