

THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH

(9) Go West, Young Men!

Acts 16:1-10. It is interesting that Paul chose Silas as his travelling companion in place of Barnabas. Silas must have had some standing with the Christians in Jerusalem for them to choose him to bear the council's ruling on circumcision to the church in Antioch. He, like Paul, was a Hellenistic Jew and a Roman citizen, which would have given him the same standing as Paul in the Roman world. It seems they were able to work in harmony during the difficult and dangerous days of this Paul's second missionary journey.

Instead of sailing, this time they went on foot, north from Antioch through Syria and Cilicia, Paul probably being very happy to spend some time in his native Tarsus before travelling on to Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch (in Pisidia), where he and Barnabas had established churches on his previous journey. As a good shepherd, Paul was always keen to reinforce the faith of young churches by return visits.

In **verses 1-3** we are introduced to Timothy, a teenager at the time, who had already gained a good reputation as a disciple from the churches at Iconium and his home town, Lystra. Timothy was blessed in having the godly influence of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, as we see from **2 Timothy 1:5**. Eunice was a Jewess and a believer but apparently his Greek father had denied his son the rite of circumcision, so it seems Paul was anxious to make Timothy acceptable to the Jews by rectifying the omission before including the young man in his evangelism team. Many see Paul's act as one of compromise and it does seem ironic to have Timothy circumcised while handing down to the churches the ruling from the Jerusalem Council that circumcision was not necessary for salvation! It may be that Paul did this also for the sake of Timothy, whom we see through the letters Paul wrote to him later, to be a man lacking in self-confidence. Perhaps it was important for Timothy to be a "complete" Jew! We can deduce from **Galatians chapter 2** that Paul later regretted his decision, but it is very hard for us to make a judgement from our modern point of view. In any case, if Paul was wrong, it comforts us to know that God still used and blessed him mightily!

Do you ever feel guilty over some compromise you made for some reason? God knows we are human: He stands ready to forgive and forget and enable you to do tremendous things for Him!

Acts 16:6-10 says a lot in a few verses. From Antioch in Pisidia it would have seemed logical to Paul to travel southwest to the important centre of Ephesus, a strategic place for the planting of the gospel message. But verse 6 tells us that "they were kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia." We are not told how this guidance was imparted – whether through a vision, circumstances, a return bout of malaria, or some prophetic word – but we do know that they were sensitive and obedient to it. Hence they turned northward towards Bithynia, but once again, "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to." (verse 7). Paul by this time must have puzzled over this: did God really know what He was doing? Yes, He did! See 1:Peter 1:1 – these people where Paul didn't go, still became believers, and known to Peter.

It may have been with some feeling of compulsion that Paul took the only alternative – to press straight on to Troas. And here God at last gave him the answer. The vision of the Macedonian standing and begging for help was enough for Paul: God was leading him west, out of Asia and into Greece. But even with this direct leading, Paul did not take the decision alone: he consulted with his friends and they came to the decision together. A consensus of opinion among godly people is a good confirmation that it is the Lord Who is leading. The word "we" in verse 10 tells us that Luke has now joined the company, whether by accident or design is unclear: it may be that with Timothy not being terribly robust, and Paul with some physical problems, doctor Luke was an invaluable asset to the team. It also enables us to have a detailed, firsthand account of the dramatic events that were to come.

Sometimes we are mystified by what seems to be God's leading. How does your faith stand up to such puzzlement? What is more important – an uncommon message from God or our own "common sense?"

An Acorn into an Oak Tree. Acts 16:11-16.

It is interesting that, sailing from Troas to Macedonia, Paul and his friends should have gone straight to Philippi. It did not even have 10 Jewish men living there – the required minimum for setting up a synagogue – and the only place where the God-fearers could worship was outside the city, beside a river, the water being useful for cleansing ceremonies. However, in the Roman world Philippi had great importance. It was named

after Philip II, father of Alexander the Great, and as a Roman colony, it was a chosen place for many retired legionnaires. It also lay astride the great trade route between Rome and Asia, and was a typical strong point of the Roman Empire. The town had a school of medicine, connected with one of those guilds of doctors which the followers of early Greek medicine had scattered up and down the world. It is quite probable that the doctor Luke, a Greek Gentile, was a native of Philippi: he seemed to have a good knowledge of the area, and spoke of the city with warmth and favouritism.

In any case, it was atypical of Paul to start at a place with no strong Jewish base and as we read on we'll see that this church had very humble beginnings. Yet it grew to become one of the greatest churches spoken of in the New Testament. No wonder Paul could say, writing to them in **Philippians 1:6**, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Can you think of great churches, or Christian organisations, that started off very humbly, even with just one person, and grew into great and influential movements? It helps us to remember how great is the power of God in using His children – and that applies to us as individuals, too. But we must start off humbly!

On the first Sabbath of their stay in Philippi, Paul, Silas, Luke and Timothy went looking for a place of prayer and sure enough, they found a group of God-fearing women by the riverside, whereupon they lost no time in bringing them the good tidings about Jesus the Messiah. It is ironic that, while Paul was kept by Divine guidance from preaching in Asia, his first convert in Macedonia was actually from Asia! Thyatira was a city of varied trade, and Lydia represented some firm engaged in marketing cloth dyed "turkey-red" from the juice of the madder-root, a cheaper rival for the crimson expensively extracted from the murex shell. She had become a Jewish proselyte, and her faith in God paved the way for the light of the gospel to enter her soul. Her baptism would have been very public, and not something which a woman in her social position would have done lightly. She would have been quite wealthy, and as a new Christian her first service to God was to provide hospitality to His servants. It is a heart-warming scene.

An Ominous Change of Scene! Verses 16-40.

At the other end of the social scale, we now see a poor spirit-possessed girl enslaved by the ruthless men who exploited her condition for their own monetary gain. We could wonder why Paul was so disturbed by her testimony to them. The fact is that he had the insight to know the devil was using her in an attempt to patronise the Church: anyone who submits to a patron is subservient to that patron and Paul wanted no such authority given to the devil. God alone has the authority to deal with the souls of men.

So Paul, in the power of the Holy Spirit, exorcised the spirit and set the slave girl free. Of course, that touched the hip pockets of her masters and they were quick to arrest both Paul and Silas, dragging them to the marketplace to face the authorities under the guise that these Jews were trying to get the citizens to break the Roman law. At that time Rome recognized Judaism but Christianity was seen as an illegal religion.

What happened next should never happen to anyone, let alone two Roman citizens. The magistrates, yielding to mob pressure, gave Paul and Silas no trial, had them stripped and beaten, severely flogged and thrown into prison. To make sure they were under top security, the jailer put them in an inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

How would we have reacted to such a situation? Paul, out of compassion, had just worked a life-changing miracle on the girl, with Silas the passive bystander: how could they have borne such despicably unjust treatment? In all the ruckus they apparently had been unable to claim their Roman citizenship, and to add insult to injury, they were incarcerated as heinous and dangerous criminals. Have you ever suffered such a degree of injustice? Many a Christian today is suffering a similar plight because of their faith, in countries around the world. How is it possible to keep our love for God strong and true under such pressure? Does that depend on us, or on God?

The turn of the tide.

In verse 25 the story takes an upward turn. Paul and Silas, hungry, tired, their backs sore and bleeding, their emotions bruised, *were praying and singing hymns to God!* No complaining, no tears of self-pity, no calling on God for vengeance, they were worshipping their God faithfully and with voices loud and confident enough for the prisoner to listen to them!

And at that moment, God came to their rescue! A violent earthquake shook the prison, unlocking all doors and loosening all chains. In prisons of that day, each door was merely closed by a bar, so that the earthquake as it passed along the ground, would force the doorposts apart and the bar would slip from its hold. The chains and stocks would become detached from the walls as they were shaken and gaps appeared between the stones.

And in the midst of this catastrophe, the faithful, trusting Paul was miraculously in complete control. Why didn't the prisoners immediately escape? Were they frozen by fear, or did Paul have some calm and reassuring word for them? The jailer, who could have been an old army officer for whom suicide would have been preferable to the dishonour of losing his prisoners, was stopped in his tracks by Paul's authoritative command, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The reaction of the jailer is interesting. Despite his stern devotion to duty, he quickly acknowledged Paul's leadership and the way out of his dire situation. Trembling in fear, he brought Paul and Silas out and asked the famous question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas were not going to waste that opportunity! "Believe in the Lord Jesus!" they swiftly answered, and extended the invitation to all the jailer's household. In the midst of their trauma, and with bleeding backs, those dear servants of God preached the Gospel! The result was the third miracle that night: the jailer and his whole family became followers of God. How Paul and Silas must have rejoiced, their privations forgotten!

The jailer's conversion was complete: in the middle of the night, he gently washed their backs and then made his change of heart public by being baptised. No longer prisoners, Paul and Silas were brought into his house and a meal was set before them. Verse 34 says the jailer was "filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole family."

Have overwhelming problems dampened your enthusiasm for telling others about your God? Or have you "evangelized with a bleeding back?" God is able to reward you with a blessing far greater than any of your problems.

With the coming of daylight, the story gives us a gratifying finish, as we see the magistrates eating humble pie! With utmost diplomacy they sent their officers to gently escort Paul and Silas to freedom. But Paul was having none of that! Playing his trump card, he cited the serious legal breaches they had made the day before - breaches made worse because they were dealt out to Roman citizens. "Let the magistrates come themselves and escort us out!" he demanded. The magistrates had every reason to be alarmed at this news: they would be in serious trouble if called upon to give a valid reason for yesterday's hasty judgement. Meekly they fell in with Paul's demands and escorted them out of the prison, and we are not surprised that they requested Paul and his friends to leave the city!

It might seem on first reading that Paul was merely standing on his dignity and exacting some vengeance on the magistrates for his humiliation, but that is not so. The church in Philippi was a newborn baby, and as such, had all its growing-up hazards ahead of it. So it was important that its human founder was seen to be completely innocent of any wrongdoing: no guilt must taint the infant church. Granted, it must have been a great lift to his spirit, to be shown to be in the right, but Paul, as ever the shepherd of his sheep, was concerned for the welfare of the church. Reading the epistle he sent to them later, it is obvious that they were a great joy and blessing to him.

It is always a challenge to lead a blameless life, and especially so when our behaviour influences those around us. We need to be aware that some behaviour innocent to us, may cause someone else with different ideals, to stumble. How can we best be sensitive to this criterion?

So we come to the end of this part of our story with the lovely verse 40: Paul and Silas went straight to Lydia's house. Did they seek comfort from the other believers gathered there? No! Rather, they *encouraged them!* We can only stand amazed at the grace of God! The godly Paul had earned the right to urge the young church later, in **Philippians 4:4-7**, to "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

It was a motley crew, that Philippian church! There was Lydia – Asian, a wealthy businesswoman, yet with an intellectual need: there was the slave girl, Greek, in the lowest strata of society, with a deep psychological need: and the jailer, Roman, middle class, with a moral need. Who else? Some of the prisoners? Other Romans, influenced by the jailer and his family? Other Greeks? Students of the medical school? Some of the merchandising fraternity? Whoever they were, Paul was able to write to them in Philippians of his joy “because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now”, and that “all of you share in God’s grace with me.” This epistle will be more meaningful and enjoyable if you read it in the light of this story.

In **chapter 3:20** Paul was led to say to these people – many of whom would have been quite proud of their citizenship in Philippi – “Our citizenship is in heaven.” For just as the Roman citizens of Philippi were, above all, citizens of Rome, so we as Christians have our temporary citizenship on earth while our true home, the centre of all our hopes and longings, is in heaven. So Paul urges them, in chapter 2:5ff, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus who humbled himself and became obedient to death on a crossTherefore God exalted him that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”