

GOD’S WORK IN PHILIPPI

SCRIPTURE READING:

ACTS 16:16-40

Slide 1. God’s Work in Philippi

My prayer this morning is that we would learn something from Paul and Silas, just like these 2 blokes talking together about this very question...

Will you join me in prayer?

Lord Jesus I pray that we will be challenged as we hear your word this morning. May we be willing to follow the example of the apostles whose mission we read about in the book of Acts. May they inspire us towards greater faith in you and greater courage as we follow you. Help us to fulfil the mission and purpose to make disciples and build your church. As I preach this morning, may I teach your Word faithfully, in Jesus Name and for your glory *Amen*.

Slide 2. Learning from the Apostles

This morning we continue in our series from the book of Acts. Known more formally as the Acts of the Apostles, the book of Acts outlines in narrative or story, the actions of the Apostles as they travelled from city to city. There is much we can learn from them.

Slide 3. Go make disciples

Why did they go? Jesus had issued the command to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. In chapter 1 verse 8 the book of Acts begins with Jesus repeating this command to be his witness to the very ends of the world. The book of Acts is a record of how the disciples put this command into action.

Although Jesus had issued the command and the Apostles followed his instructions wholeheartedly, the book of Acts is not a blueprint for mission, or missional activity.

Slide 4. The church on mission

Rather it is a historical account of the church on mission in fulfilment of the command of Christ, as they were led by the Holy Spirit. As we consider the principles that they lived by, we can apply these same principles in our lives today as we seek to follow Christ and continue the mission as we too are led by the Spirit.

Slide 5. Philippi

Acts 16 is set in Philippi, a colonial town, the leading city of Macedonia v12. Philippi was a city of free men, many of whom had served in the military. They were deeply committed to the Roman Empire and the Roman way of life that they had sought to defend and fought for during their military campaigns. This was the first church to be founded in Europe and it would continue to be a prominent and generous church during the New Testament times. It was a strategic decision on the part of the Apostles to go and share the gospel in Philippi. I think this background goes a long way towards understanding the motivation behind the actions of Paul and Silas as they sought to witness to Jesus in Philippi.

Slide 6. Be willing to defend the gospel

The first thing we see in verses 16 to 18 is their willingness to defend the gospel. Paul and Silas were on their way to the Jewish place of prayer, which was located at outside the city gate by the river, when they meet a slave woman who made a lot of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She had been following them for many days.

The original language used to describe this 'slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future' is fascinating. It literally says she was possessed by the spirit of Pythian. In Greek mythology this was the name of the Pythian serpent or dragon associated with fortune-telling

and the god Apollo. I think we must assume that the citizens of Philippi were quite aware that the woman was claiming to channel the spirits of the gods. What we refer to as Greek mythology was actually the belief system of the people of Philippi. This was their religion and their reality. No commander would go into battle without first consulting the spirits for an oracle assuring them of victory.

So, the first problem the Apostles have with this slave is that whatever she says will be seen as an endorsement of the false Greek gods.

Even when she describes their message as referring to the salvation of the most high God this would be understood as yet another higher god amongst the various Greek God of the spiritual realm, not the one and only true God.

When we hear her proclamation: [17 ... "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."](#) we probably understand this to be a clear statement of the gospel. However the words she uses were also used by her contemporaries with very different meanings to how we understand them today. Firstly, the word for God, Theos in ancient Greek had the primary meaning of the many deities. Secondly, the concept of being saved, was the language used by the political leaders of the day. For example, the emperor would say of himself "I am the saviour of the world". Often, this involved a claim to share in the divine nature. All this to explain that the result of this pagan fortune-teller's endorsement of the gospel would serve to equate the power of Christ and the truth of the gospel with the various gods of Greek mythology and seriously detract from the exclusive claims of the gospel presented by the Apostles. This was unacceptable to the Apostles. It would undermine the message of the gospel by causing confusion in the wider community. The Apostles had to take a stand to defend Christ. What would they do?

What was thought to be a spirit of Pythian was in fact an evil spirit of Satan. There was no need for debate, discussion or reconciliation. They did not enter into multifaith discussion because they had the insight by

the Holy Spirit that what they were facing was an evil spirit and so they confronted the spirit directly saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” Immediately she was delivered from the evil spirit.

Slide 7. Be willing to suffer for the gospel

The next section of the passage outlines the result of Paul’s action! When the slave owners realise that their source of income is gone they become angry with the Apostles and drag Paul and Silas to the marketplace to face the two magistrates overseeing the city of Philippi. Their motivation is interesting because it highlights the false allegations brought against Paul and Silas. They were not defending their Greek religion against the claims of these two Jewish men but merely angry that their lucrative business enterprise has been destroyed. To start off saying, “These men are Jews” revealed their racial prejudice, which was likely the result of the anti-Jewish sentiments that were prevalent at the time because the Roman Emperor Claudius had just expelled the Jews from Rome in AD49 (less than a year ago). And yet there was nothing unlawful about practicing the Jewish faith. The charges were baseless but the crowd joined in.

Fearing a riot, the magistrates made a rash decision and ordered Paul and Silas to be beaten, without a proper hearing. Paul and Silas were then thrown into the prison, into the innermost cell and their feet fastened in the stocks.

How would you be feeling in this situation? How would you respond?

Just imagine a similar situation where you are falsely accused of overreach in your faith, maybe you are accused of being disrespectful or intolerant of the faith of others simply because your actions put an end to some situation where they were receiving kickbacks or financial reward at the expense of others. Maybe you would be OK about a situation like this... Maybe you would look at it philosophically and appreciate where the other person was coming from, able to put yourself in their shoes and feel sorry for them and their loss. But I would feel angry. I would be

feeling resentful. How dare they make me suffer just because they can no longer keep benefiting financially from the slavery of others. Let alone the physical punishment of the beating and imprisonment Paul and Silas are made to endure. I would be out of my mind in rage and indignation.

But Paul and Silas are willing to suffer for Jesus. Despite their ordeal, Paul and Silas begin to pray and sing hymns to God in worship.

We find them praising God, even though their backs are bruised, they have suffered injustice, their feet are fastened in the stocks and they are sitting in discomfort.

They show no self-pity or resentment, no worry, no fear, no anxiety.

Despite facing uncertainty, not knowing what the outcome would be, they praise God and trust their future into His hands.

They showed faith in God with their singing and “the other prisoners were listening to them.” They listened not because they were being kept awake, in the same way that we might listen to the neighbour’s music after 10pm when their party is lingering on, but they were listening with fascination and great interest.

They could see the faith and hear their joy. It was something unprecedented in the prison. So often the light of the gospel shines brightest in the darkest places. Our Christian hope is most clearly seen in places of hopelessness. Those around you don’t take much interest when things are going well for you but when we go through low times and we are in trouble, there is real interest in how we cope and if our hope and faith will sustain us.

26 Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose.

Although it was a violent earthquake, no lives were lost.

It would have been easy for Paul and Silas to think that God has caused this to happen for their escape, the ultimate justification of their

innocence, divine vindication, and exoneration. This had happened before.

Once again, I ask you, what would you do in this situation? Would you run away gleefully? Would you take it as a sign from God?...

When the keeper of the prison woke up and saw the opened doors, he was devastated. His first reaction was to kill himself, thinking that all the prisoners had escaped.

Under Roman law, guards who allowed their prisoners to escape received the penalty of their escaped prisoners. Losing all hope of escaping punishment, [he drew his sword](#).

In the darkness, the jailer heard a voice of hope: “We are all here!”

Paul saw that he was about to kill himself and shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!” (16:28) Not only were Paul and Silas still inside, but the rest of the prisoners were there too. Either they were too awestruck by what has happened, or they have been urged by the pair not to run. We see so many miracles in this passage!

Paul, Silas and all the other prisoners could have easily made their escape, but with great discernment, Paul and Silas stayed and the others along with them... They did not sneak out of the prison and flee like fugitives guilty of an offence because the earthquake was not for their personal freedom and comfort. No, it was for the salvation of the Jailer, he and his household would be set free.

Slide 8. Be willing to share the gospel

Despite the pain and ill treatment Paul had endured he was willing to share the hope of the gospel with his captor.

The jailer asked Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?”

How much he meant by this question, it is difficult to say. In all likelihood, he knew nothing of the Jewish God or Jesus the Messiah.

The earthquake might just have been a sign to him that the gods were unhappy and the jailer may have wanted to be delivered from divine judgement.

Whatever his fears, Paul gave him the only right answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your family!”

This is the gospel! Sometimes it can be confusing trying to understand what we must do to be saved.

Do we need to join a church?

Do we need to get baptised?

Do we need to follow the 3 points of this sermon and the command to go into all the world to make disciples?

Do we need to wash people’s feet, literally or metaphorically in social action?

Paul’s answer is so clear, [Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved](#). This is the most concise answer to this question that we find in the bible. It means that we are saved when we trust in Jesus as Lord. We can only trust someone we know so we must decide that we are willing to get to know Jesus so we can know God and put our faith in him exclusively, the one true God. And because God invites us to believe in Jesus long before we have any interest or understanding of God or our spiritual need, believing in Jesus means being willing to accept God’s offer of relationship with him by believing that Jesus makes this possible. The gospel is as simple and as complex as that!

Paul then spoke the Word of God to him and all the others in his house.

His family heard the Word of God, they believed and were baptised.

Faith comes from hearing the word of Christ. The truth of God’s Word changed them. **ONLY** the Word of God has the power to change lives.

Next, we see the practical expression of the jailer's conversion to follow Christ. The jailer washed Paul and Silas' wounds and host them to a meal. The jailer was filled with the Joy of the Lord that he and the other prisoners had seen in Paul and Silas earlier even in the midst of personal suffering.

Once again, I ask you, what would you do in this situation?

Imagine, you have been falsely accused, isolated from your friends and colleagues and support network and the person responsible for keeping you separated from your friends cries out to you for help???

Sometimes it is in the most unlikely circumstances that you have an opportunity to share the message of salvation and hope in Jesus if only we are open to this occurring. We might not feel like it. It might be the last thing you feel like doing, especially if you are having a pity party feeling sorry for yourself, but what an inspiring example we have set before us in the actions of the Apostles in Philippi.

I wonder what are the most unusual circumstances in which you have ever shared your Christian hope with others.

Slide 9. Be willing to stand up for the reputation of your witness

The third and final scene of this passage occurs the next day when [35...the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order \[to\] "Release those men."](#) [36 The jailer told Paul, "...Now you can leave. Go in peace."](#)

Maybe the magistrates realised they did not have a good case against Paul and Silas and the crowds had died away so they decided to set them free.

But in a surprising move, Paul demanded that the magistrates come to them and publicly show their innocence. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, does not explain the reason for this. But with all we know of Paul up until this point in the story we can safely assume that it was not an act of personal revenge.

He was making a public stand to clear their names for if they were to have snuck out of town quietly, such an exit would only have created suspicion.

And more importantly, I believe Paul wanted to leave behind a good witness for the new church in Philippi. The city needed to see them as good and upright citizens. This was important for the ongoing witness of the new church moving forward.

The Apostles were willing to exercise their civil rights to protect the reputation of the Gospel.

Once again, I ask you, what would you do in this situation? Having experienced the miracle of the conversion of the hardened jailer and seen his life filled with joy and the baptism of his whole family once they too believed and weary from mistreatment and the adventures of the evening, I confess I would be very willing to quietly leave prison and indeed leave town without further incident.

I wonder if you feel the pressure to keep your Christian faith on the down low and treat it as a personal thing that does not need to be made public either at work, or within our civil society. The actions of the Apostles inspire us to consider standing up for the gospel when we have a civil right to do so. There might be all sorts of social pressure to conform to the prejudice of public opinion but where there is protection within the law, we should take a stand. This demonstrates that God is not simply a personal preference or a feature of our particular cultural identity, but that God is real. It also demonstrates that Christians have a valid place in public discussion, the right to be heard and the right to contribute. This too is a dimension of our witness. Our witness need not be restricted to personal evangelism, as important as that is. What I'm saying is that we need not give in to public opinion, but where justified take our stand in the secular world for the sake of Christ and the gospel message of the church. With our rights come civil and social responsibilities but that is another sermon.

Will you join me in prayer?

Dear Lord,

May we share the same faith and confidence as Paul and Silas, trusting in your presence and your control over all the circumstances of our lives.

May we always trust and obey you. We believe you are working to fulfil your will in and through us. May our eyes be always on you, and let our hearts be filled with joy and hope, praising you at all times for your goodness and grace.

May we be faithful witnesses in good times and when we find ourselves in difficult times. May we always be responsive to your leading in our lives.

Let your will be done and your name glorified.

Amen.