

'I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

In December of 1985, we held a seminar in this church entitled "A Christian Response to the AIDS Crisis." We sought ways to minister to sufferers of this terrible disease; to take them to their hospital appointments, prepare food for them, clean their homes, etc. We were aware that the gay community in San Francisco were closed to much of the help being offered by the churches. They feared that Christians were merely seeking an opportunity to condemn their behavior and preach to them. That was not our motive, but that was the feeling of many homosexuals in San Francisco. Thus, we have been trying to be more creative in our approaches.

One day last year while I was on a flight to Dallas, I noticed the Mayor of San Francisco sitting a few rows in front of me. She stood up and began moving back through the first couple of rows of seats, talking to her delegation who were accompanying her, as I later learned, on a trip to South America. I immediately thought to myself, "What a wonderful opportunity to talk to her of our vision to minister to the homosexual community in San Francisco!" As she moved towards my seat, I became extremely nervous, however. I said to myself, "Come on, Ritchie! What's wrong with you?" I prayed, "Lord, give me the courage to talk to her." The next thing I knew I found myself walking towards her and introducing myself as a pastor from Palo Alto. I told her about the seminar which we had held and of our desire to minister in the city among AIDS sufferers. She replied, "Just call the mayor's office, ask for my secretary, and tell her we talked. She will give you a list of names of people you need to talk to." It was all so easy I wondered why I was so nervous to begin with. I was overjoyed at how well our conversation had gone. Later, I thought of the word which Paul wrote to the Philippians, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me..."

I want to apply the truth of that verse to our lives this morning as we look at the further adventures of the apostle Paul. Together with Silas, Paul has embarked upon his second missionary journey, picking up Timothy in Lystra. They have arrived at Troas, and it is here that Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia who says to him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." The apostle responds by immediately seeking to go into Macedonia, "concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:10b). Thus, Paul prepares to enter Europe with the gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ. As we look at this story today, we will see that the risen Lord, who provides wisdom, power, courage and boldness to Paul and his companions, regardless of the circumstances, will provide the same resources in our lives if we will but turn to him. That was the secret of Paul's life, as he shared later in his Philippian letter. In chapter 1 of that letter, the apostle declared that Jesus was his life ("for to me to live is Christ"); in chapter 2, he said that Jesus Christ was his example (as Jesus took on the "form of a bond-servant"); in chapter 3, he wrote that Jesus was his confidence ("I lay hold of Christ"); and in chapter 4, Paul said that Jesus Christ was his strength ("I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me").

Thus we take up the apostle's story again as he sets out from Troas, responding to the call to bring the gospel to Europe. In the city of Philippi, in Macedonia, he will share the gospel, cast out demons, endure affliction, and confront authority. He will be a living demonstration of the truth of his own words, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

I. Share the Gospel

Acts 16:11-15

Therefore putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the following day to Neapolis; and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there

would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. And a certain woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

The city of Philippi was named for Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. In 42 B.C., Augustus, who would later become Caesar Augustus, was aided in battle by the people of the city, and in gratitude he made the city a Roman colony, with all the privileges that that entailed, including citizenship. Thus, Philippi was one of the leading cities of Greece. The great Roman highway, the Egnatian Way, traversed through the city; the same road which Paul would later use to travel to Thessalonica, Berea and Athens.

So Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke entered Philippi and immediately set about finding a synagogue which they would use as a beachhead to establish the gospel. The rabbis taught that any city in which ten or more Jewish males resided was suitable for the setting up of a synagogue. If ten were not available, the worshipers should meet by any body of water--lake, ocean, pond, etc.--so that water would be available for ceremonial rites. Failing to find a synagogue in the city therefore, Paul and his companions went down by the Gangites River, a mile west of the city, where they found that a number of women had assembled. The team sat down and began to teach from the Old Testament that Jesus Christ was God's Messiah.

Some eleven years later, writing to these same people from a prison cell in Rome, Paul reminded the Philippians of the Person and work of the Savior in these words,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil.2:5-11)

As Paul and his co-workers were sharing the gospel by the river, "a certain woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God," was listening intently. The result was that "the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." When opportunity arises, Christians are called to simply and clearly share the Word of God. We do not have the power to open the hearts of our hearers; that is not our responsibility. Neither do we have to manipulate or force the message on anyone. And we do not have to lay awake at night wondering if the seed of the Word of God will germinate. As believers, our duty is to plant the seed, then to rest and allow the ground to produce the harvest--how, we do not know.

That is what happened here with Lydia. God was the One who opened her heart to grasp the fact that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Others listening at the same time, including members of Lydia's household, also opened their hearts to Jesus as their Savior,. The next step was to baptize those who had come to faith. Thus, they became identified with Christ by means of baptism, being symbolically placed into him and having their sins forgiven. Surely this is the occasion Paul was referring to when he later wrote to the Philippians,

I thank my God in all remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. (Phil.1:3-5).

Whenever I read of this conversion experience, I think of Kathy, a young woman who visited our home for a

few weeks some years ago. While she was with us she met a number of Christians from this church. I noticed that she listened carefully to what they had to say about their faith. One day I found her lying on a couch in my livingroom, looking very depressed. When I asked her if she was sick, she replied that she felt spiritually sick. She had never been around Christians before and she felt very empty inside, she told me. I sat down with her and shared the reason for her emptiness, but before I had said very much she had opened her heart to the Savior. The following week she was baptized. Now she is back on the East Coast, attending medical school and working in Campus Crusade for Christ. It was obvious that the Lord had opened her heart to receive the gospel that day.

Thus a beachhead was established for the gospel in the household of Lydia, another woman whose heart was opened by the Lord to receive the gospel.

The enemy, however, was not asleep. Satan now enters the picture. But Paul is given the strength and courage to cast out demons.

II. Cast Out Demons

Acts 16:16-18

And it happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a certain slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortunetelling. Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." And she continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment.

This event may have occurred a week or so later as the four missionaries were headed back to the river for a time of prayer. The slave-girl, who had a spirit of foretelling the future, approached the disciples and began crying out. There were more than sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire--men, women and children who were denied all their civil rights. This slave-girl's masters were getting rich at her expense through her fortune-telling. People like her were highly thought of in the ancient world because they were believed to have their wits taken away from them by the gods who put their own minds into them.

The message which the girl cried out day by day as Paul and his team quietly sought to minister in the city was absolutely true. "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation," she announced. The demon who possessed her knew what was going on. But having this message shouted at them every day was nothing but harassment. It was the enemy's ploy. Paul's response was the same as the response which Jesus made to the possessed man in the synagogue at Capernaum. This man had said to the Lord, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God...." As was the case with Jesus, the apostle did not want this kind of message coming from a demon-possessed person lest the people think that his own proclamation of the gospel was associated with Satan. The enemy at times seeks to align himself with us as an angel of light, using the same terms we do. Paul was greatly annoyed at this harassment. At last he addressed the spirit, not the woman, and said, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" We must remember that Satan is the enemy, not the people he manipulates. People who attack Christianity are not the enemy but the victims of the enemy. Paul did not attempt to use any power of his own, but rather he used the power of the resurrected Lord to cast the demon out of the girl. The result was that she, the captive, was set free from her spiritual enemy. She was still a slave of Rome, but no longer a demon-possessed slave.

The television and newspapers this week have much to say about the so-called "harmonic convergence" which, according to a reading of the Mayan calendar, is occurring this week-end,. One of the leaders of this loosely defined group was quoted as saying he hoping for 144,000 people who, he said, are needed "to create a field of trust, to ground the new vibrational frequencies coming in at that time." He said that a 5,125-year cycle will climax in 2012, at which time "earthlings will be in contact with alien beings." To prepare, he says, a period of cleansing will begin Sunday and continue at least through 1992. A philosophy professor from the East Coast,

however, says that all of this stuff is "based on a hodgepodge of astrology, UFO-logy, the Mayan calendar, Aztec gods and a dash of the so-called New Age philosophy." Followers of this type of thing are also held captive by the evil one, as was this slave-girl in Philippi. And, as with her, only Jesus Christ can set such people free. Believers can, by the power of Jesus Christ, set these people free.

But Satan is still not through with his efforts to keep the gospel from entering Europe. He changes his tactic of using a demon-possessed girl, to using her greedy and heartless masters to put a stop to the missionary effort. Paul can "do all things through Christ" who strengthens him. He can witness to some women by a river; he can cast out a demon from a slave-girl; and he can endure affliction whilst in prison.

III. Endure Affliction

Acts 16:19-34

But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief magistrate, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans." And the crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them, and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison, and fastened their feet in the stocks.

But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains were unfastened. And when the jailer had been roused out of sleep and had seen the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!" And he called for lights and rushed in and, trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

Far from rejoicing over the slave-girl's healing, her masters are indignant over this attack on the sacred rights of property. They are not curious about the power which Paul used to cast out the demon because they are not open to the gospel. Rather, they are angry because they have lost their meal-ticket. They seize Paul and Silas, leaving Luke and Timothy alone for the moment, and drag them before the magistrates. They charge them with three counts: first, they were "throwing our city into confusion," they said; breaking the peace, in other words; second, they were Jews, not Romans (patriotism in full bloom); third, "these men are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or observe, being Romans" (Roman law allowed conquered people to retain their religion but not to proselytize Roman citizens). The real reason behind these charges, of course, was that these slave masters had lost their means of livelihood.

The crowd at the trial "rose up together against [the disciples]." In the heat of the moment, no one remembered to ask Paul and Silas whether they were Roman citizens. If they were, they had certain civil rights, one of which was that they could not be beaten. Instead, both men were stripped and beaten in public, and then thrown into jail and bound in stocks. The apostle would later write to these Philippians,

For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for his sake (Phil.1:29)

There's no telling what God will do if you happen to walk down by a river one day seeking fellowship with his people. You may think you have gone from Plan A to Plan B, but God sometimes has planned yet another detour, this time to prison. You should not sign up, of course, if you do not understand the gospel, because suffering for Christ's sake is very much a part of that gospel.

"But about midnight..." When you come to the word "But" in the Bible, you can stop right there and circle it; a change is about to happen. It's midnight in the cold, silent prison. Paul and Silas are lodged in a dungeon within the prison, their hands and feet locked in stocks. They are bruised and beaten. There is no late night TV show to distract them. Who could blame them if they were fearful, confused and bitter over what had happened? Rather than complaining, however, they are praying and singing hymns to God, while the rest of the prison, a captive audience if ever there was one, listens. The disciples are not held captive by their circumstances; they are not praying that God release them from the mess they had landed in; they are not demanding justice for their mistreatment. Rather, they are "praying and singing hymns of praise to God."

Then, answering their praying and singing, God responds with an earthquake "so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains were unfastened." The jailer awoke and saw the doors opened and immediately set about killing himself. He knew that under Roman law he would pay with his life anyway if his prisoners escaped. "But Paul cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!'" The jailer rushed in, trembling with fear and superstition and asked the astonishing question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" What was it about Paul and Silas that made him ask this question? Is the jailer asking for physical or spiritual deliverance? (The word "saved" here means "to be saved from danger, from suffering, or from spiritual damnation.") As he has been prevented from killing himself, it is obvious that the man is asking, therefore, "How can I be saved from eternal damnation?" He is asking for a plan, but Paul and Silas instead introduce him to a Person, Jesus Christ. The disciples respond, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household."

How could the Roman jailer be saved? By placing his faith in Jesus the Savior. Jesus demonstrated by his death on the cross that he was the Lamb of God who would take away the guilt and shame of man. Jesus is the only one who can save people from the power of sin. The jailer would have to place his faith in Jesus. By his resurrection from the dead the Lord demonstrated that he is the only One who can fill the emptiness of people with his wholeness, peace and joy. By placing his faith in Jesus, the jailer would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who would empower him to deal with all of life's circumstances..."For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but will have everlasting life." There is salvation in no one else..."for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

What must we do to be saved? The answer is the same today as it was in that Philippian prison two thousand years ago. The jailer was imprisoned by Satan, by the lust of the world and the lust of the flesh. Only by believing in Jesus could he find the answer to his question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Paul and Silas later explained the Scriptures in more detail to the jailer and his household, and each one in turn came to faith in Christ. The man then washed the disciples' wounds which they suffered in the beating they had received. Then he and all his household were baptized. Following that, the jailer took them to his home and fed them, and "they all rejoiced greatly."

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," says Paul. The apostle can witness, he can cast out demons, he can endure afflictions, and he can

IV. Confront Authority

Acts 15:35-40

Now 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. Now therefore come out 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." And the policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. And they were afraid when they heard 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. And they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

"Release those men," is the order sent down from the magistrates concerning Paul and Silas. "Get them out of our hair," in other words; "we don't want anything more to do with them." "How nice of you," says Paul, "but there is a slight problem which you are overlooking. We have been beaten in public, without trial. Our rights as Roman citizens have been violated. There has been no investigation and we have been denied the right to defend ourselves. Furthermore, as citizens of Rome we are exempted from degrading forms of punishment. We have been treated like criminals and thrown into prison. Now you are trying to get rid of us in secret. No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out." The magistrates were in real trouble and they knew it. They had been swayed by the mobs and had failed to even investigate what Paul and Silas had been charged with. Their positions were on the line. Earlier, the Emperor Claudius had deprived the city of Rhodes of its freedom for having crucified some Roman citizens. That is why the magistrates forgave the disciples and appealed to them to leave the city, because as citizens of Rome they could not be forced to depart Philippi.

But why did Paul and Silas confront the authorities? It sounds out of character for these servants of Jesus Christ to demand their rights. They did so because the first church in Europe had now been established, with Lydia and her household and the Philippian jailer and his household--all of them Roman citizens--and they would need protection when they in turn witnessed to Christ in the future. Paul is not concerned for himself, but is concerned that all who would later come to Christ in that Roman city be allowed to live and worship in peace.

A number of the Jews for Jesus people were arrested for handing out literature in Los Angeles International Airport in 1984. They responded by challenging their arrest in the federal courts. On June 15th this year, the Supreme Court ruled 9-0 that Jews for Jesus, and other groups, had protection under the First Amendment to hand out literature and to talk to people in any airport in the United States. Thus, our Jewish brothers appealed to the courts of the United States to protect the rights of Christians to evangelize and present the gospel of Jesus Christ freely and in peace in airports throughout our land. (All other groups are similarly protected.) In a sense, Paul is doing exactly the same things here in Philippi by demanding that the magistrates who had punished him and Silas themselves come and release them from their unjust imprisonment.

The missionaries then visited once again the home of Lydia and encouraged the brethren in that church. Luke remained on for a time to shepherd the body, while Paul, Silas and Timothy headed south on the Egnatian Way, on to their next adventure with their Lord, in Thessalonica.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," wrote Paul to the Philippians later. Christ had strengthened him to witness, to cast out a demon, to endure affliction, and, finally, to confront the civil authorities in Philippi so that the first church in Europe would henceforth be allowed to live in peace.

In the age of the Spirit in which we are living, our Lord is "taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name." And he is doing so in and through Christians. But he never calls upon us to do anything without providing the strength necessary to accomplish his perfect will. Therefore he does not want nor need our power, personality, ability, talent, experience or money--even our Plan A. He wants us to be like Paul, Silas, Luke and Timothy--available, and in touch with his purposes on earth in this age of the Spirit. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," says Paul. Do we believe that?

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