

SILAS

SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE

By Steve Zeisler

Some of the most brilliant people in the world devote their time and energy to manipulating images, spinning news accounts, crafting language, framing messages, arranging appearances to gain agreement—rather than concerning themselves about any underlying reality. This inclination to doctor and spin is at its height in times of war and during presidential elections, both of which we are facing this year.

Christian churches and para-church organizations have also grown increasingly enamored with star performers and marketing strategies. But when we read the New Testament, what we find is refreshing and profound. The intention of the writers of these texts was to persuade rather than dazzle their readers. Consider some of what we know from our earlier studies in Acts (Discovery Papers 4741-4768). We notice that there is no promotion of the genius and strength of the followers of Jesus. Almost without exception, they come without pedigree. They are flawed. They are often surprised by the events they experience. The traditional title of the book of Acts, *The Acts of the Apostles*, might better be rendered *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*. The apostles and all of the other early believers were responding to the initiative of the Spirit as doors opened for them.

Both the believing communities and the missionaries we find on these pages are presented as a remnant, not a majority. They are never more numerous, richer, stronger, or more attractive than those who oppose them. And we have noticed along the way that success and suffering go hand-in-hand. God's presence and his truth lead to a response of great love by some and fierce opposition by others. When we consider New-Testament faith, we should never imagine that we have been promised deliverance from every stress, or widespread approval. We are not promised that everything will go our way. Paul used a wonderful image of the Christian life in 2 Corinthians 4:7 (NIV): "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." A clay jar is neither hard as stone, nor as valuable as gold. Its significance comes from what is inside.

We're going to pick up the story in chapter 16. Recall the events that are at the center of Acts 16—the opposition to Paul and Silas, followed by their arrest, beating, and jailing, not in the ordinary jail but in the inner prison, where they were contorted into stocks. This account is one of the most vivid and challenging in the Bible. We considered it in the last message (Discovery Paper 4768).

In this message we're going to pause and consider Silas, an individual who is easily overlooked and yet makes a very important contribution here in Philippi and elsewhere.

A man of meekness

There are no speeches by Silas recorded in the New Testament. No documents bear his name. He is never the big personality. In places where he ministered, the result was focus on Christ, not him. He had about him a fragrance of Christ that gave life to other people, and they found themselves loving the Lord more for his contribution. We have much to learn from Silas.

Having been forced to undergo beating and jailing, you will recall, in the darkest hour of midnight these missionaries were not moaning and complaining and crying out in pain over their wounds. They were not cursing their opponents. They were singing hymns! Then God sent an earthquake and freed them. Paul cried out that the jailer must not kill himself; the other prisoners had not left, because they were so caught up with the obvious presence of God. The jailer came to faith with his family by candlelight and washed the wounds of

these prisoners. It is an impressive scene.

If you were to dramatize this scene, surely Paul would be at center stage, wouldn't he? Silas would be harder to find, a step behind and off to the side, probably in the shadow. Paul was the one who had banished the evil spirit that inhabited the slave-girl, which had started all the difficulty that they found themselves in. He was always loud, impossible to overlook, brilliant, courageous, and passionate. Later Paul would write about his own sense of his ministry: "If I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16). He would also say, "If we are beside ourselves [crazy], it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you" (2 Corinthians 5:13). He knew that many times people wondered if he hadn't really lost his mind, he was so captured by Christ, so insistent in his telling of Jesus' story. Toward the end of our journey through the book of Acts we will see this. Paul is the object of a Roman inquisition in Acts 26:24: "While Paul was saying this in his defense, Festus [the Roman governor] said in a loud voice, 'Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad.'"

So we aren't surprised to find Paul in jail, but why was Silas with him, and why was it only Silas? We know that the missionary team who went to Philippi included at least Luke and Timothy in addition to Paul and Silas. By now there was also a church in Philippi. Yet only one person other than Paul was required to go to prison. In the subsequent history of the church, Luke and Timothy are both more widely known than Silas, yet they avoided this painful night. Silas stood by his brother Paul and went through every difficulty with him.

In the next message we'll come to a similar situation in Acts 17:5. The Jews in the city of Thessalonica are jealous, so they round up bad characters from the marketplace, form a mob, and start a riot. They rush to Jason's house in order to search for Paul and Silas, who are once again the intended objects of violence (although that event will turn out differently).

Silas got himself in trouble by being selfless and servant-hearted. He was determined to go where God sent him, to serve where God opened doors. I have come to think of Silas' life as a commentary on one of the surprising statements of Jesus: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5, NIV). Many people who read those words in English associate meekness with weakness; they think of meek people as watered down, not having very much to them. We don't often think of meekness as being connected with riots, jail, or confrontations with demons. But I am convinced that Silas was a meek man in the true sense of the word, and that is the reason he had these adventures.

The term "meek" as Jesus used it means great strength that is well-controlled. The picture that is often used to explain this is of a stallion or some other powerful animal that has learned to follow its master's orders. It remains a strong animal, but it has given up its right to act independently in order to do what its master directs it to, without resistance. That is really what meekness is. A meek person is not defensive, and doesn't have a volatile ego that always needs to be stroked and made much of. A meek person has gotten past the need to be noticed and applauded.

Silas, a truly meek person, was someone who could contribute in every setting, because he didn't require much for himself. Jesus said the meek will inherit the earth. They will have remarkable influence. They will be given great opportunities, not because people notice them so much, but because people notice the Master whom they serve. They are of great importance but are not necessarily highly acclaimed by anyone except their Lord.

I don't know very many people who have the personal presence of Paul, but I know a lot of people who are like Silas—indeed, like Lydia (see Discovery Paper 4767). In somewhat the same way as Silas, she too was an easily overlooked, under-appreciated individual whom God used to the surprise of other people.

With that in mind, let me take you on a short tour around the New Testament, because Silas shows up in a few different places. Let's find out what this man was like.

God's versatile prophet and peacemaker

We can say first that Silas loved the word of God. He is called a prophet in Acts 15:32. Both Paul (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1) and Peter (1 Peter 5:12) credit him with contributing to letters that survive in the New Testament. (He is called Silvanus in those texts, which is a different version of the name Silas.) In 2 Corinthians 1:19 Paul writes, “The Son of God, Christ Jesus...was preached among you by us—by me and Silvanus and Timothy....” Silas built his ministry on declaring what the word of God had to say.

A lot of times at our Wednesday morning men’s Bible study, the Road Crew, I make a point of walking past Roy Bradford, because his Bible is something to behold. It is so written upon it seems impossible to read, with arrows and underlines and references and obscure notes. Periodically Roy will interrupt me as I am teaching and say something like, “You know, in 1987 you said thus-and-such about that verse.” I believe it is that kind of love for Scripture that was true of Silas. It explains a lot about him.

Another observation we can make about Silas is that he was flexible. One of the things that concern me, as Christian groups seek star performers to lead them, is that every star performer I’ve known is very narrow in what they can do. They have to have exactly the right staging, lighting, amplification, and so on in order to do what they are good at. But God could put Silas anywhere, in any circumstance—a riot; jail; leading a Bible study; ministering to Jews, Romans, or Greeks—he didn’t shrink from any assignment.

Silas was also a peacemaker. He first shows up in two settings in Acts 15, a chapter about Christians in conflict. Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians were at odds with one another in the city of Antioch. The church leaders in Jerusalem needed to send somebody representing them who could minister in this conflict. Silas was one of the two men they chose. Then at the end of chapter 15, Paul and Barnabas, two great friends, had a shouting match, refused to believe the best about each other, and parted company. It was Silas who traveled with Paul. He wasn’t put off by tension, struggle, and the inability of Christians to get along and believe the best about one another.

People who are good at peacemaking are inevitably good listeners. In virtually every setting that I know of in which God-honoring people can’t get along, it is because what they are saying doesn’t represent what is in their hearts. The motives underneath are better than the words that are coming out of their mouths. They hurt others without meaning to. Peacemakers like Silas can hear what is underneath, the motives and desires of the one who can’t express himself or herself very well. And again, in order to listen well to other people, you have to have learned not to need to be stroked and applauded yourself.

Finally, Silas characteristically said yes to God. Prison, prejudice, unpredictable outcomes—it didn’t matter. Silas was a tramp for the Lord. He helped found churches, disciplined new believers, witnessed God work miracles, and shared joy and hardship with other remarkable men of God. He was a street preacher and a witness to Jews, Greeks, and Romans. Both Peter and Paul praise him as a faithful friend in the work of the gospel. Yet he never had top billing. In no New-Testament event is he the central figure.

Most men I know are taught from a very early age to define themselves by winning competitions. This is probably true of women as well, but I think it is especially true of men. You have value, worth, standing, and success when you measure yourself against others and come out ahead, more accomplished, because they can’t do what you can do. But mature souls don’t measure themselves by how much credit they get for accomplishments. Their goals become truth and godliness and love. They don’t need to be promoted or cheered.

The meek will inherit the earth. The meek have an extraordinary role to play, but often are unsung heroes. John the Baptist makes a great statement in John 3:30, having been told that his own ministry is being eclipsed by Jesus’. He says simply, “He must become greater; I must become less.” If you want a motto to live by, that is probably as good as it gets. We encounter both Silas and Lydia at a high point in the founding of the church in Philippi in Acts 16. Each would have been on the sidelines if anybody but the Lord God were writing the story, but he gave both of them an important part to play. I want us to learn from them, appreciate them, take those lessons and assume that God wants to use us, too. The treasure inside is what is important, not the kind of jar we have.

The words of an old hymn make a good prayer for us.

“May the mind of Christ, my Savior

Live in me from day to day,

By His love and power controlling

All I do and say.

“May the Word of God dwell richly

In my heart from hour to hour,

So that all may see I triumph

Only through His power.

“May I run the race before me,

Strong and brave to face the foe,

Looking only unto Jesus

As I onward go.

“May His beauty rest upon me

As I seek the lost to win;

And may they forget the channel,

Seeing only Him.” (1)

Notes

1. Kate B. Wilkinson, *May the Mind of Christ, My Savior*.

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Various texts

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