The Philippian Mission

"They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia."
—Acts 16:6, *Revised Standard Version*

IN ACTS, WE ARE TOLD the Apostle Paul had been prohibited from taking the Gospel message to Asia. Instead, the Lord commissioned him to introduce the Gospel into Macedonia. "A vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us."—Acts 16:9

The Asia that the Lord would not allow Paul to enter was, at that time, the westernmost province of what is now known as the continent of Asia. Macedonia was the easternmost province of Europe. It was at Philippi, Macedonia's capital city, that the paganism of the East and the paganism of the West met. Philippi was ripe for the introduction of the Gospel message. In Paul's day, it was the fulcrum upon which was balanced Eastern and Western thought. Though missionary work would subsequently continue in the East, the introduction of the Gospel message into Macedonia by Paul and his

brethren would tip the balance toward the West. The Gospel would thereafter begin to spread throughout Europe, affecting pagan perceptions everywhere, thereby completely reshaping Western thought and practice.

The Apostle, understanding the strategic potential of his commission, responded without hesitation. "After he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them." (Acts 16:10) Paul took with him Silas, a Jew; Luke, a Gentile; and, quite probably, Timothy, a son of mixed Gentile and Jewish parentage.

It is Luke who chronicles the main experiences of the little missionary band. Philippi is the "chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a colony: and we were in that city abiding certain days." (vs. 12) Philippi was more than a Roman garrison outpost. It was a colony whose intended purpose was to expand and perpetuate the Roman presence in that area and thereby maintain the peace. Rome's looming presence influenced almost everything that occurred in Luke's account.

In their colonized circumstance, the Jewish custom was to gather on the Sabbath in a public place to pray. Upon arriving in Philippi, Paul, Silas, Luke and Timothy did likewise, seeking an opportunity to preach the Gospel. "On the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made."—vs. 13

A PYTHON SPIRIT

Satan, no doubt, also keenly aware of the strategic potential of Paul's missionary journey to Philippi,

and ever eager to thwart the spread of the Gospel, set an obstacle in the path of the missionaries. "It came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us." (vs. 16) The woman was a demon-possessed slave for whose prophesies and pronouncements her masters charged money. The *Marginal Translation* of the *King James Version* identifies the demon which possessed the woman as a "Python spirit";—a spirit ascribed to those who worshipped the ancient Greek pagan god, Apollo. She and her masters followed the men who were preaching the Gospel. As she did, she shouted, "These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation." (vs. 17) Luke tells us, "this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour."—vs. 18

Paul demonstrated that he wanted no affiliation with the slavemasters' moneymaking schemes, nor did he wish to attract the attention of the Roman authorities by having his presence and mission announced. He sent the 'Python spirit' from the slave woman. Irate at losing their lucrative source of income, the slavemasters reported Paul and Silas to the local magistrates. Though they had hypocritically aided and abetted Paul and his friends for days in the same endeavor, allowing their slave to proclaim them men of God, the slavemasters accused Paul and Silas, both Jews, of the very serious crime of introducing a new religion. That was forbidden in Philippi. Rome did not countenance civil contention over religious issues, especially among the Jews.

Religious strife made governing more difficult and could lead to insurrection. Unrest was bad for the Roman economy.

A FORESEEN ADVANTAGE

Luke and Timothy, being non-Jews, escaped the following brutal scenario. "When her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the marketplace unto the rulers, And brought them to the magistrates, saying, These men being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city, And teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans. And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent off their clothes, and commanded to beat them. And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely." (vss. 19-23) Exceeding their authority on this occasion, the local magistrates caused a serious breach of the Roman legal process. This would redound to Paul and Silas' advantage later. No doubt, it was all foreseen and arranged by the Lord.

Both Paul and Silas possessed Roman citizenship; a valuable possession in their day, subject to special consideration under Roman law. As Roman citizens, they should have been remanded to the Roman authorities. Instead, they were beaten by the local authorities before they had a trial; another breach of Roman law. The two could have claimed their rights as citizens under Roman law and every one involved in the cruel and illegal brutality perpetrated against them would have suffered a severe,

perhaps fatal, response from the strict Roman system. However, Paul and Silas told no one of their Roman citizenship at that time. As a result, they experienced much pain, abuse and eventual incarceration. They withheld that information and endured the unjust cruelty for the love of their newly emerging brethren in Philippi.

MISSIONARY OPPORTUNITY

After having beaten Paul and Silas to mollify the crowd, the magistrates charged the jailer with holding them until their fate was decided. Roman law stipulated that a jailer could be made to serve the sentence of any prisoner who escaped during his watch. If the prisoner was serving time, the jailer could be made to serve the remainder of the prisoner's sentence. If the prisoner was awaiting death, the jailer could be put to death in his stead. Paul and Silas' jailer took the matter very seriously. The jailer, "having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison."—vs. 24

In Roman times, prisons were appalling, fetid places. Dank, unlit, and usually infested, inner prisons were the equivalent of modern maximum security areas. The worst prisoners were put there. Paul and Silas' jailer imposed a punitive measure even beyond that of the inner prison. He "made their feet fast in the stocks." (vs. 24) Stocks were usually iron-bound wood with several holes in a row. The prisoner's feet were put into those holes. The amount of discomfort the jailer could inflict upon the prisoner was determined by the distance he put between the prisoners' feet. One imagines Paul and Silas' jailer placing their feet quite far apart and the

painful effect that would soon have on their hips and backs, especially since they had earlier experienced a severe beating. Their prospects seemed dismal indeed.

SINGING THE GOSPEL

Covered with welts from the rod or the lash, joints aching because their feet were in stocks, Paul and Silas "prayed, and sang praises unto God" from the innermost recesses of the damp and dark prison of Philippi. (vs. 25) The two disciples of Christ did not merely sing and pray quietly to encourage themselves in their extremity. It is clear that they were praying and singing with such volume that all other prisoners could hear them—"and the prisoners heard them." (vs. 25) They had courage in abundance fostered by their unshakable faith. Theirs was a mission for God. They had been commissioned to preach at a strategic location from which the Gospel would spread westward toward Rome. Paul and Silas, not allowed to openly speak the Gospel message, sang it to the others in prison; and the prisoners heard it. The disciples of Christ alive in the present day would likewise certainly sing the Gospel story if they were not permitted to preach it. "I will sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for me. How He left His home in Glory for the cross at Calvary."—No. 343, *Hymns of Dawn*

LIBERATION OF ALL

Satan, having had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into prison with execution a distinct possibility come morning, had done his best to end their mission. He failed. All in the prison were set at liberty. "Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that

the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bands were loosed." (Acts 16:26) Supposing all the prisoners had fled, the jailer was as good as dead under Roman law and he knew it. "The keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled." (vs. 27) Death by his own hand was preferable to the numerous gruesome ways that the Romans could have put the jailer to death for his perceived failure. As the jailer drew his sword to end his life, Paul "cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here." (vs. 28) Astonished, the jailer "called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"—vss. 29,30

REJOICING AND BELIEVING

Responding, Paul said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." (vs. 31) Luke adds, "They spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house." (vs. 32) The message Paul and Silas related to the jailer could not have differed substantially from that which Paul delivered to the Colossians in his epistle, "I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God; Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you,

the hope of glory: Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." (Col. 1:25-28) Hearing the word of the Lord, the grateful and now converted jailer "took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway. And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house."—Acts 16:33,34

CHASTENED MAGISTRATES

Morning revealed a chastened local authority. "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."—Acts 16:35-40, *New American Standard Bible*

A STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Their previous day's rash and illegal conduct of beating Paul and Silas, and incarcerating them

without trial, placed the Philippian magistrates in serious jeopardy of the very strict Roman law. No doubt apprised of that, they sent an underling to the jailer the following morning to quietly secure their release. It was then Paul chose to reveal that he and Silas were, in fact, Roman citizens. Were they to reveal that fact directly to the higher Roman authorities, all involved in their cruel and illegal treatment would have been severely dealt with by Rome. Paul and Silas kept their Roman citizenship hidden until the best possible strategic moment. They had been willing to endure the earlier brutality of the Philippian citizenry and officials to gain the advantage over the magistrates to ensure the safety and protection of their beloved Philippian brethren after their departure. Though Paul, Silas, Luke and Timothy were introducing what appeared to be a new religion, the local magistrates' fear of the severe legal consequences for their official blunder ensured there would be no official reprisals against the Philippian church after the missionaries' departure. Going to the house of Lydia, a sister in Christ at Philippi, the four no doubt assured all brethren gathered there of that fact, after which the men departed.

CHURCH'S MISSIONARY JOURNEY

The circumstance of Paul, Silas, Luke and Timothy at Philippi was very much an analogy of the church's experiences throughout the Gospel Age. Like the missionaries at Philippi, the church has been on a missionary journey during the entire Gospel Age. Paul and his brethren were pursued by hypocrites who offered assistance for gain; likewise, the

church has been beset by those who feign interest in the Truth for gain, the most notable being Emperor Constantine of Rome seeking political advantage over the alliances of his pagan rivals. His offer to enhance the authority and prestige of the early church by declaring it the state religion was accepted by the majority at the time. The result was the ecclesiasticism of Christianity.

Paul and Silas were bloodied in the marketplace at the hands of the magistrates of Philippi without a hearing. The church, in kind, has been unjustly drawn into the congregational marketplace where doctrines and creeds are bought and sold for money, and condemned without being heard. Paul and Silas were publicly beaten there. Likewise, the church has felt the sharp lash of public castigation zealously laid on by the ecclesiastical magistrates of Christianity.

CHURCH'S UNJUST INCARCERATION

Superstitious ignorance has been the enthusiastic jailer of the church. Religious superstition has forced the church into the inner prison of obscurity even as gross darkness covers the people. As were Paul and Silas by their stocks, the church has also been fettered by the doctrinal fantasies and religious traditions of others. These severely limit the church's access to those held in the deep blackness of religious deception. However, the church does what is possible to do in its extremity. As did Paul and Silas, the church continues to raise its voice in prayer and songs of praise, singing loudly the song of Moses and the Lamb for the benefit of others, not knowing to what hearing ear its voice may be carried in the dark.

CITZENSHIP REVEALED

The subsequent release of Paul and Silas well represents the glorification of the church at the end of the Harvest. The church, at the end of this present Gospel Age, will be loosed from the gloomy recesses of its prison of obscurity and will ascend to the bril-liant light of prominence and power with the Sun of Righteousness. The chastened magistrates of pro-fessing Christianity will then know that those they beat unjustly on earth were, in truth, citizens of heaven. ■