

IT AIN'T OVER 'TILL IT'S OVER

Paul's Philippian Experience #4

A Brief History of Paul's Time At Philippi

For the past several weeks we have been looking at four of the six recorded encounters that Paul experienced while in Philippi. This week we're going to take a look at the final two encounters. But let's start with a review of the first four and what we learned from them before we move on.

The four things Paul encountered after he entered Philippi were:

AN OPPORTUNITY

A NEW BIRTH

AN ANNOYANCE

AN ARREST

Paul took advantage of an OPPORTUNITY he knew existed. He went outside the city to the place of prayer because he knew this place would provide an opportunity for him as a traveling Jewish teacher to speak to those who were gathered there. As he preached the gospel of Christ to those gathered, one woman in particular listened intently to his words. Her name was Lydia. She believed the words of Paul and as a result was baptized and offered her home to Paul and his companions during their stay in Philippi. This was the NEW BIRTH.

The ANNOYANCE started as Paul was making his way to the place of prayer and was shouted at by a slave-girl with a spirit of divination. This shouting continued for many days until Paul had had enough. He finally got so greatly annoyed that he turned to her and commanded the spirit to leave her. And it did.

Unfortunately those who were making money off of the slave-girls predictions were not happy that their source of income had dried up. So they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to make their complaint before the rulers of the city. Paul and Silas were ARRESTED for disturbing the peace, severely beaten with rods, and thrown in jail.

What did we learn from these encounters?

(1) LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES AND START WITH WHAT YOU KNOW. Like Paul we should take advantage of the opportunities God provides for us by starting in the places we know. Opportunities are all around us. By keeping our eyes and ears open we can take advantage of them and speak of God's love and grace whenever they occur, whether that's "in or out of season".

(2) THE MESSAGE IS THE METHOD. God's method for bringing about salvation is the gospel of Christ and we are the instruments through whom He has chosen to speak this gospel. If we remain silent the gospel is not heard. So if truth is to be revealed the proclamation of the gospel must be an integral part of the process. For it alone has the power of God to bring about salvation.

(3) WHEN DOING MINISTRY EXPECT TO BE ANNOYED. The devil will do anything to sidetrack us away from ministry. He is especially good at using irritating things to get under our skin by causing just enough distraction to keep us from doing what God has called us to do. What would normally not bother us to the point of annoyance, we now find ballooned out of proportion because of its seemingly unceasing nature. Friendships are strained, ministry relations are challenged and unity is threatened because we get

annoyed with one another or with the constant negative circumstances of life happening around us during times of ministry.

So when doing ministry we should expect there to be increased annoyance. But we should not allow this to affect our ministry or relationships. During times of increased annoyance, forgiveness should be our most necessary and frequently used tool.

(4) TRUTH AND EVIL CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO STAND TOGETHER. If we know nothing else from the ways of the serpent in Genesis we do know this – the enemy uses intertwining truth and lies for the purpose of leading others astray. He is called a liar and the father of lies. If we accept what known liars say because they speak what appears to be truth, then we lead others astray because, unlike us, they will follow the words of liars without discernment.

If Paul had accepted the demon's words, he would appear to be linking the gospel with demon-related activities and with the gods of the Gentiles. This would damage the message Paul preached about the Christ. By showing the power of God over these false beings, the Spirit of Christ is shown to be the source of all truth and healing.

Whenever we encounter light and darkness we must separate the light of the gospel from the darkness of deceit. We must confront it whenever it appears. Truth and evil cannot be allowed to stand together.

(5) SPEAKING THE TRUTH HAS CONSEQUENCES. As we have seen, speaking the truth can have positive results. Lydia has just become a believer because Paul preached the message of salvation. But speaking the truth can also produce negative results because the message of the Gospel is a disturbing message. It will either awaken someone to embrace the truth, or it will agitate them to resist it. And sometimes this resistance can lead to imprisonment.

Even Truth has Consequences. Some of us do not proclaim the gospel now because we are afraid of being ridiculed. But how much more silent will we become if we fear being imprisoned? The question we must ask ourselves is this - Are we ready to suffer the consequences of proclaiming the gospel?

I would hope that we would all respond like Paul by saying *“(We are) not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”*

And that we would remember his instruction to *“not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of (those imprisoned for their faith), but to join with (them) in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God.”*

This completes the review and now brings us to the next encounter. I call this: “SINGIN’ IN THE PAIN”

How and why Paul and Silas were arrested is really not the most important part of this story. What stands out the most is the fact that several hours after they were severely beaten, thrown in jail, and fastened in the stocks, they were doing something most of us would not think of doing in their circumstance. They were singing. We read about this in:

ACTS 16:25

“But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.”

There is most certainly not much to do while in prison. And anything that happened to divert attention away from their circumstances would be most welcome. But I think singing praises to God would be about the last thing I might expect to occur in the inner part of a Roman prison. Yet here were two men recently severely beaten with rods, tossed in jail and shackled, now singing praises to God. Talk about making the most of a bad situation.

It reminds me of when Peter and John were arrested and beaten by their Jewish leaders. After they had been flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus, they went on their way, *“rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.”*

We will speak more about this later when we study the book, but Paul said in the fourth chapter of Philippians that we should *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice.”* He goes on to say *‘I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am in.’* Evidently he learned some of this in a Philippian jail.

How is it possible just after being beaten, put in prison and placed in stocks to be singing hymns of praise to God? What is there to be thankful for? The whole purpose of going to Philippi was to preach the gospel. God even directed them to Macedonia for just such a purpose. Some trip this has been. How are they going to preach the gospel in jail?

How many of us keep our sights on the negative events of life without seeing beyond to the One Who sees it all? How many of us would be complaining and in despair because we had been falsely accused by people whose only interest was financial gain? Yet we see Paul and Silas singing hymns of praise to God. They are obviously seeing a different picture than most of us would see.

Perhaps the biggest clue to their singing is what precedes it. It says they were “praying”. Praying allows us to take our complaints and our suffering sorrows to the throne room of God. It allows us to speak to the One who is above it all. It is here where we get a different perspective on our situation.

Paul understood this when he wrote, in his letter to the Philippians, *“Be anxious for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”*

Paul did not just write these words, he lived them. He knew from experience what he was talking about. And we see this most vividly in the inner prison of a Philippian jail as he and Silas pray and sing hymns of praise to God.

But the greater lesson is to come because the slave-girls masters and the Philippian magistrates did not have the last word. Nor did the imprisonment of Paul and Silas cause the proclamation of the gospel to cease. God would use these encounters to His glory because even while incarcerated Paul and Silas would soon increase the number of believers in Philippi. Let’s see how that happened because it certainly isn’t over yet. As always, God has the last word.

In **ACTS 16:26-34** we read:

“Suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.”

“When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘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 after he brought them out, he said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’

“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 together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.”

So the fifth encounter Paul had was with an earthquake and a jailer. And these resulted in:

A MIRACLE

Actually, as I look at it two miracles took place that night. The first was from the perspective of the prisoners. The second was from the perspective of the guard. But I believe both were the result of the prayers of Paul and Silas and the singing of praises to God.

We don’t know how many prisoners were in the jail at the time of the earthquake but it does say that while Paul and Silas were singing hymns of praise to God, *“the prisoners were listening to them”* and *“all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened.”* The fact that there were more prisoners than just Paul and Silas is not unusual. What is unusual is what Paul said to the jailer - *“We are all here.”* This means that not only were Paul and Silas still in their cell after all the doors had been opened and all the chains unfastened, but others were in their cells as well. And Paul was speaking for them all.

I don’t know of any foundational shaking of a building that would open doors and unfasten the chains of prisoners while leaving everything else untouched. So the first miracle was that their prison doors were opened and their chains were unfastened. This was a definite miracle to those who were imprisoned. And this would normally have resulted in escaping prisoners. But there were none. So the second miracle was that no one tried to escape.

This was a miracle to the jailer because if they had escaped he would have committed suicide. Under Roman law, a guard who allowed his prisoners to escape was executed, which is why the jailer intended to do away with his own life. But with every prisoner in his cell this act became unnecessary.

Since the Scripture says this happened “about midnight” it would have been dark in the cells. Any light would have come from burning torches. When the jailer woke up he saw the prison doors opened and immediately assumed the worse. But the impossible came out of the darkness. As a Roman citizen Paul was acquainted with Roman law. So even though he may not have seen the jailer he knew what the jailer’s intent would be. So he quickly shouted, *“Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”* It was then that the jailer called for lights and rushed into the inner prison containing Paul and Silas.

Now there are some things about this incident where we must use conjecture. For example, it says prison doors (plural) were opened. There may have been many cells containing other prisoners, or, since Paul and Silas were placed in the inner prison, there may have been more than one door between the jailer and the inner prison. We don’t really know.

Some Romans prisons were simply large holes in the ground. Others had several cells surrounding a

courtyard. The inner prison may have been a hole in the ground in the mist of the prison into which prisoners were lowered or it may have been a dungeon-like area in the lowest part of the prison. The fact that Paul could say, *"We are all here"* could lead us to believe this prison had several cells surrounding a courtyard so that Paul had some visual knowledge of the continued presence of other prisoners. But we have no real way of knowing.

What we do know is there was more than one door opened since Scripture says prison doors (plural) were opened. But regardless of how many cell doors were opened or how many prisoners there were, the jailer ran straight to the inner prison where he had placed Paul and Silas. And trembling with fear he fell down before them. The Scripture then says, *"After he had brought them out, he said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'"*

Now, no doubt the jailer was aware of the reason for the imprisonment of Paul and Silas and the incident of the slave-girl that was the cause of it all. He would also have heard that the slave-girl called them, "Servants of the Most High God" who were telling of "the way to be saved". So when you combine this knowledge with the miracles he just witnessed, it is not surprising that he fell fearful and trembling before them. But what is equally amazing is that he brought them out and asked them *"What must I do to be saved?"*

I mean this is pretty incredible. Put yourself in the place of Paul and Silas. A few hours ago you were free to preach the gospel and cast out demons. Then suddenly the world turns on you and you are severely beaten with rods, thrown into the inner prison (probably with no daylight or circulating air), and your feet are fastened in the stocks. So you decide to make the best of it and start praying and singing. When you do, the ground shakes, the doors open, and your chains are unfastened. Then the head jailer rushes into your cell falling down before you, brings you out of that cell and asks, "What must I do to be saved?" I mean, you can't make this stuff up.

Paul and Silas were initially brought out of the inner prison to some place big enough where Paul could speak the word of the Lord to the jailer and many others, as it says Paul *"spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house"*. We don't know where this was, but this is another reason to think this prison had a courtyard. I say this because it says the jailer took them and washed their wounds and then immediately he and all his family were baptized. If there was a large amount of water to be found in a prison it would have been in a large fountain located in the courtyard. So the courtyard of the prison would be the most likely place for this to have occurred.

But then something equally unusual happened. After their baptism the jailer brought Paul and Silas into his own home and fed them. Only a jailer who had been touched by the living God would have dared take prisoners from their cell, wash their wounds, bring them to this own house and feed them. If we were to ever call into question the sincerity of the jailer's confession I believe his actions provide proof of his salvation and of the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life. May it be that those we lead to Christ would have such an immediate response to the needs of others. But dawn is approaching and reality is setting in. Since all were under Roman authority Paul and Silas were returned by the jailer to their cell before dawn.

Now, you may remember that the doors to Peter's prison cell were also once opened. And an angel led him out of the city into safety. Not so here with Paul and Silas. Unlike Peter's miraculous release from prison, the purpose of opening Paul's prison door was not for his release from Roman bondage but rather for the release of others from the bondage of sin. I can't help but think of Pastor Saeed Abedini and the reports we have heard of his leading others to Christ in his prison as well. Let us hope that his stay in prison has the same result as that of Paul and Silas.

It is interesting to note that Isaiah 61:1 says *‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.’* This is the same verse Jesus quoted and is quite literally what happened to this Philippian jailer as a result of the imprisonment of Paul and Silas.

Well Paul’s time in Philippi concludes with one final encounter with the chief magistrates which resulted in: AN APPEAL

We read about this in:

ACTS 16:35-40

‘Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, ‘Release those men.’ And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, ‘The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace.’ But Paul said to them, ‘They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out.’

The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city. They went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.”

According to Roman law, a Roman citizen could travel anywhere within Roman territory under the protection of Rome. He was not subject to local legislation, unless he consented, and he could appeal to be tried by Rome, not by local authorities, when in difficulty. As a citizen he owed allegiance directly to Rome, and Rome would protect him. Even Roman governors in the provinces were forbidden, “to kill, scourge, torture, condemn or put in bonds a Roman citizen who appealed to the people. Why Paul and Silas did not make their citizenship known earlier is a mystery. Perhaps the shouting of the crowd and the quickness of the action made it impossible to be heard or perhaps believed. In any event, Paul makes mention of it now.

Paul was not going to let the Philippian officials off the hook so easily. Nor was he going to let the matter of being dragged by the slave-girls masters into the public marketplace remain an acceptable response to the preaching of the gospel. He demanded that what had been wrongly done in public should now be made right in public as well. He was using the injustice of his arrest and beating to ensure that the believers he was leaving behind would be treated with the same respect and tolerance as the Jews were under Roman law.

To beat and imprison a Roman citizen without a trial was a serious offense. So when the magistrates heard that Paul and Silas were citizens, they came to apologize for their illegal actions and to escort them out of prison. Perhaps to avoid any further embarrassment or potential opposition from the crowd who caused the uproar in the first place, they kept begging Paul and Silas to leave Philippi, which they did; But not without first visiting the house of Lydia where the believers were gathered, and to encourage them before they departed. Paul would visit Philippi only once more at the end of his third missionary journey.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THESE ENCOUNTERS?

It Ain’t Over ‘Till It’s Over

In ROMANS 8:28 we read,

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

In life, circumstances may take a sudden dramatic turn for the worse and opportunities may seem to dry up overnight. But this does not mean God is not at work or that He can no longer use us to accomplish His will. God will continue to work out His purpose despite the plans and faults of men. The power of God to accomplish His purpose is always greater than the power of men who seek to prevent God from doing so.

Our 2-year old granddaughter loves putting puzzles together. These puzzles of course are made for a 2-year old so they have very few pieces and are typically sturdy enough for little hands with limited coordination to handle. Even so she sometimes makes a “grring” noise and throws a piece or two in the air as an expression of her frustration at not being able to figure why the pieces won’t fit. Congratulating her on her successes while at the same time teaching her how to handle her frustration is now one of the constants in our home.

When we are young the pieces of life we see are small and fit into our limited understanding of how the world works. We are sheltered by our parents from most of life’s difficulties and encouraged by them to greater and greater deeds. But the pieces of life remain small and few in number.

As an adult the puzzle of life grows bigger with many more pieces that we attempt to put into some semblance of order. But even with God at the center and the edges of life defined by God’s grace, the middle pieces are sometimes confusing and hard to connect. Some pieces just don’t seem to fit together properly no matter what we do and like a 2-year old we raise our hands in frustration because our attempts to make the circumstances of life “fit” aren’t working. It’s like putting one of those puzzles together which has unusual sides with no interlocking joints. Nothing seems to fit and there are no clues as to how they are supposed to go together.

I used to do puzzles regularly. Still do on occasion. The one thing I learned about doing puzzles is that it is a rare day indeed when you can finish the puzzle at one sitting, especially with no one helping you. Of course, adult puzzles have more than 8-10 pieces in them. Most now have 1,000 or more pieces. And they come in various shapes and sizes - circles, ovals, triangles, and even 3-D, not just squares and rectangles like I grew up with. Today they even incorporate designs with swirls and circles and lots and lots of teeny-tiny things which the human eye can barely see but which the puzzle makers think give you giant clues as to where they go in the picture. Yeah. Good luck with that.

So what used to be fun has now become a thought-provoking challenge for me. And the older I get the more I am less up to the challenge. Sometimes I want to make a “grring” sound myself and throw a few pieces in the air. But I am an adult and I maintain my control by walking away for a while before coming back in a more relaxed state. Because, really, I just don’t want to embarrass myself in that way.

The Christian life is like a puzzle. And it grows bigger and more complex as we mature in our faith. Sometimes the pieces of our lives don’t seem to fit into the picture of the Christian life we have created in our mind. Tragedy strikes, health issues arise, divorce happens, cars break down, and we lose our jobs. Some of us are even thrown in jail unjustly. Pieces that used to have well defined edges that fit neatly into other pieces now have nothing on them that define their place in the puzzle. And the box top does not help because there is no box top.

Being a Christian does not make us immune or exempt from the difficulties of life. In fact Jesus said we should expect them. And Paul was certainly an example of one who experienced many of them. But Paul said he had found the secret of being content no matter what life handed him. And the reason he was able to do that is because he knew the Maker of the puzzle. And he knew the puzzle would not be completed in this life, only in the next. In essence, the box top that revealed the puzzle picture resided in heaven. And he would not see the completed puzzle until he was ushered into that place by the Maker Himself.

Life only fits together when Christ is allowed to be the one in charge of the puzzle. For God has so designed the pieces of our lives that they fit in ways which only He understands. We can get frustrated and throw pieces in the air but that will not create understanding out of chaos. We can force our piece to fit into a place where it was not meant to fit, but that just throws the rest of the puzzle out of whack.

The best we can do with the puzzle life brings our way is to place our pieces into the hands of our Maker. Only God knows what the puzzle is supposed to look like. Only He can see the final assembled puzzle of our life. Instead of being frustrated with the puzzling circumstances life brings our way we can, like Paul, pray and sing hymns of praise to our God. Why? Because we know He has the whole picture in mind. Not just the present events, but all the events in our lives. He knows the beginning from the end. He knows the edge pieces from the middle. He knows when the first piece is put in and he knows when the last piece will be placed that will complete the puzzle.

The issue is not the injustices or disruptions that come our way, as puzzling as these may be. The issue is who will make sense of them? When we can't find how the pieces of life fit, who can we trust to see us through and bring us out the other side better and stronger than when we went in?

Yogi Berra, the famous baseball catcher, outfielder and manager who spent most of his time with the New York Yankees, was famous for his almost nonsensical wisdom. One of these snippets of wisdom was, "It ain't over 'till it's over." That is actually a very simple way of saying, "Don't stop playing ball just because we're at the bottom of the eighth inning and things don't look so good." For a Christian it means, "Don't stop running the race just because you experience some resistance. God is still in control. The race is not yet over. Enduring to the end brings the reward."

If you want the puzzle of life to make sense, don't focus on the individual pieces as they occur. Put your focus on the One who made the puzzle. By placing the completion of the puzzle in the hands of God you will find there is no need to make sense of everything. God will work all things out for good. He will make all the pieces fit together into a beautiful picture. God does conceal some matters but He does allow us to figure some things out. Still, there are some things God reserves only for Himself.

Life may never make sense here on earth. But we can rest on God's promise that He is working out everything in our lives for good. And though we may never know the why or how of everything that happens to us on earth, when we get to heaven none of that will be important. Our time on earth is just a passage. Our real destination is heaven. We live now by faith in God's providence, but soon we will be living in God's kingdom. And nothing will matter then except the ceasing of all sorrows, all tears, all pain and the eternal enjoyment of God's presence.

It ain't over 'till it's over. But when it's over, as the song says, "What a day of rejoicing that will be!" When we see Jesus all the pieces will fit. The picture will be revealed at last. And we'll join with others in saying, *"To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."*

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