

Installment #12

Open Heart, Open Wound

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 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. ²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.¹



We are well into Paul's second missionary journey. The Apostle did not know it going into the city but Philippi would turn out to be a nightmare for him. Pain and misery grinned as Paul walked, tired and hungry, into the city, making his way to the only synagogue there.

I was a student in seminary before I ever set foot in a Christian monastery. I had little idea about what monks did but I certainly was interested. Going home from my first visit I was struck with one big idea that has never left me: those people—those monks—denied themselves many earthly pleasures in order to open their hearts to the Lord. All of their waking hours revolved around the Lord in some way: seven worship services a day, a daily experience of Holy Communion (mass), work that was understood as prayer, private reading of the early fathers of the Church or other spiritual material, and many other spiritual activities designed to foster a spirituality of the open heart.

So I took a fresh look at the spirituality of my own church. Frankly, although a

¹ Acts 16, TNIV.

member for many years and now training to be a minister in that church, I knew virtually nothing about its emphasis on spiritual growth. But I learned that the early leaders of the church, John and Charles Wesley, were also very intense in their spiritual discipline. For them it all started at 4 AM with an hour of prayer. A day of spiritual emphasis followed. In fact, the Wesley brothers were somewhat like monks in their desire to know the Lord and please Him. So this set me to reading and some years later teaching the beautiful sermons, songs, and discipline of 18th century Methodism. I learned that the church I served was strong on the kind of discipline that would take one to heaven. It was a great and wonderful discovery.

Paul and the Open Heart

Now I am trying to see just how Paul the Apostle experienced an open heart, what his desert experience meant to him, and how he seemed empowered from that point on in preaching Christ as resurrected Lord.

In Acts 16, Luke records the following:

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

The Lord opened [Lydia's] heart.

We have noticed already, by the names of the places Paul and his fellows visited, that God was guiding them all the way. Indeed, we discover that the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus (one and the same) closed the door to some cities and opened a door to others for the proclamation of the Gospel. At the end of Matthew's Gospel we are told that our Lord wanted His disciples to go on witnessing until "the end of the age." Everyone is to have an opportunity to hear the Gospel message and to respond to it more than they have already. Paul did not ask why this city and why not this one; he simply obeyed

the Spirit whom he had come to love and trust. Here is a lesson for us: Let us not ask why but where, and if the where of God differs from the where of our inclination, then so be it.

The word for *respond to* means more than just listening intently. Lydia took in what the Apostle had to say and her life was changed by what she heard. Yes, Lydia heard the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, but we should notice its components. Lydia positioned herself to hear the Gospel. Some people do not seem to have a sense of inquiry about the Gospel, even though the salvation of their soul is at stake. Then there was the preached word by Paul and the other witnesses. The great Apostle was clear in what he said. Many pastors are more or less clear in what they say from the pulpit. Lydia did not scratch her head when Paul spoke, wondering what was going on. And then there was the God whom they worshiped, coming to them in the presence of the Spirit. This is a combination that is ripe for the Good News: (1) an eager heart, (2) opened by God, (3) into which the pure Word of God is poured by preaching.

Lydia and her household were baptized and the disciples invited to stay at her house. She was a dealer in purple cloth, which is to say that she sold either purple silks or purple dyes. Purple, a royal color, was much in demand. The wording of this passage suggests that she was a wealthy woman with a large house. She may have been a widow. Regardless of her circumstances, this *worshiper* of God *opened her heart* to the Gospel and became a believer. We might assume from the record in Acts that the apostles had every right to be happy about how they were received in Philippi. Things had not gone so well for them in other places but Philippi showed promise. That is, until they ran into the fortune-teller.

¹⁶ *Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling.* ¹⁷ *She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."* ¹⁸ *She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.*²

² Acts 16, TNIV.

“A spirit by which she predicted the future”.

What kind of spirit did this pagan fortune-telling woman have? The Greek text reads, "the spirit of Python." If you are thinking about a large snake, you are right! The spirit of Python represented a Greek snake deity that foretold the future. It is important to note that the Arabic translation renders it, "an unclean spirit, foretelling future things."³ An unclean spirit! It has been suggested that this woman had reference to the Greek god Zeus. No wonder Paul did not want this woman following them and shouting. What sounded like a Christian witness turns out to be an advertisement for the devil! It is true that Paul was a servant of the Most High God with words leading to salvation. The Most High God, however, was Yahweh, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 18 tells us that Paul was so exasperated that he commanded the spirit in this woman to come out of her...and it did. The peace that followed was only temporary.

¹⁹ *When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities.* ²⁰ *They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar" ²¹ by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."*

Suppose the text had read: The owners of this poor woman were happy she was healed, so happy in fact that they gave all the money they had to the Apostles for the work of the church. They then turned to the crowd and said: "Brothers, we have sinned and we are thrilled about the work of Paul.

Not hardly! This slave woman was a source of money for these wretches. They cared for her only because she provided them with a good living. She was filled with a wicked spirit and her owners couldn't care less because they too were probably filled with the same spirit. **Note:** Paul is charged in verse 21 with advocating unlawful customs or "preaching a non-Roman cult, a mode of worship and practices that Romans do not welcome."⁴ Jewish worship was forbidden in Rome since Jews in general were thought to be hostile to Roman interests.

²² *The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. ²³ After they had been severely flogged,*

³ John Gill, Exposition of the Entire Bible, Acts 16:16f.

⁴ Joseph Fitzmyer, The Acts of the Apostles, p. 587.

they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.²⁴ When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

The inner evil spirit energized not only the owners of this poor woman but also the crowd they were able to arouse.⁵ The Roman magistrates were also responsible for the beatings Paul and Silas endured. The lash or whip was the most common kind of Romans punishment for slaves. Being branded on the forehead was also used on slaves and putting one's feet in the stocks (lit. "the wood," perhaps attaching their feet to a log or large block of wood) for public humiliation. Luke's account of what happened to Paul and Silas indicates that the Christian evangelists were treated like those at the lowest level of Roman society.

What must I do to be saved?

³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized.

This Philippian jailer was so rattled that he blurted out: "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*" Paul gave what has become a classic Christian response: "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—and your house.*" We can hear this jailer breathe a sigh a relief. What he saw was bravery, endurance, commitment, and joy under pressure. He could not see but obviously felt the Apostles' strength through prayer and their happiness through singing God's praise. At any rate, the jailer wanted what the Apostles' had.

Roman Punishment

The Emperor at the time of Paul's death was Nero. For the crime of treason in Nero's reign, the person judged guilty was stripped naked, stretched by having his head placed in a fork, and then beaten to death. Do you remember that the Lord Jesus as well as some of His disciples were accused of treason and may have died such a death, except for Jesus,

⁵ See Brian Rapske, The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting, p.121f. For a different view of the crowd.

who was hanged on the cross. Of course, convicted persons were often thrown into the arena and killed by wild beasts. It is easy to see a litany of cruelty on the part of the Romans. By such means we learn something important about the power structure of ancient Rome, apparently held together by fear. That thousands of Romans would gather at the coliseum for the “games,” pitting Christians against one another, against trained fighters, and hungry beasts reveals the essentially evil nature of such people. The Romans were little more than ancient Aztecs. It does

not take much imagination to understand the cruelty of punishments such as being sewn up in a sack with a wild beast or a dog and thrown into a river. Or, being used as bait for wild animals or targets for gladiators or put to death by burning, all of which reflect the masochism rampant in Roman society⁶. On the other hand, Christians often behaved with acumen and the strength given by the Holy Spirit though some caved in because of the pressure. Philippi gives us a view of Roman prisons and general punishment not found anywhere in the New Testament. It was easily the worst treatment Paul experienced. It is no wonder that when the officers of the magistrates attempted to let Paul and Silas go without anymore fuss; Paul said he was a Roman citizen, news that sent shivers through those who had treated the apostles so roughly. Paul demanded that he and the other Christians be released with apologies. You might judge for yourself whether or not Paul “turned the other cheek” and if so, how, and if not, why not?⁷

The title of this installment is **Open Heart, Open Wound**, suggesting something of the character of people in the text, both physically and spiritually. All were seeking God, suggesting an open heart. All were punished, rightly or wrongly, suggesting open physical wounds. For Paul, open wounds seemed related to an open heart.

It is easy to see that the jailer and his family had open hearts to the power of the Gospel. When Paul shouted to the jailer, “*Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!*” what assumptions do you see on the jailer’s part? And what happened to the remainder of the prisoners in the Philippian prison? All around, this is a remarkable event, showing God’s power and compassion. But what else do you see in the larger passage? What biblical

⁶ Not to say anything about the Roman Coliseum and the death-dealing that went on there for the enjoyment of the Roman citizenry in the vicinity.

⁷ Did Paul demonstrate Christian charity when he spoke harshly to the Galatians in his letter to them? Why do you answer the way you do?

phrases would you suggest for such an idea as the **Open Heart**?

Note: This jailer was probably a retired army veteran. As such he was regarded as the “governor of the prison,”—probably with the rank of centurion. He was expected to follow orders at all times. Yet there was a more compelling reason for him to secure his prisoners well. If they escaped he had to forfeit his life for theirs and that is the reason he drew his sword, thinking that the prisoners had escaped, as they normally would have. We do not know how many prisoners were in this jail at the time but it is interesting that not one tried to escape.

Paul’s Open Heart

⁴⁰ *After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the believers and encouraged them. Then they left.*

Paul is a much studied figure in the New Testament. I am sure that is in part because of the amount of literature he wrote. In his letters, he urges readers to follow Christ, at times even to follow him (Paul) in living the Christian life. He does not write such advice flippantly but with humility. He is not worthy to be a model for Christian spirituality in his own eyes, but his desire to be the Lord’s man is evidence of an open heart to the will of the Lord.

What do you think?

1. Tertullian, an early church father, once said, “Nothing the limb feels in the stocks when the mind is in heaven.”⁸
[A leg in the stocks feels no pain when the mind is thinking about heaven.] Do you think this is true, that a mind fixed on heaven can endure pain? Can you explain your answer?
2. Why do you think the non-Christian prisoners in the Philippian jail remained where they were and apparently did not attempt to escape when they had a good chance to do so?
3. Read Acts 17:1-15. What is happening in this section of Acts? Who is stirring up the crowds and threatening

⁸ In R. C. H. Lenski, The Acts of the Apostles, p. 672.

the Apostle Paul? And why? How does this story relate to your church?

--Jerry Mercer
--November 22, 2008

Note: I have a prayer request to share with you.
Mr. Bob Morgan, Webmaster for Centenary United Methodist Church,
is having back surgery on November 26, next Wednesday.
Bob has been the gentleman responsible for bringing you my columns
for the past seven years.

So two things:

- (1) please offer prayers pre- and post-op for Bob and
 - (2) note that he may not be able to service my work for a month or more.
- Bob is a selfless servant of the Lord
and would appreciate your concern.

--Thank you,
--Jerry