

Paul in Philippi Acts 16:16-40

Introduction

As we look at the stories of Paul's ministry in the book of Acts, we see many themes repeated. We see the antithesis between Christ and idols. We see the sovereignty of God over all circumstances. And through all of these things, we see the abundant grace of God as He shines the light of salvation into the world through the words and work of those He sends.

Paul in Philippi

Paul and Silas make their way to Philippi after Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come and help the people there (vs. 9-12). A woman named Lydia believes and is baptized, along with her household, and Paul and Silas stay with her (vs. 13-15). On their way to pray, a slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination (*python*) follows after them and cries out that they are servants of God preaching the way of salvation. She does this for many days (vs. 16-17). Paul eventually commands the spirit out of her in the name of Jesus, which costs her masters an important source of revenue (vs. 18-19). So, her masters turn the city against Paul and Silas, Paul and Silas are beaten, and eventually the magistrates throw them in prison (vs. 20-24). While there, Paul and Silas worship God, with the other prisoners listening, and God answers their prayers with an earthquake, freeing them (vs. 25-26). Paul keeps the jailer from killing himself, and the jailer believes on the Lord Jesus Christ, and he and his household are baptized (vs. 27-34). The magistrates send for the prisoners' release, but Paul reveals his Roman citizenship, shaming the magistrates for their mistreatment, and demanding that they release them personally. They then stay with Lydia again and resume their journey through Macedonia (vs. 35-40).

The Antithesis

In this story, as in many in Acts and the rest of Scripture, we see a clash of gods. Paul, in the name of Jesus the Messiah, calls out the Pythian spirit. Apparently, that spirit was more timid (or more aware of the power of Christ) than the next idol, though. The idol of mammon blinded the eyes of the slave girl's masters, and then that idol was toppled, they did everything they could to take revenge. And it throws the city into an uproar. We see this many times in Paul's journeys, both with Gentiles and Jews. When a false idol is threatened by the gospel, riots break out and cities are thrown into confusion. Christians are told to shut up and are slandered if not physically persecuted. All this to say, we should not be surprised to see this kind of thing happening in our own day. This is a normal gospel work in cities of unbelief.

God's Sovereignty and Worship

In this story, we also see God's sovereign hand at work in the midst of that normal and messy gospel work. Paul and Silas end up in a situation we might think of as irredeemable. They lost their opportunity to be faithful witnesses to the city. Or not. They begin worshipping God (praying and singing hymns) in the prison, witnessing to the prison population of Philippi. God knew what He was doing. God not only shook up Philippi with

the arrival of the gospel, but He visibly shakes the foundations of the prison where Paul and Silas are. He is the God who shakes the world and gives strength to His people (Ps. 29), and He often does this through the worship of His people (Heb. 12:18-19). Paul and Silas sing and pray, God shakes the foundations of their prison, and sets them and all the prisoners free.

The Good News

In this story, we also are reminded of the abundant grace of God in the gospel. When Paul stops the jailer from committing suicide, the jailer asks what he should do to be saved. Paul answers: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.” That’s it. Believe on the Lord Jesus, the Messiah. He is the only way of salvation, and His yoke is easy. This is the good news of salvation in Jesus. And how many Christians need to be reminded of this! What must you do to be saved? You know you fall short, you know you don’t measure up to God’s perfection, you know your sinful heart. And if you don’t know your heart like that, you are not being honest with yourself. With all of that, how could God love you? Because He loves Jesus, and the Father is well-pleased with the Son. And so, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Don’t believe in your Christianity, the God’s law, your keeping of the law, your Reformed understanding, your love of neighbor. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Paul realized that his conversion happened not only for his own sake, but as a pattern to all who would believe of the longsuffering and grace and mercy of Jesus (1 Tim. 1:16). This grace and Paul’s love for the Giver of that grace drove him to run his race to the end. Paul says of the trials he knew were ahead of him, “But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). It is the grace of a sovereign Lord who is in control of all things and all circumstances, who works in mysterious ways in people and cities and nations, and who shakes the world and gives strength to His people. Whatever your hardship, whatever your sorrows, whatever your sin—His grace is sufficient to cover all of it.