



PRAYER, PRISON AND PRAISE IN PHILIPPI

SERIES: LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 16:16–25
34th Message
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May 27, 2018

Today we are continuing our pilgrimage with Paul and his companions on his second missionary journey. Since our middle school band is leading us in worship today, I thought it would be appropriate to look at our text today through the lens of Timothy, who was probably in his late teens when he joined the team. Growing up in a predominantly female household, Timothy probably had a deep longing for a man to take an interest in his life. Imagine the thrill of being taken under Paul's wing and being mentored by him as he traveled throughout the Roman world proclaiming the good news. Though they had very different personalities, Paul's affection and trust in Timothy created an unbreakable father-son bond that was never tarnished. The once shy and easily intimidated Timothy grew into a beloved son, trusted colleague, faithful emissary ("I have no one like him," Phil 2:20), fellow prisoner and, according to famous church historian Eusebius, the first bishop of Ephesus.¹

After weeks of difficult travel covering over 300 miles with no sense of direction, Paul and his friends arrived in Troas where they received a vision inviting them to the new and uncharted territory of Macedonia. They began their work in Philippi, an important Roman city that was strategically located on the *Via Egnatia*, the major trading route between the Aegean and the Mediterranean seas. However, with no Jewish synagogue, it will require new and creative approaches. In Philippi Timothy will witness on how to proclaim the gospel in a thoroughly pagan world, but as N. T. Wright affirms, it is not going to be easy.

As for the non-Jewish world—well, the suggestion that a Jew might be the new "Lord" over all the Lords was bad enough, but a crucified man? Everybody knew that was the most shameful and horrible death imaginable. How could such a person then be hailed as *Kyrios*? And if the answer was...that God had raised this man from the dead, that would merely convince his hearer that he was indeed out of his mind... Everybody knew resurrections didn't happen.²

The Jewish population of Philippi was not large enough to support a synagogue. However, there was a "place of prayer," where a small number of Jews and Gentile God-fearers met to pray outside the city. The gospel's initial reception in this Jewish place of prayer went surprisingly well with the immediate conversion of Lydia, a wealthy businesswoman from Thyatira, and her household. Lydia was so appreciative of her new life in Christ that she prevailed upon Paul and his team to use her home as their base of operations. So Jewish believers receive hospitality from Gentile converts, just as Peter was welcomed in Cornelius's house in Acts 10. It was a wonderful beginning, but trouble ensued on a subsequent Sabbath as they were making their way to the place of prayer.

I. Evil Confronted and Subdued (Acts 16:16–18)

A. Evil encountered

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 fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." (Acts 16:16–17 ESV)

On their way to the place of prayer the missionaries encounter a young slave girl whom Luke describes as having a "Python spirit."

The Python was a mythical serpent or dragon that guarded the temple and oracle of Apollo in Delphi, located on the southern slope of Mount Parnassus to the north of the Gulf of Corinth. It was supposed to have lived at the foot of Mount Parnassus and to have eventually been killed by Apollo. Later the word python came to mean a demon-possessed person through whom the Python spoke.³

The priestess of the oracle at Delphi was known as the "Pythia" and her utterances were considered to be the voice of God, so that visitors made long pilgrimages and pay handsome fees to have their fortunes told. In the ancient world, magic and oracles were so prevalent that Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) said, "There is in fact no one who is not afraid of being cursed by terrible imprecations."⁴ Clearly, the slave girl that Paul and his companions encountered was only a local fortune-teller, but probably in high demand because of her "Python spirit". The fact that she had more than one owner suggests she was bringing in handsome profits. Unfortunately for her owners, there was something about the missionaries that caught her attention. As they went through the streets of Philippi, she followed them screaming, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." N. T. Wright comments,

The phrase "God Most High" would ring bells with people. Many in the ancient world, fed up with the complex muddle of pagan gods and goddesses, came to believe in a single ultimate power, a "most high" divinity. The phrase "the way of salvation," though, is a bit of a tease. "Salvation" was something the Roman Empire claimed to offer its citizens (rescue from civil war, social unrest, and so on), to the "rescue" of souls from the wicked world of space, time and matter. The early Christians, of course, had a robust view of "salvation" that was neither of the above.⁵

This was not the kind of attention Paul wanted, nor did Jesus during his ministry. When Jesus was confronted by demons crying out in Capernaum's synagogue and exposing his identity ("I know who you are—the Holy One of God"), he "rebuked them and would not allow them to speak" (Luke 4: 34–35, 41). This implies first, that the character of the messenger is just as important as the message and second, how we communicate is just as important as what we communicate. When the message is holy, the messenger must be holy and speak in a manner that appeals to the highest qualities

in the listener. Concerning the second point, when someone gets “in your face” with aggressive “sound-bites” of their cause, you feel violated because they have bypassed your reason and intellect in order to make you to think like they do. When that happens you are less likely to listen to their message than if they were polite and gracious. This is why Paul exhorts us, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Col 4:6), and “by open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor 4:2).

B. Evil confronted and subdued

And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour. (Acts 16:18)

At first Paul and his companions try to ignore the girl, but after her shrieks continue for days on end, Paul’s spirit was provoked to take action and he confronted the demon directly. In the name of Jesus Christ he commanded the evil spirit to come out of her, akin to the occasions when Jesus commanded demons to leave, as recorded in the gospels. Paul has fulfilled Jesus’ mandate, not only by “proclaiming liberty to the captives,” but also “setting at liberty the one who was oppressed” (Luke 4:18–19).

Luke doesn’t tell us what happened to the girl. We would like to think she became a Christian and was adopted into Lydia’s household with the new members of the newly established church in Philippi. You might be wondering, “Why did Paul wait so long to deliver the girl?” I suspect the answer is that he knew all too well what was likely to happen when the demon left.

II. Evil Strikes Back (Acts 16:19–24)

A. Motivated by profit

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace 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 that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” (Acts 16:19–21)

All too often, injustice is embedded in economic, political and judicial systems to preserve the wealth of the rich elite and to keep the poor at bay. Therefore justice is seldom achieved without significant financial cost and social upheaval. Luke underscores the point with the threefold (and humorous) repetition of the verb *exelthein* (“to go out”). Paul commands the demon “*to go out*” and it “*goes out*” and subsequently, the owners’ hope of profit “*goes out*” with the demon!

As Tom Wright notes, “The girl’s owners were suddenly as bereft of business as a fisherman whose boat has sunk.”⁶ Because money is more important to them than a young girl’s life, the slave owners become enraged, pounce on Paul and Silas and drag them into the marketplace (*agora*) to bring charges against them before the two chief magistrates of the city. The marketplace had a raised judgment seat called a *bema*, where the magistrates sat to render judgments. Though the slave owners’ motive is purely economic, they carefully frame the charges in order to inflame the racial prejudice (anti-Semitism) and the national pride (disrupting the *Pax Romana*) of the people. You can’t help but hear their sordid disdain and moral superiority in the word order of the Greek text:

“These men are disturbing (“to throw into an uproar”) our city being Jews and they advocate customs that are not lawful for us to accept or practice being Romans.”

The irony of the situation must have been painful to Paul. In Galatia he endured violence by the Jews for the charge of being disloyal to Jewish customs, while in Philippi he is attacked for being a Jew threatening Roman customs!

Paul and Silas face quite serious charges of having introduced a destructive foreign cult that has disrupted the peace and deprived its citizens of their livelihood. Roman pride and the stability of the colony are at stake and it is the magistrates who have been invested with the authority to insure that the peace of their city is preserved.

B. Motivated by pride and prejudice

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, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. (Acts 16:22–24)

Luke gives us a picture of how justice operates in Philippi. Paul could have explained to the magistrates that his message transcended national and ethnic distinctions. But he is never given the chance. Once the flames of bigotry are lit, there is no stopping the fire. Faced with an angry mob that is on the verge violence, the magistrates cannot afford to take the time to conduct an investigation or grant Paul or Silas the opportunity to give their defense. Instead they rush into the crowd, strip off Paul and Silas’ garments and order the *lictors* (“rod-bearers”) to severely beat them as disturbers of the peace.

The *lictors* were the official bodyguards for the chief magistrates and their role was to ensure proper honor was given to them. They carried as symbols of office bundles of rods, with an ax inserted among them—the *fascis et secures*—denoting the magistrates’ right to inflict corporal and capital punishment.⁷

The lictors marched in single file before the magistrates, clearing the way and, when necessary, carrying out their sentences of arrest or summons. They carried these rods before the magistrates wherever they went, even in his home or to the baths.⁸

This shameful public beating was designed to be an *admonitio* (“admonition”), a warning to the accused parties to discontinue their activities. After the severe beating Paul and Silas were entrusted to the jailor’s custody. Jailers were commonly retired soldiers, often known for their harshness and who had both the skill and courage to carry out their orders. The jailer took his orders seriously and placed Paul and Silas in the innermost prison and fastened their feet in stocks. “These stocks had more than two holes for the legs, which could be forced wide apart in such a way to cause the utmost discomfort and cramping pain.”⁹ “Barely able to change position, a person would have to sit up or lie on the floor during the night.”¹⁰ Roman prisons were not known for their hospitable conditions. Basically they served as holding tanks while magistrates decided what to do with their prisoners. There were no provisions for food or comforts for sleep. If a prisoner wanted food or other necessities, relatives had to bring them. Sanitation was minimal, but there were plenty of rodents to be your friends. A couple of days in the hole and you would wish for any kind of sentence just to get out. As Wright concludes,

The combination of religion, money and politics is asking for trouble, and Paul and Silas got it. Stripped, flogged and jailed, they discovered what happens to those who challenge the powers of the world with the power of the Name of Jesus.¹¹

III. Where Shall Justice Be Found?

The events of the day certainly didn't turn out as they had originally planned. They were simply on their way to a prayer meeting when Paul was backed up into a corner by a demon and was left no choice but to cast it out in Jesus' name. Then the trouble began and the enemy struck back with force, playing every card in his hand with absolute impunity and with complete cooperation from the Roman judicial system. Is God still in control? Why couldn't the Spirit have enabled Paul and Silas to have triumphed over the political and economic powers like they did the demon?

Going back to our original question, "How do we make Jesus known in a thoroughly pagan world, especially when our attempts of bringing justice get snuffed out by the powerful forces of darkness?" This is not an abstract question. It is very relevant to those who suffer grave injustice.

For the last few years, through the leadership of Grace Kvamme, I've had the privilege of working with International Justice Mission (IJM). IJM is a global organization serves to protect the poor from violence in the developing world. With 17 field offices around the world they have rescued more than 40,000 people from violence and oppression. The first year I attended their Global Prayer Gathering, one of the field office leaders commented to me that, because their work of rescuing young women and shutting down brothels had been so successful, the criminals were becoming more sophisticated in their efforts to protect their trafficking by enriching the pockets of government officials. IJM staff have long known that their work bearing witness to corruption in places of power could not be made completely safe. And three years later IJM suffered its first fatalities working in Kenya, where police corruption and brutality are rampant.

On June 23, 2016, human rights lawyer and IJM investigator Willie Kimani accompanied IJM client Josephat Mwenda during a trial about police abuse of power. Shortly after leaving the courthouse, Willie, Josephat and their taxi driver, Joseph Muiruri, were kidnapped. Their bodies were discovered in the Ol-Donyo Sabuk River eight days later.¹²

Their deaths and the ensuing trial have caused a national outrage on behalf of the thousands of innocent Kenyans who have suffered police abuse of power. I've been speaking with Jim Martin, IJM's Vice President of Spiritual Formation, about the possibility of organizing a Psalms retreat for the Kenya team to help them process their grief.

So how do we make Jesus known in a world like this? You'll notice I added one more verse as a teaser to next week's text and the conclusion to our story.

A. God has the last word

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them... (Acts 16:25)

Despite their swollen backs, bloody and raw from the lictors' rods, and their pained legs and feet secured in the wooden stocks, around midnight Paul and Silas' hearts break forth singing psalms of praise "and the prisoners were listening to them." As F. F. Bruce suggests, "The double discomfort of the lictors' rods and the stocks was not

calculated to fill Paul and Silas with joy... 'The legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven' says Tertullian."¹³

The ministry in Philippi began with a prayer meeting by a river where God opened a woman's heart "to pay attention to what was said by Paul," and it ends with a prayer meeting in a jail with "the prisoners listening to them." On one level the vicious attacks of the enemy did not hinder Paul and Silas from carrying out their ministry, but rather gave them a new stage to expand their ministry. If you are wondering what psalms they were singing, I have my thoughts, but will save them for next week. The important thing is that they dedicated their lives to prayer. It is prayer that keeps us yoked to our Savior and Lord and it is prayer that makes the soil of human hearts receptive to the gospel.

B. Making Jesus known in our suffering

But one more thing is needed. In Luke's account of their ministry in Philippi, he makes no mention of *what* Paul or Silas preached, rather he focuses on *how* they lived. In order to communicate the gospel to foreign cultures with radically different worldviews, you just can't put up billboards everywhere saying "Jesus Saves," or flood the airwaves with gospel sound bites, or tweet Bible "catch phrases" on the Web. We have to be incarnational. We must first *live* the message before we *preach* the message. Non-believers must first "see" Jesus before they'll want to "hear" about Jesus.

So what did the citizens of Philippi *see* that day? They witnessed the Spirit of Jesus rescue a slave girl from torturous demonic power so she would no longer have to serve the sordid interests of powerful men. It was a public cry for justice in streets of Philippi, declaring that exploiting others for greed has no place in the kingdom of God and that a daughter's life is worth more than any profits derived from exploiting another human being. That was the gospel message made visible.

Then they saw that all the world forces of darkness in the business, political and judicial sector unite to stamp out the work of the gospel. It was a page right out of the script of Psalm 2:

Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,
"Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us." (Psalm 2:1-3)

In a kangaroo court with false witnesses, no investigation, no legal defense, or judicial deliberation a guilty verdict was handed down based not on the rules of law, but on expedience blinded by prejudice and national pride. When the ruling was given, cheers from Philippi's patriots erupted, reaffirming their victory over foreign intruders who threatened Rome's way of life. A thoughtful few, along with Timothy and Luke, who focused their gaze on the horrific fate of two unlucky Jews, beheld a different spectacle. They saw Jesus...

despised and forsaken by men
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed. (Isa 53:3–5)

This was the greatest lesson Timothy could have ever learned. It was as if God re-enacted Jesus' trial, sentencing and flogging so the city of Philippi could witness what God's love looks like.

We don't win the world by winning arguments, elections or sporting events. We don't win the world by being the top of our class, getting into the best schools, or becoming a business success. We win the world when we suffer and through persistent prayer and praise the presence of Christ by his Spirit transcends the pain, the sickness, the sorrow and the grief.

As Paul writes to the Corinthians:

All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him. (2 Cor 3:18 THE MESSAGE)

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Cor 4:7–12)

1. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4.
2. N. T. Wright, *Paul, A Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 213–14.
3. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, EBC 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebelein and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), paragraph 52074. <https://accordance.bible/link/read/EBC#52074>
4. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Backer Academic, 2007), 535.
5. Wright, *Paul*, 179–80.
6. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part Two*, Chapters 13–28 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 64.
7. Bruce notes that, "It was from this 'bundle' that the name of Benito Mussolini's Fascist party was derived." F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 336.
8. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 3:2478.
9. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 336.
10. Keener, *Acts*, 2487.
11. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 65.
12. <https://www.ijm.org/justice-in-kenya>
13. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 337.

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