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Paul & Philippi:

Historic Times Significant Relationships

By Charles Gresham

We don't handle dreams or visions well. In the context of our modern world, they must be explained biologically or psychologically. Paul had no such problem and was able to attribute dreams and visions to the supernatural. Ever since that first encounter outside Damascus, Saul of Tarsus knew that the living God could break into his experience *and* speak *and* direct (Acts 9:1–19; 22:1–21; 26:2–23). Ever since that day, he knew that Jesus, the risen Lord, commanded his life.

And Paul had no problems (as we do today) with identity. He was a preacher, a teacher, and an apostle (1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11), and his labors for his Lord centered around those roles. When he needed to invoke apostolic authority, he did so without hesitation—as when he silenced the maiden with a spirit of divination in Philippi (Acts 16:18). When teaching was the order of the day, Paul could unfold God's purpose as revealed in Hebrew scriptures—as when he taught the Jewish women gathered for worship on the riverbank near Philippi (Acts 16:11–15). But he could also preach—as when he spoke at Antioch of Syria on that first outreach journey with his good friend and encourager, Barnabas (see Acts 13:1 and Acts 14:26).

Story

Fresh with the clear consensus (as stated by Peter and James at the conference in Jerusalem, Acts 15) that Gentiles need not become Jews in order to be Christians and realizing more and more that he had a mission to such Gentile audiences, Paul, with Silas, Timothy, and perhaps

others (see Acts 15:1–3), set out across the Asia Minor land mass to the more populous areas on the eastern shores of the Aegean Sea.

But Paul's enthusiasm could not silence the Spirit's direction. Paul presumed that he could move into the province of Asia and begin his evangelistic outreach, but the Holy Spirit, in some special way, forbade him to "speak the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6). Moving north, the evangelistic party was forbidden by that selfsame Spirit to enter the province of Bithynia. (Both of these provincial areas would later be the focus of gospel preachers: Paul, in Ephesus and Asia [see Acts 18:23–19:41]; others, in Bithynia [see 1 Peter 1:1].)

There was no other place to go but Troas, that ancient seaport on the Aegean. Though the Spirit had not permitted them to enter Asia or Bithynia, he apparently had not given specific direction as to what the party was to do. But direction came during the night as Paul saw a vision of "a certain man of Macedonia" calling out, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). Luke tells the story (and may well have joined the preaching party at that time): "And 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" (Acts 16:10).

Paul's entrance into the "colony city" of Philippi was rather inauspicious. A Hellenistic Jew of the first order, yet, at the same time, immersed in the Jewish literature of the day (Phil 3:4–6; Acts 22:3–5; 26:3–8; 2 Cor 11:22–29; Gal 1:14), Paul would have known something about the major cities of the Roman empire. He would have ex-

pected (if not actually known) that there would be no friendly Jewish synagogue where he could witness concerning his faith in the Messiah or teach the things about the kingdom to which the Hebrew scriptures pointed (see his later activity at Thessalonica and Berea, Acts 17:1–13).

But the Sabbath was an important day for Paul and his compatriots; expecting to find a place of prayer and worship outside the city near the riverside, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke (and perhaps others) went and spoke to the women gathered there. There is no question that those Jewish women (Lydia and her household, and perhaps others) were to be seen as equal participants in the new life that the gospel produced. Lydia and her household were baptized as “the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). At her invitation, the apostolic party stayed in Lydia’s home.

There is no indication how long the party remained in the city of Philippi. For a number of days, Paul and his companions were irritated by a young maiden possessed by an evil spirit of divination who was “bringing her masters much profit by fortune telling” (Acts 16:16). Paul became annoyed at this unwelcome publicity, even though by this evil spirit she was telling the truth—“These men are bondservants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17)—and he commanded the demon to come out from her. Sometime after this, her masters, unable to profit from her, seized Paul and Silas; dragged them publicly before the authorities; and accused them, not of undermining their profit, but of being Jews (anti-Semitism?) and of throwing “the whole city into confusion . . . proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or observe, being Romans” (Acts 16:20–21).

There in the marketplace of Philippi, with the crowd crying out against them (probably because of the racism reflected by the merchant men who had profited greatly from this damsel’s demonic activity), Paul and Silas were beaten with rods. After many blows (perhaps rendering them unconscious), they were thrown into the inner prison where their feet were fastened in chains (“stocks”). About midnight (perhaps having just come to consciousness after the severity of the beating), Paul and Silas began to pray and praise God as the captive audience of other prisoners listened to their praise.

God’s answer was an earthquake. It shook the foundations of the prison, opened all the doors, and unfastened

every prisoner’s chains. The jailer, awakened by this unusual phenomenon, saw that the prison doors were open. Assuming that all the prisoners had escaped, he was about to commit suicide rather than answer to the magistrates’ anger. But Paul cried out, “Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!” (Acts 16:28). The jailer could not believe his ears. He called for lights, rushed in, and fell to his knees before Paul and Silas, trembling with fear and amazement.

Bringing them out of the squalid and smelly prison, he asked the question (so often quoted out of context), “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). His attention had been arrested! He knew that something supernatural had occurred! He was aware that his life had been precariously saved. Now, he had to ask these agents of other gods (had he heard the charge made against them?) what he must do to avert even greater tragedy—what he must do to be saved. There is no indication that a jailer in Philippi would have had any knowledge of Israel’s God, nor of the Messianic Savior, Jesus, whom this God had sent to bring redemption to all. No wonder Paul and Silas introduced him to the “Lord Jesus.” “Believe in him,” they responded, “and you shall be saved, you and all of your household” (Acts 16:31).

In order that the jailer and his people might believe intelligently, Paul and Silas spoke “the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house” (Acts 16:32). The word produced response; at that same hour, the deep wounds of Paul and Silas were washed, and the jailer and all of his household were immersed (see Acts 16:33–34).

The next day the magistrates, having second thoughts about what had been done to the strangers, sent their officers to tell the jailer to release them. When the jailer told Paul and Silas that they were free to go, Paul refused to leave, demanding that the magistrates themselves come and escort them from prison (and perhaps through the city to Lydia’s home). After all, they were Roman citizens and had been treated terribly (“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?” Acts 16:37). Hearing this, the magistrates did in fact come and escort them out of prison, “begging them to leave the city” (Acts 16:39).

Some time later, after they had encouraged the brethren (and had given an object lesson to the whole city in the interplay with the city magistrates!), they departed from

Philippi to go to the provincial capital of Macedonia, Thessalonica (Acts 16:40).

Lessons

Many rich lessons can be drawn from this narrative set out by Luke the evangelist (*and* historian). That is the nature of biblical material. It has a general message about God's invasion of planet Earth through his son and through those prepared by him to take that gospel message to the ends of the earth. But it also provides a lesson for each interpreter. That does not mean that the overall message is itself relativistic; it does mean that all secondary interpretations are not only based on what the text actually says, but they are also drawn from the concerns of the interpreter in light of the original meaning of that text.

I believe that *relationships* were primary in all of Paul's missionary efforts. The chief relationship was with God, evidenced in so many passages of Paul's letters, but particularly in Luke's narrative in the book of Acts. Paul was open to God's leading through the Spirit; he was obedient to the guidance of God however that guidance might come.

That close *relationship* with the divine also drove him to intercessory prayer. "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all," he wrote to the beloved Philippian congregation (Phil 1:3–4). Such prayer, whether offered during a busy schedule of gospel preaching or in the solitude of a cell, reflected full trust in the living God and belief that this God who had "begun a good work in [them]" would "perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6).

It was that *relationship* that gave Paul the proper perspective by which he could judge the reality of the times. He could rejoice even at preaching motivated by jealousy or a desire to worsen his situation, because the gospel was being preached and defended (see Phil 1:12–18). It was that *relationship* that caused Paul to look at all previous accomplishments as but "rubbish" and to focus his attention upon "Christ, and the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Phil 3:4–9). It was that *relationship* that helped him learn to be "content in whatever circumstances" he found himself (Phil 4:11–13). It was that *relationship* that Paul saw as providing for all of his people, so that he could close his beautiful epistle with this assurance: "And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19; note especially the pronominal possessive "my" in this passage and others).

Paralleling Paul's relationship with the living God was his relationship with people. For one who is pictured as an antifeminist, Paul began his work in Philippi with a group of women—Lydia, the "God fearer," and her associates. It was the Lord who "opened her heart," but it was Paul who had spoken the truth (Acts 16:14). We can specu-

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late that the Philippian church was dominated by women; in fact, the congregation was urged by Paul (in his epistle to the church) to "help these women" who had shared his struggle in the cause of Christ. Euodia and Syntyche (two of the women who had shared with Paul) were encouraged to "live in harmony with the Lord" (Phil 4:2–3). If we count noses, these two women (and what about Lydia and her people?) equal the two men, Clement and Epaphroditus, who are the only men (other than Timothy of the apostolic party) mentioned in Paul's letter (see Phil 4:3 and 2:25–30).

That vital relationship that Paul had with these Christians in Philippi (both men and women) was enough to command their financial support. We don't know how long Paul stayed in this Roman colony, but it was long enough to develop a deep, abiding affection that immediately became a base of support. Listen to him: "And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs" (Phil 4:15–16). Undoubtedly, it was this openhanded generosity to which Paul referred in the Corinthian correspondence when he wrote of the "grace" of giving as seen among the Macedonian Christians. Out of genuine affliction—and who could deny the opposition to both Jews and Christians in this colony city and in the province generally (see Acts 14:5–9)—and out of poverty, they gave liberally. Paul himself was surprised at this overflowing liberality, but he saw the key in the fact that "they first gave themselves to the Lord" (2 Cor 8:5).

Now, they were supporting him again. Their pattern of giving had begun shortly after Paul and his party left

Philippi (although Luke may have stayed in Philippi to guide these new Christians, as evidenced by the absence of “we” sections). The giving had continued as appeals were made to these “daughter” churches to support the needy in Jerusalem and Judea (see 2 Cor 8, 9). Now it had been “revived” out of concern for Paul’s imprisonment. That concern had always been there, Paul states, but these believers had “lacked opportunity” (Phil 4:10–11).

Finally, this experience in European evangelization had brought increasing self-understanding to Paul. My understanding of the apostle is that he was somewhat impatient—seen, I think, in Luke’s account of Paul’s activities in the book of Acts. It may well be that God’s refusal to allow him to enter Asia (Acts 16) was designed to teach him patience. He did enter Asia some two or three years later; but then, God’s timing was right and a great ministry resulted that shook that pagan city to its core (see Acts 19). By the time he wrote the Philippian letter (perhaps from prison in Rome, some nine or ten years later than when he first proclaimed the gospel in Philippi), he was able to say, “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am” (Phil 4:11). A self-understanding, growing out of a genuine “waiting” for God’s direction, had come to Paul so that he could use his prison experience to penetrate Caesar’s household (Phil 4:22; 1:13).

One might ask if the former Saul of Tarsus, presented by Luke in the book of Acts (or referred to by Paul himself in such passages as Philippians 3), could have written that first chapter of the letter to the Philippians. In light of his relationship with Elymas (or Bar-Jesus), the magician at Paphos (Acts 13:6–12), or his role in the Conference at Jerusalem (Acts 15), or his break with Barnabas over John Mark (Acts 15:36–39), how can one explain Paul’s “rejoicing” that, even if the motive was “envy or strife,” Christ was proclaimed (Phil 1:12–18)? The only answer is the maturity of which Paul was so conscious as he penned the beautiful illustration in Philippians 2. He was desirous that his readers have not only the “humility of mind,” but also the attitude that Jesus possessed as he left heavenly glory to become truly human and give himself as a sacrifice at

Calvary (see Phil 2:1–11). Paul himself possessed that mind. “We have the mind of Christ,” he exulted as he addressed the fleshly-minded of Corinth (1 Cor 2:1–16); he had learned this in his personal relationship with the Lord of glory.

Such self-understanding and maturity of faith gave Paul the wisdom to use one of the greatest of human gifts possible in that political context—his Roman citizenship. Paul used that gift in Philippi, as we have seen; he used it once more in Jerusalem, when he was about to be beaten and perhaps given over to the Jews for destruction (Acts 21–23). Not only did he avert an illegal beating (Acts 22:25–29), but his use of the gift ultimately took him to Rome (Acts 23:11), where both Paul and the Lord wanted him to be (see Rom 1:9–13; 15:22–29).

So we do learn many practical lessons from Paul and his relationship with the Philippians. Others could be added to the above (particularly if we were to become more speculative), but Paul’s own statement in Philippians 3:17–21 helps us to see these lessons against the backdrop of the essential nature of the Cross and the assuring reality of the future:

Brethren, join in following my example and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have seen in me. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven [we are a “colony” of heaven], from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

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