

LYDIA

SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE

By Steve Zeisler

The front page of yesterday's paper had a picture of a very tough-looking Army Ranger, Pat Tillman, who grew up in this area and died in a battle in Afghanistan. Pat Tillman had been at the pinnacle of success in ways that so many in our world desire to be. He was physically impressive, an all-star NFL football player. He had influence, money, fame, status. But our attention is called to his story not because of these things but because he died in combat. He had gotten to the pinnacle and it wasn't satisfying. Tillman determined to give himself to a high purpose. The political freedom he fought for is not the greatest cause of all, but it is good to be reminded that grand success, money, fame, and status are not enough. There is more to life.

In the book of Acts, as in the rest of the New Testament, we hear stories of folks who discovered to an even greater degree that what this world has to offer is not enough. There is a greater message to believe, a more remarkable banner to march under. There is something worth giving your life to that this world's benefits can't rival. In the Bible we find ordinary folks, unnoticed nobodies who have discovered an eternal message in the companionship of Christ. They set off on a great adventure, and their stories are now captivating us two thousand years later. This world doesn't offer what is worth living for, but God does.

We'll read Acts 16:9-12 to begin. There is a lot of energy and excitement here. You may feel the sea spray in your face as you read.

Anticipation

A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days.

I want to point out some things in the description of events that lead up to the ministry in Philippi. Remember, what we have mostly observed up to this point in chapter 16 is frustration (see Discovery Paper 4766). Our travelers had begun a journey. Then they had veered off of their original course, and had covered hundreds of miles, for weeks or more, attempting to go into regions serving Christ, and were repeatedly told, "No," by God himself. A tension was building up in this. Why was God saying, "No," unless he intended to say, "Yes," at some point? He must have had something better in mind. These were faithful servants; he was not castigating them for doing anything wrong. He was just forbidding them. So increasingly they asked, "Lord, when will you say, 'Yes?' Where are you taking us?"

Now they have finally arrived at that day. They came to the seaport city of Troas, and Paul had a vision by night, a word from God, they concluded. God was saying, "Yes," now, after all these miles and weeks! So we are excited along with them, aren't we? What will happen now? Something important!

Notice the urgency of the language Luke uses. He is experiencing these things firsthand, but in addition, most scholars think Luke was a Philippian himself now headed to his home region. Perhaps that helps us understand his excitement. Verse 10: "*Immediately* we sought to go into Macedonia....We ran a *straight* course to

Samothrace...On the *day following* to Neapolis...*and from there* to Philippi.” There was no time to waste. Luke likes to talk about sea travel, by the way. We will discover more of that as we read the rest of Acts. I picture him like Leonardo DiCaprio on the bow of the Titanic, leaning into the wind at sea. He is excited! But the thing that really thrills him is this: “We concluded that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” What a privilege!

How do you stay excited about sharing your faith, about the possibility of new folks’ coming to know Christ? By feasting on God’s grace yourself. If you have lost your enthusiasm for taking the gospel into the world, it may be because you are lacking the nourishment of his grace. Remember what it means to be loved by God, so you are able to feel some of the same delight in seeing him love others as well.

There are two other things to note in this preliminary paragraph. First, in verse 12 Luke says that they stayed some days in the city, enough time to begin a church. A wonderful congregation was going to be established there. It would be one of the heroic churches of the New Testament, an example to others. The letter to the Philippians is one of the most encouraging documents of the New Testament. It is filled with references to joy and generosity and a call to obedience, hope, friendship, and gratitude.

Second, Philippi was a Roman colony, and that is important for a number of reasons. Jesus said just before his ascension that his followers would one day preach the gospel to the remotest parts of the earth. Rome was the center of the empire that stretched to the ends of the earth as far as anyone in that day knew. It was the fountainhead of all power and authority and human determination to make life work without God. Even now Paul anticipated someday going to Rome. This colony of Philippi was a federal district, a circle of territory within which the Romans would transplant Rome. They established such districts in various places around the empire. Roman legionnaires would retire there and Roman citizens would often move to these districts. The residents of these colonies reveled in everything Roman. They loved their heritage. They fed on the gossip of the great city, who was politically advancing and who was falling, scandals of the elite, and so on. They considered themselves an outpost of Rome.

These travelers were beginning a conquest of the worship of Caesar. They were going to speak of Jesus. The word of Christ and the power of Rome were on a collision course, and here in this outpost is where they would first collide. Someday the challenge to Christians who were persecuted by Rome would be, “Will you or will you not say Caesar is Lord?” Christians refused time after time and lost their lives because they confessed that Jesus was Lord. Today there are uncounted millions of people who say, “Jesus is Lord,” and there are no Caesars left. The message these travelers bore was the message that would change everything, and I think they knew it. Paul’s writings suggest that he had some idea of the kind of thing that was beginning to happen, and he was excited about it. We know from later history that Europe is where the church was rooted most thoroughly and survived for two millennia. Important events were right on the doorstep!

Verses 13-15:

And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.

Let me make a literary observation at this point. The story of the church planting mission in Philippi focuses on just two days. I don’t know why Luke decided to write it this way. He tells the story of this first day, the Sabbath day when they go to a riverside prayer meeting. There new faith begins and some are baptized. Subsequently, he tells of a second day on which the rest of the events that are recorded occur. It is the last day,

just before the missionaries leave town. So effectively, we are told beginning and end of the Philippian mission and not much else. But we know that a great deal happened in between because of the church that was established there when they left.

In this message we are going to consider the first day, the Sabbath meeting—and begin with disappointment.

Anticlimax

A head of steam has built up: the vision from heaven, the immediacy of travel, the longing to preach the gospel. Surely something great will happen. Our first reaction to this scene, however, is of something rather bland and understated.

Paul sat down and began to teach those who gathered at a riverside prayer meeting. Paul was being faithful, but I think he was tremendously disappointed with what he found. When Paul and Barnabas went on the first missionary journey together, the pattern they developed was to go first to the place where Jews gathered. They would start where the Bible was already familiar, where the God of heaven was already being named, where Jews gathered for worship. Effectively that meant finding one or another of the synagogues that were in the region. Where Jews were reading the Bible, Paul and Barnabas could open their eyes to see that Jesus was the Messiah of the Jews. In addition they would also find God-fearing Gentiles. These were Gentiles who were sick at heart of the idolatrous religion they were raised in, and they liked to sit outside the synagogue or in the back of the room and hear of the true God who was loving and powerful and righteous. Their hearts were hoping for him. In previous cities, when Paul and Barnabas began teaching at the synagogue, conversion of both Jews and Gentiles began and the city would be evangelized.

The reason Paul went to this prayer meeting at the riverside is that there was no synagogue meeting in Philippi. We can assume they had looked for one in vain. In Rome at this time some uprising had happened, Jews were blamed, and Claudius the emperor began persecuting Jews, driving them from the city. This mini-Rome, Philippi, was apparently doing the same thing, forcing Jews out of public view, driving them underground. They were not meeting in public. No men are mentioned. Perhaps there were none who were willing to stick their necks out in times of persecution. Paul knew that some Jews and God-fearers would gather for prayer near a water source outside the city. That would be the second choice if no synagogue existed. He looked for a prayer meeting on a Sabbath day and found it.

But Paul must have been disappointed. Consider what is missing in this story. Lydia is the only one named, and she was not a Jew, but a God-fearing Gentile. No Jews are specifically mentioned at the prayer meeting, although probably some of those gathered were Jewish. And there are no men mentioned. Paul had seen a vision in which a man appeared to him and said, “Come to Macedonia and help us.” Every place he had traveled till now, Paul had seen men come to Christ. These missionaries expected to find men on whom the church could depend for leadership. Rome was an aggressively masculine, violent, chauvinistic society. If you have seen *The Passion of the Christ* and watched the Roman soldiers in vicious glee flog Jesus and torment him in other ways, you have some idea of the kind of society Rome was. Surely if they were going to see the gospel advance in this culture, they were going to need strong men to carry the message.

Paul was faithful. These were the ones God had given, so he sat down and taught them, delivering the message he had been given to deliver. But in my imagination he was looking up, back toward the city, and wanting to know how God would do a work here. “How can we start with this small group and hope to see much come of it?”

As Paul was speaking, Lydia opened her heart to the Lord. Luke’s grammar suggests that Paul didn’t even get to finish speaking. Lydia was a woman who, in her prayers, hopes, suffering, and needs was so ready to receive Christ that she came to faith when Paul was only partway through his message. This would be a little

disconcerting for a preacher. You like to get to the crescendo, make the point, wave your arms, tell the joke, and *then* have somebody respond. Then you get credit for having done it well, having been so persuasive that there was nothing they could do but respond. But Lydia responded before Paul finished his message.

Note also, that at the end of the day she had to persuade Paul and his friends to come to her house. That word in Greek implies resistance. She badgered him, perhaps, to come to her house; she wouldn't take no for an answer. This woman was overtaken by the grace of God, and she opened her heart to the Lord and opened her home to be used. At the end of the story of the ministry in Philippi, they will still be meeting in Lydia's house. It will become the center for evangelism, worship, ministry, and Christian growth. But Paul didn't want to go to her house at first. "No, Lydia, thanks for the offer, but we've got to find the open door that God will give to us....No, I'm sorry, thanks a lot....It is a great offer, but you're unmarried. How would it look if we come to your house?...It is really good of you, but we are going to seek out God's plan....It is a nice offer...." About the fourth or fifth time, they finally realized that they didn't have any other options, and they agreed to come to her house.

Recalling the heaven-sent vision, the team's enthusiasm, their high expectation, why did the missionaries first get to that city and encounter what must have been very disappointing to them? "Lord, let us engage in battle. Bring us some who will believe and some who will deny! Let us speak of you to the important people. Give us men who will support the cause and give us strength in the battle." A woman and her household believed, and that became the strategic entrée to this city, a Roman colony. Why was the message that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar, put in this unimportant context?

A couple of things occur to me that I think are helpful and may challenge us.

Misfits

First, Lydia was a misfit. The reason the gospel is powerful is because misfits bear it well. It is not required that powerful and important and well-connected people serve Christ in order for the truth to be made plain and for his power to be displayed. In fact, it is the reverse. He chooses other kinds of people. The reason this message has prevailed for two thousand years and will prevail to the end, the reason we can be certain that he keeps his promises, is because of the kind of people that he chooses—people like us. The gospel's power does not reside in those who speak it.

Consider the ways Lydia was a misfit. She was not a Philippian. She was not a Jew with vast knowledge of the Old Testament to draw on. She was not a Roman. She was ex-patriot from Thyatira. She spoke with an accent. She was not a man. She was not married. We gather that because Luke says that *her* household believed and was baptized along with her. If she were married, it would have been her husband's household. She was successful in business by her own efforts. What has been difficult for women in most ages was extraordinarily difficult in the time of the Roman Empire. Yet she had gone to a new place, brought her goods, sold them, and succeeded, and she had a household of her own. Her success in business marked her as peculiar, unfamiliar.

Lydia was a misfit, but look at the example she gives us. She was hungry for the presence of God. She went to the meeting, even though many, because of the persecution of Jews, had ducked their heads and stayed out of sight. She sought the opportunity to pray with others who prayed. Her heart melted upon hearing the gospel of the love of Christ, and she not only opened her heart, but she opened her home. She responded with generosity. Having been given a great gift, she wanted to give something in return. She listened to the voice of the Lord in the message of salvation, and she listened to the voice of the Lord saying that it was his desire to use her. She was told no, but she wouldn't take no for an answer, because she listened to a greater authority who said yes.

The last thing I would observe about Lydia is that she was stubborn. She was stubborn because she knew the

truth. She was stubborn because she had heard from her Master that she should serve him. Her stubbornness is commendable. She was not defensive or whining or awash in grievances at life's unfairness. She was confident that God wanted to use her, and eventually she persuaded everybody else to believe it.

Misfits matter to God. They are the ones he chooses. In our community there are women who have been overlooked, gifted single folks who question themselves but ought not, immigrants whose accent has caused them to be passed by, some with great wisdom who weren't educated at the best schools, some with great courage and ability who are too young to have a résumé to prove it. Perhaps you've had the experience of raising your hand to serve when the gaze of those making the decisions was focused somewhere else. Yet God chooses misfits, the unexpected people. Paul was doing the best that he could on that first Sabbath in Philippi. Though he didn't find what he expected, eventually he heard God's voice and was persuaded. Godly leadership is like that. And Paul will eventually articulate the value of misfits more clearly than anyone—if they were going to topple Caesar worship, if they were going to break the back of idolatry, it would happen because misfits, the unexpected, were chosen by God to begin the process.

Think about the people sitting around you. What do you conclude? The Lord puts treasure in earthen vessels, not in vessels of gold and silver.

“For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” (1 Corinthians 1:26-31.)

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