

Songwriter Mark Altrogge has written a song which is a deep prayer of aspiration: “Give me one pure and holy passion, give me one magnificent obsession, give me one glorious ambition for my life...” Do you have a holy passion? A magnificent obsession? The early followers of Jesus did. They were consumed with the cause of the Gospel. This is documented in the ongoing Acts of **Jesus**, through the **Church**, in the power of the **Holy Spirit**. They were undaunted and undeterred...and most often unified!

Proposition

We are in part three in our series “**Ripples**” – the Church **established**, Acts 1-7; **enlarged**, Acts 8-12; **extended**, Acts 13-28. Last week we considered the Jerusalem council wrestling with disunity. Some Jewish believers wanted to impose “performance-based spirituality”. But the Church agreed that unity is about essentials, not externals! This helps us to reconcile the differences between **local churches**.

We also noted that the **second missionary journey** of Paul began with conflict. Paul and Silas went in one direction. Barnabas and John Mark went another (Acts 15:39-41). Today we look at **Acts 16:1-40** to see the focus of Paul and his ministry team. Paul and Silas displayed sustaining joy as they remained true to their **magnificent obsession** even though they often heard the dreaded: “recalculating” warning.

How do you feel when you hear the GPS say “recalculating”? If our lives are not built upon the magnificent obsession of **knowing** and **sharing** Jesus, such situations will be demoralizing, at best. They can also be devastating. But when we are Gospel-focused we will welcome times of “recalculating” as a new opportunity. Joy is nurtured when we come to experience the greater value of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:7-11). In Acts 16 there were five major adjustments for Paul and his team.

[A] A new co-worker – vv. 1-5

In Lystra the Gospel team welcomed Timothy. He had a believing mother (II Tim 3:14-17) but a Greek father. Luke noted this as a complication for reaching Jews. So, Paul had Timothy circumcised in order to overcome this situation (v.3). It was not a legalistic decision, but to become more strategic in witness. Paul later wrote, “*I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some*” (I Cor 9:22).

Luke immediately recorded that the team delivered to the churches the decision of the Jerusalem council regarding circumcision (v.4). Paul did not ask his new co-worker to jump through religious and ritualistic hoops. Instead, he invited Timothy into the rigor and the sacrifice of Gospel endeavor (II Tim 3:10-12).

[B] A new course – vv. 6-12

Have you ever been headed in one direction (work, relationships, etc) but God changed your course? The Gospel team wanted to go into **Asia** but were “*forbidden by the Holy Spirit*” (v.6) and to **Bithynia** but “*the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them*” (v.7). It is vital be sensitive to such redirection and see it in the context of God’s larger plan. Then Paul had a compelling “Macedonian vision” (v.9). Though the vision was personal, the resulting decision was shared by the team. This indicates **Luke** joined the team from Troas to Philippi (cf. Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 28:16). “*When he had seen the vision immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them*” (v.10).

This “concluding” is a different term from “*it seemed good*” (Acts 15:22,28) but a similar process of community discernment. This brought the team from **Troas**, via Samothrace and Neapolis to **Philippi**. In **Pursuing God’s Will Together** (IVP, 2012, 10,20), Ruth Haley Barton argues for shared discernment.

Discernment, in a most general sense, is the capacity to recognize and respond to the present and the activity of God – both in the ordinary moment and in the larger decisions of our lives...[however] Everyone is running so hard and so fast that no one has time or space to listen to God...even though they might have discerned God’s will in the beginning.

[C] A new convert – vv. 13-21

This story suggests there was no synagogue in Philippi. The team “started from scratch” as they went to the riverside, hoping to find a place of prayer (v.13). Lydia, a Gentile worshipper of God, became the first convert to Christ in Europe (v.14)! There was great joy as Lydia’s household came to faith (v.15). Now, contrast this with the slave girl who had a “*spirit of divination*” and became a problem “promoter” (vv.16-17). Through Paul, she was delivered from the evil spirit (v.18) resulting in angry resistance. In ***Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*** (Penguin, 2014) Timothy Keller notes John Calvin’s point:

The Word of God is not received by faith if it flits about in the top of the brain, but when it takes root in the depth of the heart...the heart’s distrust is greater than the mind’s blindness. It is harder for the heart to be furnished with assurance [of God’s love] than for the mind to be endowed with thought.

[D] A new challenge – vv. 22-34

Paul and Silas were then **beaten** and **imprisoned!** But they praised God! They remained rooted in their mission, even in this painful challenge. “*The joy of the LORD [was their] strength*” (Nehemiah 8:10). We are commanded to “*Be joyful always. Pray continually*” (I Thess 5:16-17). Timothy Keller has written,

Prayer is both conversation *and* encounter with God...We must know the awe of praising his glory, the intimacy of finding his grace, and the struggle of asking his help, all of which can lead us to know the spiritual reality of his presence. Prayer, then, is both awe *and* intimacy, struggle *and* reality. (***Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God***, Penguin, 2014, 5)

Without this mindset would Paul and Silas have been ready to lead their jailer to faith? Note how calm they were compared with the **earthquake** and the **emotions** of the jailer! Paul spoke with authority, urging the jailer not to harm himself. Redirection for us will not always be so sensational. But we can be sure there will always be the calm, secure presence of Jesus available to us. What was the result? Salvation, joy, and celebration ensued (v.34, “overjoyed” ηγαλλιασατο). The jailer washed the wounds of Paul and Silas. What is more, the jailer and his whole household were baptized.

[E] A new confidence – vv. 35-40

Luke documented that the team remained on mission with greater confidence. Notice the way they stood up to the civil authorities (vv.37-39). They did not “lick their wounds” but offered encouragement to the Philippian church (v.40, “exhorted” παρεκαλεσαν). Later, Paul would write a thank you letter to this family of believers, making a note of their “*partnership (κοινωνια) in the Gospel*” (Philippians 1:5). Rather than retreat, the team “departed” (“went forth” εξηλθαν) to Thessaloniki, Berea, and Athens (see Acts 17).

Conclusion – Digging Deeper

How do we maintain joyful focus on our holy passion, our magnificent obsession? John Maxwell said, “*The pessimist complains about the wind. The optimist expects it to change. The leader adjusts the sails.*” Sailing provides us with an interesting illustration. According to the discoverboating.com...

Creating motion under sail can be exhilarating. The idea that a boat, even a large one, can be moved simply by the force of the wind seems magical but it’s really basic geometry and physics...When the wind is coming from behind the boat, sailing is simply a matter of pushing forward. But when the wind is ahead of the beam (the middle of the boat) sailing is less a matter of pushing and more of suction.... The underwater shape which is a combination of the keel, rudder and general lines of the hull, creates a “center of lateral resistance” which is actually what helps the boat translate the force of the wind from sideways motion to forward momentum. How much of the lift pulls the boat forward depends on the angle of the boat to the wind or the “point of sail”.

Consider the example of the first Century believers. How did they joyfully journey forward in their mission to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth? Consider that God is our **rudder** who sets the direction of travel. Remaining rooted and at rest in Jesus is our **keel**. And we are propelled forward by the **wind** of the Holy Spirit who empowers our forward movement. What is your “point of sail” today?

Thoughts from G. Campbell Morgan about Acts 16

The devil is always defeated when he imprisons a Christian man. That is the hour of his defeat. The place of the cross is the place of the crown, to a servant of Christ. When the devil and the world combine to persecute a Christly soul, they put him on the throne of power...Put Paul and Silas in the prison...Then what? Listen, do you hear the singing? Or presently, when Paul reached Rome, as a prisoner, what did he do? He...preached the Kingdom of God in the centre of Rome's imperial magnificence...He will write letters, the thunder and the force of which will reverberate through centuries...Or put John Bunyan in prison, and he will see visions, and write of celestial truths, and celestial glories, which will abide with the Church, messages second only to the message of the Bible.

Looking again at the paragraph as a whole, we notice the small beginnings of great movements. A woman's heart opened, and how wonderful the victories which followed. Do not let us be looking for the highway of God in the conspicuous places. While men are building their monuments to Brutus defeated, and singing over the glory of Augustus, the Christian apostle is making his way up to Philippi. He will have to pay for his lodging for two or three days, and presently one woman will have her heart opened, and will believe his message. This is the place where God is acting. Where is God acting today? I do not know, and I am not going to attempt to find out, but God helping me, I will try and be a man at His disposal. It may be from something I say that some woman's heart will be opened, that she will presently be the prophet for whom we are waiting, the pioneer for the further campaigns of the army of the King. One woman's heart in Philippi, and Rome was doomed to lower its flag, that the banner of the Cross might be supreme.

(Taken from ***The Acts of the Apostles***, by G. Campbell Morgan, Revell, 1924, 386-387)

Reflections from prison by Madame Guyon (1648-1717)

*A little bird I am, shut from the fields of air,
And in my cage I sit and sing to Him who placed me there;
Well pleased a prisoner to be, because, my God, it pleaseth Thee.*

*Nought have I else to do, I sing the whole day long;
And He whom most I love to please doth listen to my song;
He caught and bound my wandering wing; but still He bends to hear me sing.*

*Thou hast an ear to hear, a heart to love and bless;
And though my notes were e'er so rude, Thou wouldst not hear the less;
Because Thou knowest as they fall, that love, sweet love, inspires them all.*

*My cage confines me round; abroad I cannot fly;
But though my wing is closely bound, my heart's at liberty;
For prison walls cannot control the flight, the freedom of the soul.*

*O it is good to soar these bolts and bars above!
To Him whose purpose I adore, whose providence I love;
And in Thy mighty will to find the joy, the freedom of the mind.*