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## Introduction to Postcard from Philippi: Prayer & Profit

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These last 2 Sundays of August, I'm going to look at the accounts of St. Paul's visits to 2 cities in Greece: Philippi & Athens.

Philippi was the first place that Paul & Silas stopped at after at the Spirit told them not to preach in the Asian coast of the Black Sea & Paul had a vision or dream of a man from Macedonia asking him to come over to preach the gospel in Europe.

20 years ago, Elizabeth & I holidayed at a tourist resort one hour south of modern Saloniki or Thessalonica. One hot day, we hired a wee car & went to find the site of Philippi, 3 or 4 hours north east. Founded by Philip the father of Alexander the Great, by Paul's day, it was the Roman capital of their Province of Macedonia, on main trade road to the East; abandoned in 1400's after invasion of the Ottoman Turks; a world heritage site, derelict ruins but a square mile with cobbled streets & ground level remains of the Courthouse, the forum, the Market Square, the Temple, shops & the bathhouse all clear. I searched my dusty loft for a postcard but gave up.

### Acts 16: 6-24

3 things:

- 1) Sometimes, we don't know what to do, what direction to go. We can seek God's will but trust God's good purposes for our lives. If we are humble & flexible, like Paul & his companions, we can step out in what we believe to be the right direction but allow Jesus to alter our course if He sees something better.
- 2) When the Lord sends us as His messengers into new places or situations, He is there ahead of us & may have people ready to respond. The Jewish community at Philippi was so small that it didn't even have a synagogue. (10 male Jews was the minimum requirement for one.) But out of prayer & small unpromising beginnings, the Lord built a loving strong church- See Paul's later letter to the Philippians.
- 3) That poor slave girl had been exploited by her masters, who made a lot of money from her telling of fortunes. Paul called on the name of Jesus to set her free from the evil power of the occult. As a result, the slave owners saw their business ruined. They brought up false accusations against Paul & Silas of disloyalty to Rome in this proudly Roman colony, so they were flogged & put in prison. Love of money is often a powerful motive for evil. Is it for us?

When 30 years ago, Terry Waite was released after 4 years as a hostage in Lebanon, mostly held in solitary & very cramped confinement, he told all those watching on TV about a postcard, sent by a total stranger, the only mail that had got through to him. On one side was a painting of John Bunyan in Bedford Jail; on the reverse a brief message: *Dear Terry, you are not forgotten. People everywhere are praying for your release & that of the other hostages.* At first, he felt angry because Bunyan was shown as having a large airy cell with a table, pen & paper, whereas he was kept chained up, unable to stretch his long legs & in the darkness. But then, he did feel encouraged that God & many people had not given up on him; that despite his seemingly hopeless situation & frequent black despair, Christ's Spirit still held him.

**At least 2 things strike me about the dramatic incident in the prison at Philippi & at least 2 questions we should then ask ourselves**

- 1. Their inner peace & joy:** when most people would have been full of self-pity – in prison, in the middle of the night, in pain after a severe flogging, Paul & Silas were singing God's praises. How could they sing hymns & pray in that prison? Perhaps, they had cracked under all the pressure & had gone off their heads, no longer in touch with reality. Or was it the peace & joy that Paul told the Galatian church results from having God's spirit at work with them & in them; the inner peace & wish to rejoice that Paul told the Philippians comes when we entrust all our worries & needs to God. Then the 2<sup>nd</sup> contradiction took place – a contradiction so powerful that it brought the jailer to his knees
- 2. The prisoners had no wish to escape.** After the earthquake, the doors of the prison had broken open & the prisoners found their chains had broken loose. Everyone was set to escape. That would mean death for the jailer. But no, the opposite happened. The prisoners **did not break out but the love & joy of God broke in that** night – into the prison, & into the lives of the Jailer & his household.

These 2 contradictions of all normal expected behaviour so impressed the jailer that he asked, *What must I do to be saved?* & he got the standard reply, *Believe in the Lord Jesus.* ***What must I do to be saved?*** - that is the 1<sup>st</sup> question.

That Jailer had not yet fully realised that there is nothing we can **do** except rely on what God has done for us in Christ. Yet, he had recognised his need; he was open to listen & to bring his family; he showed he was sorry by – rather like Jesus – **washing** their wounds & he committed himself by being baptised.

& if we ask that question, *What must I do to be saved?*, please note that Greek word translated *saved* also means *set free, delivered, healed, made whole*.

So we should first ask ourselves also a 2<sup>nd</sup> question:

***What do I need to be set free from? What imprisons me?*** Not necessarily prison walls – *Stone walls do not a prison make nor iron bars a cage*.

This past week, many have asked, What did the 20 years' Allied presence in Afghanistan achieve? Nearly 80 years ago, when many nations came together to overcome Nazi & Japanese oppression, US President Roosevelt spoke of the allies fighting for 4 freedoms – freedom of speech & expression, freedom of every person to worship God in their own way; freedom from poverty; freedom from fear. Our wartime coalition government committed Britain to a Welfare State that aimed to give freedom from poverty & disease; freedom from lack of educational opportunity & from unemployment. Still important aims worth striving for.

**Yet of even greater & more lasting importance is our need to be freed from our guilt, fears & from our fear of failure; from grudges & secret prejudices; to be freed from the power of our past failures and/or of the sinful nature that seems to enslave us.**

Jesus spoke of himself as *the Light of the world* & then said to those who believed in Him, *“If you obey my teaching, you will know the truth & the truth will set you free....but people prefer the darkness Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.* John 8: 12, 31-32, 34. Paul later wrote in his letter to the believers in Rome that *God’s Spirit has sets us free from the power of sin and of death.* (Romans 8:1-2)

The jailer not only had felt the power of the earthquake but also recognised the presence & power of God in Peter & Silas. He did not hold the key to the freedom of these men but wanted to know the One that did. May our lives point to Jesus and reflect God’s grace

Acts 16:31- *Peter & Silas replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, & you will be saved; you will be set free.”*