

UNEXPECTED ALLIES

by Steve Zeisler

I'm sure you've seen the bumper stickers for cars consisting of a fish or ichthus framing the name "Jesus." You may have also seen the humanist response to the Christian ichthus, the little fish shape that has two feet on it, framing the name "Darwin." I recently saw the third step in this debate, a bumper sticker consisting of the Christian ichthus, fairly large with its mouth open, about to swallow the little Darwin creature. The caption underneath said, "Survival of the fittest." I don't know what the next step is going to be, but there will always be a tension between belief and unbelief.

In Acts 16 we're going to have an opportunity to observe the cause of Christ challenge the world and its authority, and to think about what it means to represent the Lord among non-Christians.

In the last message we began a study of the second missionary journey in Acts. One of the most important points we considered, beginning at the end of Acts 15, was the creative work of God in changing the way Christian people relate to each other. We think friendships and ministry teams will stay exactly the same. We think the way God did something last time is exactly the way he'll do it next time. But we find that's not so. The community of Christ is filled with the glory and creativity of its Lord as new gifts emerge, new leaders are called, friendships go through challenging times, and difficulties and differences lead to growth. The community of Christ is not static.

It's also true that our relationship with the world is unpredictable. Those who are outside the circle of faith will surprise us with their desire for God.

Finally, open doors

Verses 9-12 set the scene:

During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

Notice that we have been introduced to a new companion. So far we have known that Paul and Silas left Antioch together on this trip. In Lystra they gathered Timothy onto the team to travel with them. And now in verses 10-11 it says, "...We got ready at once," and "...We put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace...." The author of this book, Luke, has joined the team, and is now writing in first person. He apparently joins the group (now four in number) at Troas, where Paul's vision takes place.

Paul wakes up one morning, gathers his companions around him, and tells them of this vivid dream that he had. It's quite clear to him that it was no ordinary dream, that God had invaded his sleep when a man dressed in some distinctive garb of the Macedonians and speaking with a Macedonian accent begged him, "Please come to Macedonia. Please bring the message that you've been sent with to us." And Paul is gripped with excitement.

Remember what happened to them in the immediately preceding series of events. They have been frustrated, traveling more than three hundred miles, having doors slammed in their faces. Every place they have gone in their long journey from Lystra to Troas, whenever they attempted to go into the city, the Spirit forbade them. Now finally it's clear that they are supposed to travel across the Aegean to begin work in Macedonia.

There is urgency in the way Luke writes this. The Macedonian man was begging that disciples should come there. They immediately made preparation, Luke says, to travel to Macedonia. They sailed a straight course to Samothrace, just stayed overnight there, then went to Neapolis, and then on to Philippi. There is eagerness, boldness, enthusiasm, and hope. Finally all the negatives are behind them.

Think back for a moment to the nature of the apostle Paul's call to ministry. Some of his eagerness in these verses could be attributed to that. Acts 22:18 records a trial where Paul told his story. He said this:

"...I...saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'

"'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'

Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

Paul was describing his early Christian life when he had returned from Damascus to Jerusalem, and he was trying to minister to Jews. He wanted to persuade his own people, the Jews, about whom he knew so much and whom he loved so deeply, to come to Christ. But in Jerusalem all he could do was stir up trouble, creating problems and anxiety among the believers and resistance among unbelievers. As much as Paul wanted to minister to the Jews, the Lord said, "I'm going to send you far away to the Gentiles. You are going to leave Jerusalem."

Thus, in the opening chapter of Romans Paul talked about his eagerness to come to Rome. Paul knew it was his calling to leave Jerusalem behind, in effect leaving Judaism-based Christianity behind, and to take the gospel into places that were Gentile, Roman, pagan, polytheistic; to take the gospel to people who weren't born with Jewish heritage.

Now, Philippi, as we're told in this opening paragraph, had an interesting designation. We're told that Philippi was a Roman colony. That meant it was a bit like our District of Columbia in that it was a federal district, not a part of any state. Philippi and a handful of other cities throughout the empire were considered to be mini-Romes. As the Roman legions overran all the countries of the Mediterranean world, most cities remained part of the country that was conquered. Rome would set up rulers in each country who would serve the purposes of the empire. Occasionally, however, Rome would capture a city for themselves. They would make it a federal city where Roman citizens would live and Roman army legionnaires would retire. These cities exalted Rome and everything Roman. And Philippi was such a city. It was a place that gloried in its Roman heritage and the status of being a colony.

That is why Paul is eager to get there. It is clearly his calling. In his eagerness to go where the gospel hasn't been before, to leave Jerusalem farther behind and go farther into strongholds of unbelief, if you will, he and his team embark on this remarkable journey across the Aegean.

Historians now look back and consider this one of the most momentous choices made by a small band of Christians in the history of the church. For the first time the gospel was leaving Asia Minor and entering Europe and the great cities of the Roman empire that were farthest from the Semitic world. Of course, as we look back on history, we know that the gospel of Christ would take root in Europe. Jerusalem, Syria, Turkey, and all the lands of Bible history would not become the places where the gospel found its great teachers and leaders in post-apostolic generations. It was in Europe---Greece, Rome, Germany, France and Britain---where the church would thrive in the centuries to come.

Puzzling people

Yet with all their enthusiasm, excitement, and hope, having been given a vision to cross into this territory, the team will find disappointment there. All the wrong people show up. Let's read on in verses 13-22:

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten.

Paul's pattern upon entering a city was always to go to the synagogue of the city and begin to minister there. In the synagogues throughout the Roman empire, not only would Jews be gathered, but also those called "God-fearers." These were Gentiles who had grown sick of their own sinfulness and had begun to hope that there might be a better answer. They loved to hear the words of the Old Testament Scriptures that were read aloud in the synagogues. Paul would begin his ministry in synagogues, trying to win Jews and those God-fearers who were already interested in the God of the Bible.

But there was no synagogue in Philippi. There are a couple of speculations as to why. Perhaps there were so few Jews in Philippi, for whatever reason, that no synagogue was ever established. Ten adult men were required in any population as the quorum needed to establish a synagogue in the region. However, historians note that Claudius had banished Jews from Rome about the same time as the events recorded here took place. It may well be that Philippi as a Roman colony was following the lead of Rome and had begun to persecute Jews, causing an existing synagogue to disband in fear. Whatever the reason, finding no synagogue was certainly a disappointment to the newly arrived missionaries.

The practice of Jews who did not have a synagogue was to meet for prayer outside the city on a Sabbath, often near a water source that could be used for ritual cleansings.

So the team goes to the riverside prayer meeting and Paul begins to speak. There are some hints that Paul wishes that someone other than this woman Lydia would have responded to his message. You'll notice it says in verse 14, "One of those listening was a woman named Lydia...The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." As I picture this scene, Paul is talking to whoever are the most likely candidates (youths, Jewish women, men?) to become Christian leaders. While he is trying to persuade them, there is a woman off to the side, and the Lord opens her heart. The Lord changes her almost in spite of him. Her response surprises the apostle. She is baptized, and she invites the team to her home. In verse 15 she says, "If you consider me to be a believer in the Lord..." There is some doubt about their willingness to endorse everything that God is doing in her life. Finally, she persuades them.

Having been called in a miraculous vision, Paul undoubtedly had high expectations for ministry in Philippi. He expected conversions among the important people of the city, and he expected open doors so that he would be able to galvanize people to great faith and response. But the story Luke tells is about three people, every one of whom contradicts expectations. Think about this woman Lydia. She is not a Jew, but a "God-fearer." Many residents of Philippi were from Rome with important connections in the capital of the empire. But Lydia is not a Roman, she is from Thyatira. It would be nice if she were from a local clan in that region of Macedonia. But she is not. And she is not a man. She doesn't have the qualifications that would make her a desirable leader in

this new community of faith.

I've tried to think of a modern analogy to Lydia: picture her working at Nordstrom. She would deal in clothing made from beautiful fabrics. She probably would not be married, although she might have been once. She clearly would be the head of her own home and probably wealthy (Lydia is inviting people into her home, and it is her household that is baptized with her). She would almost certainly consider herself an ardent feminist, having challenged most traditional thinking about the role of women.

Think about how God uses unlikely candidates, about how he seems to do ministry the wrong way. Once when I was the college pastor here, I was trying to organize an evangelistic outreach in one of the dorms at Stanford. As things shook out, the teams that were supposed to run the event changed, and some people I was counting on left. I realized finally that of the two students I was relying on to help lead this evangelistic meeting, in which we were going to try to penetrate intellectually arrogant Stanford University for Christ, one was a Nigerian graduate student who didn't speak English very well. He was also charismatic, and broke out in loud praises at what I thought were inappropriate moments. The other was a freshman who had manic-depressive illness. He was on a manic high as we were entering the meeting. This was not the leadership team I would have preferred. And yet people came to Christ.

The second story we read about is the story of a slave girl who was in the grip of a demonic spirit and used occult powers to foretell the future. Again, if I were trying to tell her story in modern terms, I would bring before you a fifteen-year-old girl addicted to crack and living on the streets, selling her body to make money for wicked men. In both cases a young girl's defilement and tragedy becomes a source of gain for callous men.

Again, notice Paul's reticence to see possibilities for ministry in repeated contact with the demonized girl. Finally Paul realizes that this is from the Lord. When he banishes the evil spirit all hell breaks loose, and the gospel finds another way to advance in Philippi.

The miracle of a changed man

The story goes on in verses 23-40:

After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved---you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God---he and his whole family.

When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace."

But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are

Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."

The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.

The third person whose story Luke tells to help us understand the founding of the church at Philippi is a Roman jailer. If an expatriate feminist businesswoman and a slave girl are unlikely candidates on whom to build a church, a Roman jailer fits right in at the same level of likelihood. He was almost certainly a Roman soldier at some earlier point in his life, and moved to the colony at Philippi. The responsibility of running a jail was an important one. It would have been given to a seasoned, tough, effective, violent, no-nonsense Roman soldier, someone who wouldn't blink at violence or have difficulty with harshness.

God called for a miracle earthquake. The bar falls off the jail door latch, the doors fly open, and chains that would have their anchor point pounded between rocks and the stone wall are set free from their anchoring because the rocks come loose.

Why did God go to these lengths: allowing arrest and beating and then overturning them with a midnight ground shaking? Why didn't he just stop the angry crowd and let Paul say, "I'm a Roman citizen"? Why the crowd response, the terrible beatings, the night in the stocks, the agony of unwashed wounds? Why didn't God do the simpler miracle and quiet the crowd?

He didn't do that because there was an even greater miracle than an earthquake that was to take place. A whole prison full of men were so astonished by hymns of faith that they refused to run even when the doors flew open. They listened intently to the singing and the prayers. Consider, also, the description of the jailer's joy, his tenderness, his trembling before Paul and Silas, and his humility. He took them into his home and gently washed their wounds with his own hands. This is a man who feared Rome so much that he was ready to take his own life because he knew that he would be executed for what he had done. But seeing the miracle of hymn-singing at midnight, he realizes that he is dealing with something greater than Rome, and calls out, "What must I do to be saved?" He fears God more than he ever feared Rome. The extraordinary miracle is the change in him.

Paul came eagerly to Philippi with a set of expectations that are probably similar to ours, if we know ourselves very well. Most of us expect that the people who come to Christ through our influence are going to be much like us. They will be non-Christians who have traveled the long journey from wherever they were apart from the Lord toward respect for Christianity, for the God of the Bible. Their cultural values will be similar to our cultural values. They are apt to vote the same way we vote, approve of the same things that we approve of, and reject the same things we reject. They just don't know the Lord yet. We readily reach out to people who are a lot like us anyway and invite them across the threshold to faith in Christ.

Most of the converts we know very much about in the story of Acts up to this point were Jews or God-fearers. Cornelius the centurion in Acts 10 already loved Judaism; his heart was already won by the great truths of the God of the Bible. The Ethiopian eunuch was reading a Bible when Philip showed up. Titus, whom Paul mentions in Galatians as having traveled to Jerusalem with him, was a man of deep respect for the people of God, the God of the Bible, and the laws of God. These God-fearers had traveled that long distance from rank paganism to near faith. So when the gospel came, the earliest experiences were winning people who were pretty close already.

Paul, I'm sure, expected to find in Philippi a thriving synagogue, God-fearers on every side, key members of the Philippian society all ready to believe. He would tell them that Christ was the Messiah of the Old Testament. They would come to faith, the church would be established, and the Roman world would find itself penetrated by the gospel. Though verse 40 mentions other brothers in the church, Luke carefully tells us the story of three unexpected converts---an expatriate businesswoman, a demonized slave girl, and a Roman jailer.

Worldly power resists the gospel

I want to suggest four points of application we're supposed to learn from this story. I would suggest first that worldly concentrations of power will resist introduction of the life-changing presence of God. If there are people making money off of demons, they won't want demons banished. Political authorities will often prefer public order to justice. We can't make the gospel palatable to the powers of the age. The gospel is not palatable, changed lives are not encouraged, and we have to expect resistance. We may have to pay a price. We can't water the gospel down enough for it to be well-liked. We might as well get used to it.

Non-Christians are desperate for Christ

The second thing I would say is that, as much as we see God work among people who are already mostly converted, it is also true that God is present and creative and working among the rankest parts of society. He wants to revolutionize crack-addicted fifteen-year-olds. He knows and loves and is stirring in the lives of people who have habitually ridiculed and resisted the gospel. He is at work in prisons and among self-worshipping humanists.

Lives lived apart from Christ are increasingly desperate. Reflect on what it's like to not know the Lord and live in the modern world. The political leadership of this nation cannot agree that nearly full-term babies, partially born, should have their lives protected by law. We live in a world in which all the efforts at fixing things---affirmative action, efforts to bring about reconciliation---are making them worse. People are if anything more racist than they were fifteen years ago, more likely to give in to hatred, more anxious. Let's assume you've tried to be a good pagan and humanist, to reject God, to believe that the people in charge know what they're doing. It's pretty hard. However smug or hardened an individual may appear, it remains true that everyone has a God-shaped vacuum inside that only God can fill. We should expect that many unbelievers are closer to faith than they appear to be.

We don't have to be smart, just available

The last thing I'd say by way of application is that Paul and Silas and Timothy and Luke didn't know any of this when they went to Philippi. They kept trying to ignore Lydia, except she wouldn't let herself be ignored. They tried to ignore the slave girl, but neither would she let herself be ignored. They didn't want to get beaten up and sent to jail, but that's where God sent them. They didn't know how God worked among aggressive unbelievers and different, unusual, peculiar people. But they didn't need to know. They didn't need to be smart enough to do things right the first time.

What they did was go. "We concluded that God was calling us to Macedonia...We got ready at once...We sailed straight for Samothrace...We went where God was sending us." So they were thinking, "If we concluded that God was sending us there, then he is going to do something."

I hope that encourages us as well. The issue is not whether we are particularly perceptive about what God is doing. The issue is whether we are available. We can get it wrong many times, and God will still lead people to himself. When we finally notice the opportunity, having walked by it a dozen times, it will still be there. The question is whether we are willing to eagerly pick up the opportunity to believe that God is calling us to something, to expect to be used as world changers

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