

D-DAY AT PHILIPPI

by Ray C. Stedman

We are studying the section of the book of Acts which sets before us the account of the early church in operation and which outlines for us the pattern of normal Christianity. We must remember that this book is intended to describe Christianity as it ought to be in every age. When the principles set forth in Acts are followed, the church is always going to be as vital as it was then.

In the passage to which we come this morning we will relive a seemingly rather obscure and minor event which, in the reckoning of hindsight, has turned out to be one of the most significant and momentous occasions in human history. It does not seem very important when you read this account. But this is the story of the entrance of the gospel into Europe. Here the Apostle Paul and his small company cross the Dardanelles, moving from Asia to Europe. As we look back, across the intervening twenty centuries, we can see that this is one of the most important events of all time. It changed the whole course of Western civilization. Perhaps no single event since the cross of Christ has so affected the world as Paul's seemingly unpretentious decision to cross a narrow neck of water.

I am sure that if the Emperor Claudius, who occupied the throne in Rome at that time, had been asked to name the most significant event of his reign, he would never have dreamed of suggesting (had he even known about it) that it was the occasion when an obscure little bald-headed Jew decided to leave Asia for Europe. That is how little we understand the history we are living through. We do not know what the really great events are.

You remember that the Apostle Paul, with his faithful friend, Silas, and his young follower, Timothy, had been joined by Dr. Luke. They were in the city of Troas, and there Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia asking him to come over and help. God gave them direction by shutting two doors behind them, as we learned last time, and now opening this door slightly ajar in front of them. The apostle never waited. When he found a door open he tried to move through it. As Dr. Luke tells us what happens we will see unfolding once again the familiar pattern that these early Christians followed in planting the gospel in new places. This is very instructive as to how we should operate today to change a nation or a community.

We will see the principles coming into focus as we move through this passage, beginning with Verse 11 of Chapter 16:

Setting sail therefore from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is the leading city of the district of Macedonia, and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days; and on the sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. {Acts 16:11-13 RSV}

Not a very impressive beginning, is it? Here are Paul and Silas and their company in this pagan city of Philippi. Luke is careful to tell us that it was a Roman colony, because the Philippians prided themselves in the fact. About a century earlier, a great battle had been fought outside the walls of the city. In it Brutus and Cassius, the murderers of Julius Caesar, had been defeated by the combined forces of Antony and Octavian, who later became the Emperor Augustus. Because of the help they gave to Octavian's armies, when he became Emperor, he granted Roman citizenship to these Philippians. Therefore the city became a little bit of Rome transplanted to far-off Macedonia. The people had all the rights of any Roman and were governed in the same way as Rome. They took great pride in the fact that they were a Roman colony located so far from the capital.

When Paul and Silas and the others came into the city they were faced with the problem of how to start a Christian work. what would you do in a strange, pagan city in which you had never been before? How would you start in trying to propagate the gospel? Well, this was no problem to Paul. He always knew how to begin

because he always did the same thing. Everywhere he went he started with the same activity -- simply proclaiming the revolutionary message about Jesus, the word about Christ.

You see, even its historical basis is very arresting. Here is the story of a man who came on the scene and did remarkable things and lived an amazing life and who, in a dramatic series of events, was taken and crucified in the city of Jerusalem. That in itself would be dramatic enough, but when you add the astounding news that he did not remain dead but arose from the grave and appeared, over a period of forty days, to witnesses who saw and touched and ate with him -- this is an astonishing message! Then the apostles described its implications -- how this fantastic series of events was designed to enable God to meet the need of the human heart -- the clamant, searching cry for meaning, for relief from guilt, for deliverance from bondage to habits which limit and frustrate. When all this was explained they immediately received a hearing.

Now, they did have to choose where to begin. In most places Paul tried to begin in the most obvious, natural place: he went to the synagogue, where already religious people were gathered who knew something about God from the Scriptures. But Philippi was a pagan city, evidently with too few male Jews to have a synagogue. The Law was very specific -- you had to have ten adult male Jews in order to have a synagogue. If there were not that many, then the Law provided that the Jewish people were to meet by a river and have a prayer meeting.

That is why Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke walked along the riverside on their first sabbath morning in Philippi -- to see if they could find a Jewish prayer meeting. To their delight they did. But, perhaps to their dismay, they found that the only ones present were women. So the gospel entered Europe through a woman's club. I do not know if you would find that a very promising beginning. Most of us would feel that the way to start evangelizing a city is to gather the most influential people together. But, of course, that is exactly what they did! The most influential people in any community are the women, and I am not joking when I say that. They have a power to work behind the scenes that is absolutely unparalleled. And, in our day, for them to begin forsaking that, and trying to assume a more open power, is absurd to some of us who understand the power of women. So here Paul and Silas, led of God, find the opportunity to address these women by the riverside. There they began to preach the gospel, as always, to the most available people.

The second principle they followed was immediately evident:

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul. And when she was baptized, with her household, she besought us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us. {Acts 16:14-15 RSV}

The next step after the proclaiming of the Word of God -- the radical, revolutionary message of the gospel -- is always up to God. And these disciples expected God to do something!

That, by the way, is the missing note among Christians in many places today. Many churches have given up expecting God to do anything, while they expect to do everything. They expect to organize the program and carry it through. It is literally true, as someone has observed, that many churches today are operating in such a way that, if the Holy Spirit were suddenly removed from their program, nobody would notice that anything had happened.

They do not expect God to do anything, but these people did. They just preached the Word and then they expected God to act. They could not tell what he would do -- he is always unpredictable. He has several ways by which he gains access to a city, breaks open a community, and begins to spread the gospel and to plant a church. Philippi was a tough nut to crack, and so God employed four different methods to open that town. In some places he needs only one, and there are yet other ways he uses in other places.

But right here you find one of the ways the Lord frequently uses: He has prepared men and women there, people whose hearts are ready to respond to the gospel. Such a woman was Lydia who was already a worshiper of God. She was a business woman who sold purple goods, who handled the purple dye for cloth

which was so valuable in those days. She made a good living. She had her own home and it was large enough to accommodate Paul and his party. Her heart was ready, having been prepared by God, and she was led of God to be there and to hear.

That is one of the first principles of any Christian evangelical activity. When I have had the occasional privilege of speaking to groups of non-Christians, who have looked at me coldly and rather hostilely at times, and whose reactions I couldn't anticipate, it has been a great encouragement to my heart to realize that there, unquestionably, are people in the group whom God has prepared. I never doubt it, for I have always found it to be true. There are always one or two whom God has prepared. I try to talk to them and to ignore the hostile reaction of others.

This is what happened here. Lydia was there and she did not get upset by the message. She did not view it as a challenge to her Jewish faith, but immediately recognized that it was the fulfillment of all her Jewish hopes. So she opened her heart and received the Lord. Thus the gospel first entered Europe through a Business and Professional Women's Association meeting.

Soon God employs another of his methods to crack open a city:

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. She followed Paul and us, crying, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And this she did for many days. But Paul was annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. {Acts 16:16-18 RSV}

One of the ways God arrests attention is by a spectacular deliverance like this. Sometimes it is in the realm of the physical, as with the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple in Jerusalem, who was suddenly healed, or as in the case when Paul, preaching at Lystra, saw a man lame from birth and said to him, "Rise, stand upon your feet; Jesus Christ makes you well," {cf, Acts 14:10 RSV}. Sometimes it is in the realm of the spirit, as in this case.

This teenage girl, a slave, whom today we would call a medium, or even a witch, was possessed by an evil spirit who used her as a channel to convey clairvoyant messages, interpreting various events of the day, and predicting the future for people. She was exploited for revenue by a group of unscrupulous owners. This girl followed Paul and the others around and declared wherever they went: "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."

Actually this was a very dangerous satanic attack upon the gospel. The devil knows the power of the Word of God, and he knew what these men could do in Philippi if they got a chance. So he was already prepared to adopt his most powerful tactic: To derail their proclamation right at the beginning by appearing to be in line with it, by attempting to form an alliance and thus to gain a position from which eventually to subvert the whole program.

The devil has only two basic approaches -- either apparent alliance or outright attack -- one or the other. Of the two, alliance is by far the more dangerous because it appears to be so helpful. What this girl said is perfectly, absolutely true. These men were indeed servants of the Most High God, and had indeed come to declare the way of salvation.

So, you might ask, why didn't they welcome this? For the same reason that Jesus never allowed a person possessed of an evil spirit to give testimony to him. In the Gospels we are told that wherever Jesus went, the evil spirits would cry out: "Thou art the Son of the Most High God!" {cf, Mark 5:7-8 KJV}. And Jesus would always rebuke them, "Hold your peace." He did not want that.

Why? For two reasons:

First, because if men are drawn to him on that basis, they always come with a wrong motive. Anybody who

deals with mediums, witches, astrology, etc., is always motivated by self-interest. They want to use the occult in some way to aggrandize themselves.

Second, it will not be very long before the truth, which is originally proclaimed as bait to lead people on, begins to be mixed with error, and very serious error at that. Then people are sucked in and cannot tell the difference between the truth and the error. That is the story of every cult which bears the name of Christianity in the world today. They all began with a proclamation of truth, but soon error began to be intermingled, and eventually people were lead right off the track.

Just yesterday I received a book somebody sent me called *Edgar Cayce's Story of Jesus*. Many of you know who Edgar Cayce was, I am sure. He lived earlier in this century and was called "the sleeping prophet." He would go into a trance and pour out volumes of information supposedly from the spirit world. He is being hailed today as a leading prophet of our generation. Because some of his predictions came true, he is regarded, even by some Christians, unfortunately, as an authoritative spokesman. His followers have now published this book in which he takes the facts of the New Testament and interweaves them with a lot of spiritualistic revelations and clairvoyant readings, etc. It is a mishmash of spiritism and Christianity, all designed to attract people with the truth, and to lead them into error.

There is so much of this going on today. I just saw a new magazine called *Man, Myth, and Magic* which is heralded as the most unusual magazine ever published. Open its pages, and you can believe it! It is attracting great attention today. This is a satanic attack.

That is why Paul was annoyed. The word, in Greek, is not really "annoyed." That makes it sound as if he were merely irritated by this woman who kept following him around. It does not mean that at all. The word means, he was "deeply troubled." Why? Because he knew where this would lead. He knew what would happen if he allowed or recognized her testimony. So finally, in the power of the Spirit of God, he turned and said, "I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And the spirit came out that very hour. The girl was set free.

That must have been a tremendous blessing to her heart. She was delivered from this evil thing. But, as always, the devil was quick to twist everything to his own ends. What was a blessing to this girl, he immediately employed to awaken serious opposition. This was also the case in the healing of the lame man in Lystra. That victory was soon twisted by the enemy so as to turn the populace against Paul and Barnabas, and they were stoned. But remember also that this was permitted by God, because one of God's ways of opening a community is to allow the devil to arouse a violent opposition. So do not construe it simply as a satanic attack and nothing more.

Look what happens now:

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the rulers; and when they had brought them to the magistrates they said, "These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice." The crowd joined in attacking them; and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, charging the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. {Acts 16:19-24 RSV}

Notice that this violent opposition was readily aroused. God permitted it in order to open a door for a church to be implanted in this city. That is always God's purpose. But whenever violence is resorted to, it is also always a sign that evil has been deeply entrenched, that this is a place where evil is long-standing and deeply imbedded. This is what, in Second Corinthians 10, Paul calls a "stronghold": "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God, to the pulling down of strongholds," {cf, 2 Cor 10:4}. Here in Philippi there was a stronghold. When it fell the whole surrounding area would be open to the gospel. That is why there was so much opposition and why God had to employ several means of breaking through. Quickly

the opposition came to utter violence, implacable enmity against the message. When that happens it is always a sign that you are attacking a stronghold of evil.

This stronghold found expression in the pride of these citizens of Philippi in the fact that they were a Roman colony. Notice how clever the owners of this jail were. They immediately haled Paul and Silas before the magistrates on the charge that they were challenging the rights of Romans. "They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice." Paul and Silas had touched their point of pride. But when you do that to people they are no longer logical; they always react emotionally.

This is what happened here. A lynch mob formed immediately over this emotional issue. We are finding this pattern repeated many times in our own day. Those who are intent on arousing violent uprising and insurrection in this country are deliberately and very cunningly seizing upon emotional words or issues and using them to arouse people to immediate action without taking thought.

This crowd responded illegally, as calculated, the magistrates were swept off their feet, and the end result was that Paul and Silas were beaten. That is an official Roman punishment. Their backs were bared and they were beaten with rods as thick as a man's thumb until their backs were bloody and raw. Then they were thrown into prison. So aroused were these people that the magistrates charged the jailer to put them into the very inner dungeon. In the darkness and dankness of an inner cell he locked their feet in stocks, so they could not even turn over. That shows the power of evil in this town and how deeply entrenched it was.

But we have not yet seen the end of the story. The fourth method God uses is that of dramatic intervention. This often happens, especially when violence sets in.

But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and every one's fetters were unfastened. {Acts 16:25-26 RSV}

There is nothing unusual about an earthquake in this region. To this day, earthquakes are common in northern Macedonia. The earthquake was natural; the timing of it was supernatural. God released the earthquake, precipitated it precisely at the right moment and set Paul, Silas, and the other prisoners free. The most dramatic aspect of this story, though, is not the earthquake, nor the fact that the prison was damaged and fetters unfastened. It is the singing of Paul and Silas at midnight.

Somebody has said that the gospel entered Europe through a sacred concert which was so successful that it brought the house down!

Frankly, I am filled with admiration for these men. Imagine this, praising God! That is the meaning of the word "praying" used here. They were not asking for anything; they were praising God and singing hymns. They were not faking either. Their backs were raw and bloody, they were covered with wounds, they had suffered a great injustice, but they exhibited no self-pity or resentment. They were facing agonizing uncertainty. They did not know this delivering earthquake was coming -- they did not request it.

All this is accentuated by the solemn words "at midnight." Everything -- all the pain and the heartache and disappointment -- is always worst at midnight, isn't it? But at midnight they began praising God and singing hymns. I do not know what they sang. I know what I'd be singing: *Rescue the perishing, care for the dying*. But I think they were singing, *How great thou art*.

Evidently they sang because they could see things that we, in our poor, blinded condition, seldom see. These men were men of faith, and I think I know some of what they saw. When you see it, your question will no longer be, "Why did they sing?" but, "What else could they do but sing?"

They saw, first, that the enemy had panicked. Paul and Silas and all these other early Christians were always conscious of what Paul describes in Ephesians 6, that "we are battling not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers and wicked spirits in high places," {cf, Eph 6:12}. This is a blood-and-guts battle

which is tough and demanding, and where every inch of the way will be contested. But they were delighted when they saw that the enemy had panicked and had resorted to violence. That always means that he has emptied his bag of tricks already. He is down to the bottom of the barrel, there is nothing left. They knew they had won.

The second thing they saw was that God, in his resurrection power, was at work in the situation. Resurrection power cannot be stopped. As Paul would later write to these Philippians, "what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel," {Phil 1:12 RSV}. There is no way to stop resurrection power. All attempts to oppose it, or to throw an obstacle in its path, are turned around and used as opportunities for advancement. Paul and Silas knew that, and so they were assured that the work was established, that it would continue, that they had won. Resurrection power was at work.

The third thing they understood in all this was that suffering -- physical, mental, and emotional suffering -- is absolutely necessary to Christian maturity. They themselves had been benefited by this experience. Again Paul would write to these same Philippians and say,

For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, {Phil 1:29 RSV}

Suffering is part of the program. They knew this was so because it was part of the program for the Son of God.

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, {Heb 5:8-9 RSV}

Suffering is an absolutely inescapable part of the curriculum. You will never grow up, you will never be what God wants you to be, without some form of suffering. When you learn that, you will stop griping and bemoaning your estate so. When you run into some suffering you will start rejoicing, as these men rejoiced.

They saw that the foe had been defeated, that the work was established, and that they personally had benefited. Is that not enough to rejoice over? Of course! So they began to rejoice and sing and to thank God for what they saw. And God was so excited by this that he said, "I just can't hold still. I'm going to shake the place up a little bit!" It blesses the heart of God to see men act this way. And so the prison was opened.

Now we see the next step in the pattern. This was their established routine: They came to town and proclaimed the Word, they expected God to do something, and when the results began to show, they started the operation of body life -- the life of the family of God. This is what happened next:

When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, 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 brought them out and said, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, with all his family. Then he brought them up into his house, and set food before them; and he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God. {Acts 16:27-34 RSV}

The result is that there is a church, right there. They had reached some women before, but you never have a church until you get both men and women, as well as all classes. And here were the men coming in now, the jailer and his family, his household, servants and all.

They came because of the crisis in this jailer's life. There are some who read these words of the jailer, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" as though he were saying, "Men, how do I get out of this mess? How do I square myself with the authorities?" But I am confident this is not what he is asking, because the answer of Paul and Silas is, "If you believe in the Lord Jesus, you will be saved, you and your household." The

household was not in trouble with the magistrates; the jailer was. So he must be talking about eternal things. If you refer to what had just happened to him, you can see why. He thought his prisoners were free, and he knew that his own life would be forfeit if they got away. So, rather than allow the authorities to take his life, he was going to do it himself. He had drawn his sword and was ready to plunge it into his breast. He was about to die when Paul stopped him with the dramatic words, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

Now when men are about to die they start thinking about what lies beyond. And that is what is behind his question. They responded with the only possible answer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." The word "believe" governs the entire sentence. If his household believes, they will be saved, too. They are not saved because this man believed; they will be saved when they believe. Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. They all believed, and so they were all saved.

That was the beginning of God's family in Philippi. The immediate reaction of the jailer is to wash their wounds. Is that not a beautiful picture? This man who, just a few hours before, had thrown them in the cell and had brutally locked them in stocks, was now washing their wounds, washing away all the blood and dirt and filth, and tenderly taking care of the men to whom he had been joined in the family of God. That is the beginning of body life, the immediate sharing of one another's problems, the bearing of one another's burdens. And they rejoiced together. That is part of body life, too. They welcomed each other into the family of God. What a time of celebration!

The last section continues the theme of the beginning of body life. It must be read in that context in order to be understood.

But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." And the jailer reported the words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go; now therefore come out and go in peace." But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now do they cast us out secretly? No! let them come themselves and take us out." The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. [Isn't that wonderful? I love that little touch.] And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of prison, and visited Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they exhorted them and departed. {Acts 16:35-40 RSV}

There is a lot of humor in that, isn't there? The police told Paul he could go, but he said, "No! I'm not going. They beat me uncondemned, they broke the law themselves. Now let them come down and ask us to leave." And so these magistrates, who had just cast them into prison, came down, hats in hand, and apologized to these two prisoners for their treatment, and begged them to leave town. Paul said, "O.K., we'll leave, but we'll take our time about it. We want to have lunch with Lydia first, and then we'll visit some of the brethren."

Who are the brethren? This is the first mention of any male converts here in Philippi, other than the jailer.

After the first service this morning, the delightful college student we've nicknamed "Ernie the prophet," who many of you know, came up to me and asked, "Who were these brethren?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "Do you know who I think they were? I think they were the prisoners who had been listening to Paul and Silas sing at midnight." I think he was right. We are not told what happened to them, but the prisoners were listening intently, and they too were freed by this event.

You might ask, "Why did Paul raise the issue of his Roman citizenship at this point?" Some think he was being a bit prickly and difficult, a bit vengeful for his own sake. But we must read this in the context of what he is doing with the body of Christ here at Philippi. He could have invoked his status in his own defense much earlier. Had he mentioned that he was a Roman citizen when they were about to beat him, he probably could have spared himself the beating. But he did not say a word then. Now he does, for the sake of the Christians in the city of Philippi. You can see what a difference was created by having these magistrates come down and meet the believers, apologize to Paul and Silas, and acknowledge their illegal treatment. They put the church in

an entirely different status within the community. Paul did this for the sake of the body.

His final act is to gather the brethren together and to exhort them, teach them, and admonish them to go on in the Lord. When you read the letter to the Philippians, written from Paul's Roman prison -- still in prison, still rejoicing -- you can see that letter is full of triumph. He is still exhorting them to rejoice, still teaching them and ministering to the body. That is a principle the early Christians always followed. The minute believers came together they began body life, sharing together one another's burdens, praying for one another, rejoicing together, and living together the life of Jesus Christ. It is of great necessity for the church to recover this again in our own day.

Prayer:

Father, we pray that this may be true in reality, that we will demonstrate it not only in some outward, external fashion, but most of all in the way we accept one another, pray for one another, seek to help one another, bear one another's burdens, and meet one another's needs. If there are lonely people here among us, Lord, help us to brighten their hearts and lives right now by our warmth of greeting and perhaps with an invitation to come home to dinner with us, so that we can share something of the joy we have together. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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