

## THE CHALLENGE OF OFFERING HOPE

Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch following their journey through the province of Galatia, a city which by then was the nerve-centre, the mission control hub of the Christian Church. Before they went their separate ways, Barnabas to Cyprus, and Paul in concentric, expanding circles westward, finally reaching Rome, they travelled together to Jerusalem to meet with leaders of the Church, to settle what had become a major controversy and a major misunderstanding, leading to rifts and division, the matter of circumcision.

In Jerusalem, under the leadership of the Apostle James, it was resolved, the focus should be taken off the matter of circumcision, as other issues of moral conduct were more important for Gentile believers. Paul demonstrates this very decision in a practical way when he meets Timothy in Derbe during his second missionary journey, (whose mother was a Jew and father a Greek), he asks him to be circumcised, not because Paul believed circumcision was needed, but because he did not want this to be a point of argument, creating a diversion from the real message, the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch from Jerusalem with several younger *missionaries*, primarily to take them away from heated Rabbinical debates, and give them clean air to focus on the mission of God in Christ.

After a few years in Antioch, Paul sets off through the central part of modern Turkey, in the direction of the city we know as Istanbul, stopping at Derbe, a large town where he met Timothy, a young man who accepted the Gospel of Christ during Paul's first visit, and invited him to join Paul and Silas. Paul himself did not know where he was going except that he travelled under the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit. Timothy joins them in what we might consider both exciting and frightening journey of discovering God at work in the region.

We live in an age of contradictions: on the one hand we find it difficult to believe, therefore we choose to ignore the miraculous. Bible references to *miracles* are particularly difficult to understand and digest, perhaps because we look for and cannot find satisfactory explanations which make sense. Yet, we find extra-terrestrial life like "ET" and other sci-fi stuff like Star Wars (latest film: *The Force Awakens*) quite entertaining; we enjoy the spookiness of Harry Potter; we indulge ourselves, perhaps through our grandchildren, in the complex world of dinosaurs; and we sit awestruck, watching the wonderful pictures sent back to us of planets, and stars, and constellations and other "worlds" out there.

We find it difficult to believe legitimate and real miracles, but we find it easier to believe, that which is fantasy.

Paul was introduced to the world of miracles, *supernatural* happenings in a real world, at the time of his conversion. Before that, his Jewish upbringing would have sheltered him from any thought of the *supernatural*. So, when on the Damascus Road he heard a voice calling him by name, *Saul! Saul, why are you persecuting me?*, Paul knew he did not hear "a voice from the dead"; he knew he heard the voice of the Living Christ speak to him, in the same way that Jesus spoke with His disciples. Hence his reply, *Who are you, Lord?*, probably the first time he called anyone *Lord!*

As Paul, Silas and Timothy travel towards Istanbul, they have three *divinely inspired, supernatural* encounters, which we might find difficult to understand, and struggle to make sense. Our natural tendency, therefore, is to tend to gloss over it and move on to the next section of text.

The first divinely inspired, supernatural encounter was the **Holy Spirit** forbidding them to speak the Word (the Gospel of Christ) in Asia (a province in western Turkey, extending to the Aegean Sea); the next supernatural encounter was **the Spirit of Jesus** who prevented them from going into the coastal regions of the Black Sea; finally, Paul had a

vision, a vivid dream one night, in which he saw **a man from Macedonia** urging him to come over and help them.<sup>1</sup>

Every Christian endures this struggle: how do I know ...?

- How do I know this is what God wants of me?
- How do I know, God wants me to go there?
- Not a question many of **US** would ask at this stage in our lives, but there are many who ask, *How do know whom I should marry? ...* or whether I should not marry at all and remain single?

The list goes on. *How do I know for certain, what I should do ... what does **God** want me to do, or **not** to do?*

The answer to the question starting with, *How do I know, God ...*, is found in **FAITH**: In whom have you placed your faith? Do you **really** trust the One in whom you have faith, with your whole being?

You know, when children ask the question **WHY?**, some of whom have the annoying habit of repeating the question until we are exasperated (!!), they don't want an answer, nor are they testing your knowledge: do you really know the answer.

When asking the question **WHY?**, a child really wants to know, *Will you engage with me, meaningfully? Do you care enough for me to have a meaningful relationship? Can I trust you? Can I trust you enough to take me seriously? Can I trust you to look after me, when I am weak and vulnerable?* As soon as the child knows they can trust you, and you care enough for them to engage in a meaningful relationship, they place their faith in you, and stop asking the question, **WHY?**

It's the same in our journey with God. When we learn to trust God, to place our complete and unrestrained faith in Him and His ways of doing

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16:6-10

things, we stop asking Him **WHY?**, and we do as He says. What seemed absurd and ridiculous, becomes natural and acceptable.

So, Paul, Silas and Timothy do not have an argument with God when the Holy Spirit forbids them to speak, or the Spirit of Jesus prevents them from going to the place that seems most logical because it is next door. **AND** when a person appears in a dream and says, *Come over and help us*, they knew for sure, it was God's direction. So they make nothing of the fact that they had to about-turn from going east and make a 400-mile detour by foot, heading west to the bustling port city of Troas, the best place to cross by ferry, from Asia, into Europe.

So, they entered Macedonia, the land of Alexander the great, and go to the city of Philippi where they found the local synagogue, arranged to meet with the leadership, and commenced their presentation of informing them, the Scriptures **had** been fulfilled, God's Word **had** been accomplished: Jesus was the Messiah sent by God, who died on the cross, rose from the dead, and is the Christ, through whose death, we are no longer separated from God.

They receive a very positive reception in Philippi, until a slave girl is freed from the evil spirit of divination, and her "owners" are very upset because **they** were deprived of their means of substantial income. They are imprisoned and hounded out of Philippi, leaving for Thessaloniki, a city named after Alexander the Great's half-sister, where they received a warm welcome, and their message, *Christ the Saviour has come* was enthusiastically received.

Having accepted the Gospel message so readily, Paul taught them of the Christ who had come, died and rose from the dead and is in heaven, is due to return, to come again, soon.

It is very easy for a preacher, for that matter any communicator (politician, doctor, teacher, any one who communicates a message), to be misquoted and misunderstood, and their words and phrases taken out of context.

This is what happened with Paul, and he had to write to them to redress the balance and calm their hysteria, that they should not give up work and sit idly by, waiting and watching for the *Day of Lord* which is the second coming of Christ. Paul tells them that *Day of the Lord* **will** come soon, but like a thief in the night, so he urges them to carry on working as they should, and be responsible in looking after their families as they should, and be good citizens as they should, **BUT** to be prepared and to be watchful.<sup>2</sup>

The church in Galatia was confused about the role and importance of circumcision; the church in Thessaloniki misunderstood and therefore confused about the timing of Christ's second coming.

The essence of the Gospel of Christ is **HOPE**, and the challenge of the Gospel message is, **How then, do we communicate hope?** Hope drives us forward, with positive anticipation. Hope gives us a reason for living, with joy and eager anticipation.

Last Sunday, Wendy spoke on **Forgiveness**. Some churches get it wrong and use *forgiveness* to make people feel guilty about who they are, telling people every Sunday, their sin is **so** great, they will have to beg for forgiveness every day of their lives, until Kingdom come, literally!

Real *forgiveness*, the one Jesus taught, is about releasing what we know is wrong in us, to the perfect and Holy God, who then puts it behind **HIM** (not us), and releases us to move forward.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 5:6

You see, the moment you ask God for forgiveness, God's love is so great, He forgives you then and there, and He puts it behind Him. Now, its unto you to do your part: leave the guilt behind and move on with the abounding joy of a prisoner, pardoned and set free! That's when **HOPE** is made real, and drives us forward.

On the first and third Sundays of every month, at this table we recall Jesus's words to remember Him, by the sacrifice of His life in broken bread, and the new covenant because of His sacrifice, the covenant of living **HOPE** personified, when we drink from the cup.

At the start of his first letter to the good Christians in Thessaloniki, in the third verse, Paul offers three ways by which we communicate this hope:

1. through action that is inspired by **faith**
2. through labour/work that is prompted by **love**
3. through endurance which is founded on **hope**

By the time Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he had perfected this very message. He says to them, *three things last forever, faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.*

How do you communicate HOPE to a desperate world?

1. through action that is inspired by **faith**.  
You are doing things, acting on situations, because you have reached that point in life of not questioning God. People see you and recognise your faith and some will want this faith for themselves. How will you tell them?
2. through labour that is prompted by **love**.  
Any work you do, that is done out of love, and not obligation or duty, is clearly visible to others. Once again, people are not stupid, they will see God's love ministering through you. When

they ask you, how will you tell them God's love that has changed you?

3. through endurance which is founded on **hope**.  
People can see your life is fuelled by a firm and sure hope.  
People will see you do not flounder, struggle or stumble,  
because the hope of Christ in you, makes you feel secure.  
People see that hope, and they will want it for themselves.

**How will communicate the HOPE that is in you? What will you say?**

**AMEN**