

The Place of Prayer

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In this chapter of the Acts of the apostles, I want to bring you directly to what I think to be the central message of the chapter. We read as though it were not a difficult thing at all, we read in verse 12, "from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia. We remained in this city some days." I tried this out as a sort of game I've played with myself. The first time I did it, I was driving into Exeter. We were living on the south coast of England at the time, I was driving into Exeter to preach and I looked around as the city began to emerge, street after street of houses, four people to a house, how many people? Crowds and crowds of people, unknown streets, just suppose, suppose there were not Christians here and I was coming as a missionary? What would you do? And if you don't like to play that game with Exeter, try playing it with Inverness. Just suppose, suppose you were one of a small party of Christians coming to your own city and there were no Christians here at home, what would you do?

Now, in essence, I think that that is what this chapter is about. What is it that establishes a Christian church? And if you would now look on with me to the end of the chapter which I think is verse 40, "So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them." They came to a place where there were no Christians, but when they left there was a church. How would you go about that? What is it that founds a church and what is it that makes a church grow?

So you come to a place where there are no Christians and you leave it and there are Christians left behind. Now if you'll share that picture with me, that's what we will try to trace out as we work our way through this chapter. Please notice where they started. This is in verse 13, "on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made." They began in the place of prayer. Look with me in verse 16, "Now it happened as we went to prayer." They were continued in prayer. And look with me, if you please, in verse 25, "At midnight Paul and Silas were praying." I think there are more significant references to prayer in this chapter of Acts than any other. How does a Christian church get well-founded? How does it continue? How does it grow? It should begin in the place of prayer, continue in the place of prayer, and go on in the place of prayer.

Ah, I have really hardly anything more to say to you than that tonight. Consider that to be the centerpiece of an attractive tray cloth and allow me to embroider one or two things around the edge, but don't forget that central reality. How is a Christian church founded?

How is it meant to continue? And what is the secret of its growth? They started in the place of prayer. They continued in the place of prayer. And they went on praying. Will you learn with me, beloved, from the word of God?

First of all then, see what happens when God's work is done through prayer. There's a lovely leisureliness about Paul's approach to Philippi. If you go back in your mind to the end of chapter 15, the hasty Paul had broken with his missionary partner Barnabas. The problem was that Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them on another missionary journey and he had already proved to be a deserter and Barnabas, the picker-up of lame dogs, pulled up, set him on his feet, dust him down and get him going again, and Paul said, "No, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. We can't afford to have a weak link, Barnabas, so he can't come." Now what should they have done, beloved? Well, what they did do is this: they each impatiently shot off in different directions and the work of God is never forwarded by impatience. Did Paul want that? Did the Lord want that great missionary partnership to break up? I doubt it very much.

So why didn't they wait? The work of God must be a work of patience. He's never glorified by our impatience. Impatience makes golden calves, they can't wait for the word of the Lord to come down the mountain. And Paul shot off impatiently and ran into a packet of trouble, wandering all around what was then called Asia, which is the eastern end, the western end of what we call Turkey. My geography is not all that great. That end of Turkey, wandering around and not able to feel any confidence that the Lord was leading them. They came to Philippi and they stayed in that city for some days. Don't be impatient. Just wait for the Lord. His estimate of time is not ours. He doesn't share our hurry. Time belongs to him. Be patient and wait for him.

But when they had passed their patiently waiting days, the first thing they did was go into the place of prayer. So watch now what happens when the work of God is founded in the place of prayer and we come to that key verse, verse 14, "Now a certain woman named Lydia," I'm taking it again from my own rendering of it for you, not even in the New King James Version which I have before me, they've all messed around with the order of words in the Greek. "A certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira who was a worshiper of God was listening, whose heart the Lord opened to pay attention." Will you please note that sequence? She was listening, whose heart the Lord opened to pay attention. That is the secret history of everybody's conversion, not just Lydia but everybody. There is a hearing of the word of God, an opening of the heart by the Spirit of God, leading to paying attention, conviction about the word of God, and that sequence cannot be broken. No amount of organization, no skill of an evangelist, nothing can break that sequence to hear the word of God, the opening of the heart by the Spirit of God, leading to conviction about the truth of God. It's the secret history of everybody's conversion.

Those of us who are privileged to have a date to our conversion, in my case the 23rd of February, 1940, at about 7:15 in the evening, I'd had long years of preparation because I was brought up by my grandma who loved the word of God and taught me to love it, but there had to be the moment when there was the opening of the heart by God leading to

conviction, leading to, as we said in those far off days, receiving the Lord Jesus Christ into the heart as one's own personal Savior. To you people who are in the prime of life, do you remember those lovely words, "Have you received the Lord Jesus Christ into your heart as your own personal Savior?" Do you remember that's what we used to say?

There has to be a hearing of the word of God, the opening of the heart, and the reception of Christ because we are convinced of the truth that God has been speaking, and that's the story behind everybody's conversion. Are you one of those whom God has blessed in a different way and you cannot put a date to your conversion but you know that you are in Christ and that you have received him? How has that come about? By the hearing of the word of God, the opening of the heart, and conviction concerning the truth. When it comes to conversion, we are all Lydias and there is no one who can lead a soul to Christ except Christ himself.

You see, that's why the growth of the church has to be in the place of prayer, because in prayer we are laying hold of the one and only evangelist who can convince people in heart reality of the truth of the Gospel. You must ask Richard B. whether this is a right understanding of the book of Revelation, but in chapter 10 there is a gigantic figure who is holding a little book in his hand and he puts his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land and proclaims with a loud voice. Is it a picture of Jesus preaching peace to the nations? Well, far be it from me to convince you one way or the other because I don't know, but he will know. He is the only one who can preach peace to those who are afar off and to those who are nigh and that's why prayer is basic to the founding of a church.

Alright, that's our first little embroidery on our tablecloth. What's the centerpiece? What happens when the work begins in prayer, continues in prayer, and perseveres in prayer? That's the essence of it at the center. That was the foundation of the church at Philippi, the first little bit of embroidery. What happens when the work begins in prayer? Answer: people get converted. And there's no other way. Not organization. Not advertising. Not spending money. Not broadcasting. Not television. All these are ancillaries to the great basic reality without which nothing happens, that the Lord God Almighty brings home the truth of his word to the fallen human heart and leads to conviction and conversion. Putting the matter in more theological terms, regeneration comes first. Unless there is a work of God regenerating, the soul that is dead in trespasses and sins, there can be no possibility of opening the heart to Christ and welcoming him in with conviction. It's got to be like that, therefore, the foundation of the church has got to be in the place of prayer.

Right, we come on now to the fortune-telling girl that we've already read about, so I needn't remind you of the story, but notice again how it starts. We're in verse, I think, I'm not sure. Can you tell me, is it verse 18? Is it 18? 16, right. Someone's sight is better than mine. We were going to the place of prayer and a slave girl met us. We were going to the place of prayer. The work began in the place of prayer. Day after day it went on in the place of prayer, and as they were going, this demented demon-possessed girl who was a fortune-teller, or as we might say nowadays, an astrologer, one of these strange people, and she followed Paul and us shouting out, "These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And does it spring to your mind that

there's no such thing as bad publicity? The city must have been buzzing with this word "salvation" for her or anybody to pick it up. There was no question what these, this group of men was about. "What are they for? They're telling us about salvation. These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation."

So the question for you and me is: why was Paul upset? Did he not believe that there's no such thing as bad publicity? Did he not welcome a little bit of free proclamation of what it was all about? Because that is what it's all about, isn't it? Why was he annoyed? Well, here again I've got to confess to you that I'm going to tell you something but it's only my opinion. It may be right and it may be wrong. I believe it's right. I believe what the slave girl said, shouting aloud on the streets of Philippi, "These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you a way of salvation." It is, in fact, the most obvious translation of the Greek but in New Testament Greek the definite article comes and goes and sometimes for the sake of English we've got to put it in, and sometimes we leave it out. It's a matter of interpretation, but what she actually said was, "they proclaim to you a way of salvation." Was that what upset Paul? He obviously didn't believe in multi-faith services, did he? He wasn't going to have the Lord Jesus Christ mixed in with all the mystery religions with which the Greek world abounded and which were all claiming to be ways of salvation. Not going to have Jesus counted in amongst the many gods and many lords. Jesus is unique. He's the only Son of God. He is the Lord God Almighty. He's the second person of the Trinity. He's not to be either confused or linked or mixed with any other claim to divinity or any other claim to salvation.

"These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you a way of salvation." That would explain why Paul was angry. That would explain why he's stopped in his tracks. But the point I wish to make to you is this: that whether that interpretation happens to be right or happens to be wrong, and I believe it happens to be right, whatever, when the church continues in the place of prayer, it has power over all the power of the enemy and that's obvious, isn't it? Do I need to tell you how Satan is abroad in our world? I think not. Do I need to specify the avenues along which Satan is working in our world? I think not. But when the work goes on in the place of prayer, that church has power over all the power of the enemy. I just put it that way. It doesn't say that the slave girl was converted, it just says the demon was cast out and left her. Power over all the power of the enemy. You look around and you see such strongholds of Satan as you and I have never seen before in this land. How are we to pull down those strongholds? According to Acts 16, when the church continues the place of prayer, it has power over all the power of the enemy.

Now just a quick wee wordy about the last section of this great story. You remember the Philippian jailer? It's the most familiar piece of the whole Philippian episode. The owners of the slave girl were so incensed that they stirred up animosity against Paul and the other missionaries and Paul and Silas were seized and dragged before the magistrates who stripped their clothes off and gave them a sound Roman beating with rods and threw them into prison and commanded the jailer to keep them safe, and having received such a command, he put them into the inner prison, the top security wing, and fastened their feet in the stocks. And at midnight, Paul and Silas were praying. I find this as a most

remarkable incident. We're talking about the Lord God Almighty, the infinite God. We have already seen that there is no conversion except he brings it about. It was his purpose to convert the jailer. He could have done it in an infinite number of ways but he chose to do it by having his servants beaten black-and-blue and thrown undeservedly into prison and fastened in the stocks, and presumably left there indefinitely.

So my third little embroidered rose on your tablecloth is this: see what happens when all life in all its complexity, in all its incomprehensibility, see what happens when life is accepted in the place of prayer. They had suffered all these things which provoke us to say, "Why? Why? Why? Why were they the subject of a riotous lynch mob? Why were they beaten unmercifully? Why were they thrown into prison? Why were their feet fastened in the stocks? Why? Why? Why?" The interesting thing, of course, is that apparently Paul and Silas asked none of those questions. They accepted their situation and at midnight they were praying and singing praises. They were continuing in the place of prayer and because they were continuing in the place of prayer, a great sequence of events followed. Suffering was accepted in prayer. Prayer led to an opportunity to witness and that opportunity of witness led to conversion. If they had not been singing praises and praying, would there have been an earthquake? I think not. God was listening to the prayers of his faithful people who accepted life as he handed it out to them and continued in prayer and praise.

The jailer thought his end had come and Paul cried out, "Do yourself no harm! We are all here!" And the jailer called for lights and sprang in and came trembling and he brought them out and he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Didn't Jesus say that suffering would lead to an opportunity to testimony? It will turn to testimony, didn't he say so? And it did. When life was accepted in the place of prayer, it turned to testimony, "What must I do to be saved?" One of the most marvelous verses in the Bible because in response to that key question, Paul gave the incomparable answer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." The simplicity and sufficiency of saving faith. The simplicity and sufficiency of saving faith.

Just put your trust in Jesus and you are safe and secure for all eternity. Isn't that marvelous? Doesn't that central reality of the Gospel thrill and lift up your hearts? Doesn't it? Please God, it does. But bringing it back to our theme, see what happens when life is accepted in prayer instead of in complaint. The sort of things that make us moan and say, "Lord, why are you doing this to me? Why to her? Why to them? Why now? Why for so long? Why so awful?" None of that. The continuation of the church in prayer and praise and leave the outcome to the Lord.

When Paul wrote to the Philippians and probably writing from a Roman prison, he said, "I am on duty for the defense of the Gospel." He didn't say, "I'll be busy about the Gospel once I'm out and about again." He didn't say, "Oh, how I will serve the Lord if he will deliver me from this." He said, "Here, now I'm on duty for the Gospel." And he practiced that in the Philippian jail and the jailer and his family were converted and the church grew so that when he went to Philippi there were no Christians and when he left there was a church.

Beloved, have you got any other recipe? Have you got any other program for your church that will prove as effective? Please, please will you heed the word of God? The work of God must begin, continue and persevere in the place of prayer.