

RELIGION

Scripture of the Week

Luke 22:64

Mission to Philippi, Part I

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Dean of North Portland Bible College

The text for the Sunday School lesson (International Series) for next Sunday is Acts 16:9-12, 16-23. We encourage you to read all the Bible references as you follow through this article, and also encourage you to attend the Sunday School class at your church this week.

In the history of Paul's missionary journeys, Luke (the author of Acts) usually does not fill in a lot of details about events related to a specific city. But in Acts 16 we can read a lengthy account of the foundation of a great church, one which was very special in the heart of the great Apostle. The Sunday School lessons for this week and next will examine the success of Paul's ministry in Philippi, the first city in Europe in which he preached the gospel.

Philippi was a far cry from the cities of Phrygian Galatia and Barnabas had preached and established churches on Paul's "first missionary journey" (Acts 13-14). Those cities were mountain towns or cities, less cosmopolitan and sophisticated than the cities of the Aegean sea.

The "boundary" between Europe and Asia was invented later by European geographers, and it is really artificially determined. Nevertheless, the establishment of a church in Philippi was important to Paul's missionary strategy. It was the first of a long series of important churches in the heartland of Greek culture and Greek idolatry; it was the beachhead from which the gospel penetrated larger cities, like Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus. These cities surround the Aegean Sea, and many smaller cities were also reached and evangelized from these bases.

Paul may have had some of this plan already figured out, but he had not

planned to go to the province of Macedonia first. He and his mission team apparently wanted to go to the province of Asia (16:6), which included the great city Ephesus, but they were "forbidden of the Holy Ghost" to go into that area. Next they looked at the province of Bithynia (16:7), "but the Spirit suffered them not." By human standards, either of these would have been a wise choice. Both these provinces were located in the area we now call Turkey, both had significant cities, and both were virtually unreached by the gospel.

Thankfully, Paul's team were very sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and so they bypassed these areas, and went on to Troas, on the sea-coast. We aren't told how they received the Spirit's instructions, but it was clear enough for the time being. As Dowson Trotman once said, "When you can't see where the Lord is leading you, go as far as you can see." In Troas, Paul himself received a vision leading him to cross the edge of the Aegean into Macedonia (16:9-10). After this, there were no more visions directing each step, until the Lord told him to stay in Corinth for a longer period (18:9-11).

We also need to be ready to move as the Spirit of God directs us. But in the absence of extraordinary means, the Lord has given us sound minds to use--indeed, "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). We can make the right decisions, as we are humbly subject to "mid-course corrections" by the Spirit.

Our lesson includes the amazing story of the slave girl in Philippi. "A certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination" (Acts 16:16) began following the Christian missionaries around the streets of Philippi. In the original language, this spirit is simply called a python, an inspired representative of the Greek god Apollo, who was popu-

larly thought to be embodied in a snake at the famous oracle of Delphi. Plutarch referred to the people who were possessed by such spirits as "ventriloquists," that is, the people spoke and acted as "dummys" for the unseen spirit within. Christians realized the awful reality of such possession (Luke 8:29; 9:38-40); and Paul taught plainly that idol worship was closely connected to the demonic powers (1 Cor 10:20-21).

This girl was enslaved and exploited by a group of men, her "masters" or "lords," who saw her possession as a business opportunity. These unscrupulous men would sell time with her to people in the city who were impressed with her affliction, and thought that the power within her could help them tell the future, or give them advantages over other people.

She cried out that Paul and his team were "servants of the Most High God," and seemed to be testifying to the truth of their message (Acts 16:17). But God's people, like the Lord Jesus before, did not want any kind of endorsement from the forces of darkness (Luke 4:34,41). On the other hand, Paul was grieved not so much by the girl's persistent cries, as by the pitiful state the child was in. And so he turned and ordered the spirit out of her, "in the name of Jesus Christ." The deliverance was virtually immediate.

God's people today can learn valuable lessons from this incident. (1) The more actively we preach the good news of Christ, and witness in our daily lives, the more Santanic opposition we will see. We shouldn't fear it, but we can expect it. (2) We must realize that many people involved in sinful lifestyles are actually victims themselves--victims of the greed of other, stronger people, as well as the demonic realm. We need to demonstrate God's mercy, love, and power (as He directs) to free them from slavery.

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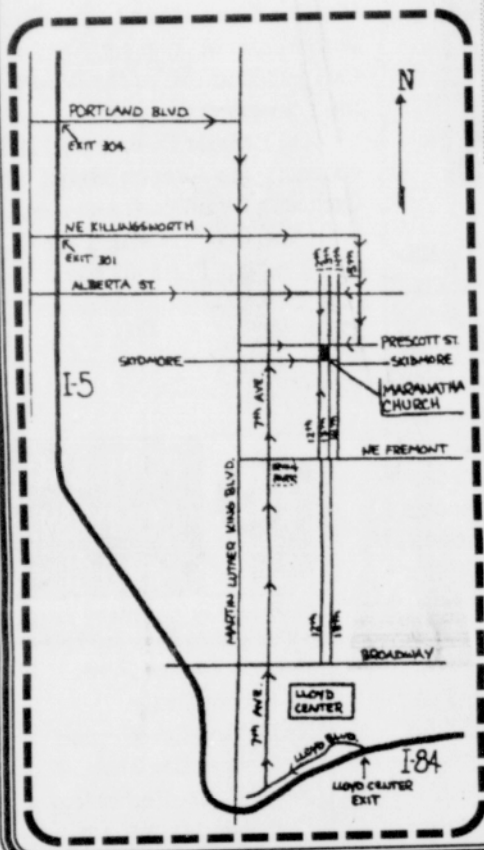
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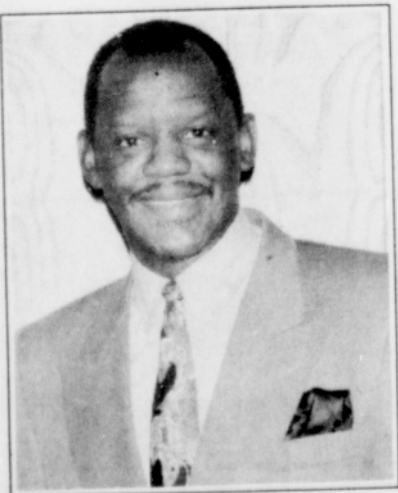


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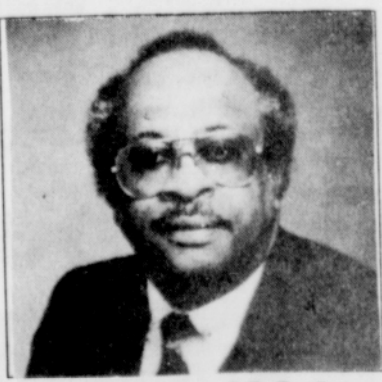
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