

## *Adventures in Philippi*

### **Acts 16**

John Breon

Paul was restless. He and Barnabas had had some kind of disagreement about whether John Mark should go with them on another mission trip. Barnabas said yes, Paul said no. So they parted ways and each went on their own mission trip. Paul took Silas with him. They went back through an area where Paul had already preached and planted churches. They were checking on the believers and helping them, strengthening the churches. Timothy from Lystra—one of the towns they visited—joined the mission team.

Then the team tried to go into one region, but the Holy Spirit kept them from going that direction. So they tried to go into another area, but the same Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, wouldn't let them. So what are they supposed to do? That's why I imagine Paul was restless. He's likely seeking guidance and praying. Then in the night Paul has a vision. In the vision, a man from Macedonia (that's northern Greece) begs Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul shares the vision with his team and, Luke writes, "We got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (16:10). This is the first of several passages where the writer of Acts uses the first person plural: "we" and "us." Though there are various attempts to explain this, the simplest explanation is that the writer was part of the mission team. Luke joined Paul, Silas and Timothy for the trip to Macedonia.

So they sail to Macedonia and then travel inland to Philippi. This city is a Roman colony. Many former Roman soldiers and officers live there. As a colony of Rome, the people of Philippi live according to Roman law and customs. It's supposed to be kind of a "little Rome" in this region of the empire.

Paul's typical approach in a new city was to go to the Jewish synagogue to worship and find an opportunity to share the gospel, to tell the story of Jesus. In Philippi, on the Sabbath he and the team go outside the city to the river, looking for a place of prayer. Possibly there wasn't a

synagogue in Philippi. But there was a Jewish tradition of praying near moving water, so they go to the river. And they begin talking with some women there. One of those women is named Lydia. She's from the city of Thyatira, in the province of Asia (modern day Turkey). She's a businesswoman who deals in purple cloth, which was pretty good business in those days. Lydia is a worshiper of God. Like Cornelius the Centurion, she's a Gentile who worships the God of Israel.

"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." We need the Lord to open our hearts to respond positively to the good news. We're not naturally inclined to say yes to God. We need help. This is part of what we mean when we talk about prevenient grace, the grace that comes before our response and enables our response to God's message. And, as we seek to be witnesses and share the good news, we can be confident that God goes before us and prepares people. The Lord is still opening hearts to respond. The Holy Spirit is setting people up for our witness, our ministry. People still have the opportunity and responsibility to respond, but by God's grace we can respond.

Paul's message here was likely the basic Christian message we've seen all through Acts. God is keeping God's promises. We see this in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Through the resurrection, Jesus is exalted to the place of highest honor. The Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of who Jesus is and what God is doing. Someday Jesus will appear again in glory and bring the fullness of God's kingdom to earth. In light of all that, repent; by God's grace, turn back to God, put your faith in Jesus, receive God's gift of salvation.

Lydia's ready to hear this. And she responds positively. She and her whole household are baptized. Then she shows hospitality to the missionaries. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house." So they go there and Lydia's house becomes headquarters for the gospel mission in Philippi.

On another day, the mission team is again going to the place of prayer. On the way, they're met by a woman who's a slave who has a spirit of divination. A lot of people in the Roman empire went to oracles who would give them messages from the gods or would tell their fortune or

whatever. This slave has that ability and she earns a lot of money for her owners. She follows Paul and the others and shouts, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

That sounds pretty good, but most people in Philippi would probably hear "Most High God" and think of Jupiter/Zeus or whoever the top god was in that region. They probably wouldn't think of the Lord God of Israel. And when they hear about "being saved," they likely think about health or prosperity or rescue from some disaster or misfortune.

Paul doesn't really need this kind of publicity. And he probably has compassion for this woman who's enslaved and possessed by a demonic spirit. So after several days of her following them around and shouting about them, Paul gets fed up and casts the spirit out of her. "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" The power of the name of Jesus is the point here. Jesus is greater than the spirit who possessed the woman. The implication is that Jesus is greater than all the pagan attempts to discern the future. He's greater than all the gods who supposedly spoke through various oracles.

But now the gospel and the power of God have interfered with people's money. The owners of the slave realize that this source of income is gone. People can ignore the church and the gospel message. But when it starts to affect our finances, it gets our attention. So the slave owners grab Paul and Silas and drag them into the marketplace to face the authorities, the magistrates of the city. They don't tell their real reason for being angry at Paul and Silas. They do bring up ethnic and religious prejudice—"These men are Jews." And they accuse them of stirring up trouble—"They're throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

The good news of Jesus will face opposition in this world. We've seen it before in Acts and we'll see it until the end of Acts. Paul was always getting into trouble for preaching, for bringing deliverance, for messing with people's income. An English bishop has been quoted as saying, kind of wistfully, "Wherever Paul went, there was a riot. Wherever I go, they serve me tea."

The crowd in Philippi joins the attack against Paul and Silas. The officials have them flogged, beaten with rods, and then thrown in prison. The jailer did his job, carried out his orders, and made sure the prisoners were secure.

About midnight Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns to God. What a great response to what's happening to them. They're confident in God's care and in the power of the gospel. Maybe like the apostles earlier, they're rejoicing that they're worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus (5:41). Maybe they're calling on God to help them. While Paul and Silas pray and sing, the other prisoners listen to them.

Suddenly there's a violent earthquake that shakes the prison. The doors come open and the chains fall off the prisoners.

Year ago, when I was in high school, my dad and I went to a revival service at a little Pentecostal church. That's the first time I experienced someone saying, "Let us pray," and everybody started praying at once, out loud. Somewhere in the sermon, the preacher referred to this scene in Acts. He said, "Elvis Presley wasn't the first. Paul and Silas sang till the jailhouse rocked!"

Can we learn to sing and pray when it feels like we're imprisoned, trapped in the darkness? Can we keep calling on God, rejoicing in God, trusting God, and witnessing to others in those situations?

After the doors fly open and the chains fall off the prisoners, the jailer figures everyone has escaped. He'd probably be executed for this, so he draws his sword to take his own life. But Paul shouts to him, "Don't harm yourself! We're all here!"

The jailer gets some light into the prison, brings out Paul and Silas, and asks, "What must I do to be saved?" He may mean, "How do I get out of this mess?" The jailer got more than he bargained for. People often get more than they bargain for when they ask questions that a Christian witness can take deeper.

The Christian worldview sees the entire mess that the world is in, from the global facts of human rebellion, idolatry and sin, the corruption of human life and relationships, the pollution of our planet, the

worldwide systems of economic exploitation, and so on, right through to *this* messy situation here and now, this sudden crisis, this person in desperate need or sorrow or fear, and *this* person whose own deliberate sin has raised a dark barrier between themselves and God—the Christian worldview sees all of this under the heading of ‘the way the world currently is’, as opposed to ‘the way the world will be when Jesus is reigning as Lord—and the way it can become even here and now, because Jesus is already reigning as Lord, but his reign must spread through humans acknowledging that lordship’. That’s why ‘believe in the Lord Jesus’ is always the answer to the questions of how to be rescued, at whatever level and in whatever sense. (N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, Part 2)

Paul and Silas speak to the immediate question the jailer asks: How do I get out of this mess? They also address the deeper questions about real and lasting salvation.

What kind of “messes” do we get into and how do they reflect the bigger “mess” of our lives and of the world? The good news that meets that mess with grace and power, with forgiveness and love, with help and new life, is summed up in the call, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

Once again, an entire household is baptized. Now the jailer and his family show hospitality to Paul and Silas. “The night-time feast in the jailer’s house sets the pattern for the bizarre celebration of God’s kingdom from that day to this. The world is turning rightway up at last, and what better way of showing it than a Roman jailer throwing a midnight party for two battered but rejoicing heralds of King Jesus?” (Wright).

We’re about to share the feast that celebrates God’s kingdom, that celebrates the salvation God gives and that we receive when we believe in, trust in, commit ourselves to, the Lord Jesus. Let this be a time for all that to be real for you. As the Lord is opening your heart, respond to the good news, believe in the Lord Jesus.