



Texts in Context

The Gospel in Adversity: Reading Acts 16:16-34 in African Context

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GOD'S WAYS OF THINKING AND WORKING ARE NOT OUR WAYS, SAYS ISA 55:8. God may be unpredictable, and the Bible tells how God can turn the impossible into the possible, predicaments into blessing, and a hopeless situation into salvation. Our text is a perfect illustration of those affirmations. Acts 16:31 contains one of the Bible's clearest promises of salvation ("Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household") yet it stems from a time of great adversity. In the city of Philippi Paul and Silas encountered both spiritual adversity (combined with issues of slavery and the loss of financial interests) and physical adversity (beatings and oppression). We stand in awe at God's deep and unsearchable mind, clearly demonstrated in the way he unfolds his plan of salvation to the household of the jailer and in the way he deals with the world and its opposition to the proclamation of the gospel.

While pondering this text, I marveled how the church, through most of its history, has grown out of adversity and oppression. Despite and through the vulnerability and human finitude of preachers, the glorious and powerful gospel has been proclaimed and believed. This has certainly been true with regard to the

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growth of the church in Madagascar. Patterns of similarity can be recognized between the events of our text and the way the gospel has taken root in Madagascar. From that perspective this text is most useful in our consideration of mission and evangelism. The power of God was manifested through frail and vulnerable servants, Paul and Silas. Certainly Paul would have remembered this episode in Philippi when he wrote, “We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Cor 4:7), and reminded us that Christ’s power is “made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

How does one read this text in the context of African churches, particularly from the Malagasy context from which I originate? I am surprised by the striking relevance of this text for the challenges set forth before the church today.

I. SPIRITUAL ADVERSITY AND THE FREEING POWER OF THE NAME OF JESUS

Is it fair to consider this little girl in the text and her powers of divination as an adversary of the gospel? Did she not do a great service to Paul by providing a free advertisement to the many people who were following them? Was she not helping to break down the barriers between Paul and his listeners by announcing that Paul and Silas were servants of the Most High God, “proclaiming to you a way of salvation.” How did her action produce annoyance in Paul rather than thanks and appreciation?

I suggest these reasons: (1) She was preaching Paul and Silas instead of Christ. Though she was telling the truth about Paul and Silas, she did not make common cause with the gospel. As we know from Paul, the gospel is about preaching Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:12-13; 2 Cor 4:5; Gal 6:14). (2) She was telling a half-truth. According to the New Testament, the gospel of Jesus Christ is not *a* way of salvation but *the* way of salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). (3) The “spirit of the Python” that was indwelling her was not the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit; rather this spirit stood in antagonism to the name of Jesus Christ. That spirit could not bear the name of Jesus and so was exorcised in the name of Jesus. The gift of discernment in Paul, which came from the Holy Spirit, enabled him to recognize the exact nature of the spirit in the slave girl. This spirit is not from the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit brings testimony to Jesus Christ (John 15:26)—“the testimony to Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev 19:10).

Our text speaks of the knowledge given the little girl by the indwelling spirit: she was able to know what people do not normally know. In modern parlance she had the faculty of clairvoyance. She was apparently a very successful diviner, since her owners made a lot of money from her skills. Many people in Madagascar still are indwelt by spirits of clairvoyance; they, too, know things that normal people do not know. They are shamans, diviners, and sorcerers, doing healing activities, counseling, and promising people protection. Though they may be either men or women, most are women. A good number have become Christians, because they

want to be free from the oppressing influence of this kind of spirit. Rainisoalambo, who was the father of the revival in Madagascar, was a diviner, but he became Christian when he had a vision of Jesus asking him to renounce his occult practices. Nenilava, a woman leader of the revival, was the daughter of a famous diviner and shaman. She refused to accept the authority of those spirits that had indwelt her father. People with these spirits sought liberation because of the illnesses, taboos, and pains they had to endure because of them.* But they found no liberation; even when other shamans or diviners freed them from one ailment, others appeared. They became Christians when they discovered that the name of Jesus was able to heal and to free them completely. The history of Christian ministry in Madagascar gives testimony to the existence of spirits that have such an extraordinary faculty; but it also gives testimony to the power of the name of Jesus, which is able to liberate people from spiritual oppression and demonic possession, exactly as we read in the New Testament.

Why are these phenomena not often observed in the western world? In my opinion, they are not limited to Madagascar or certain other countries in the world, nor to the times of the New Testament. Rather, there is a certain denial of spirits in western culture due to the prevalent spirit of materialism or “scientism.” The existence of spirits has been excluded from the plausibility structure of the west, especially since the enlightenment. Everything is explained in terms of science, and when science cannot explain a fact, then the reality is denied or ignored or debased. To be sure, there is a certain ambivalence in the west with regard to the reality of occult phenomena. Despite the scientific worldview, there is a steady increase in the number of people who practice and believe in astrology, magic, psychics, and other spiritualistic activities that science cannot adequately explain.

In countries like Madagascar, the spirits are very real in the daily lives of people—some may say, too much so. However, this is not just superstition, i.e., a belief without substantial evidence. The world of the Malagasy people is pervaded by belief in and intercourse with spirits, particularly the spirits of the ancestors. These spirits are feared, worshiped, and looked to for protection. Those who are indwelt by spirits, though some may be charlatans, are really powerful; they know extraordinary things and heal diseases that doctors have not been able to cure. The remarkable growth of the church in Madagascar over the last two centuries is due in major part to its proclamation of the delivering power of the name of Jesus Christ, a power that prevails over any spirits. A church that does not know how to deal with spirits will never win the confidence of the people of Madagascar. A gospel consisting solely of words or philosophy does not interest people who are looking for security, healing, peace, and a solution to their here-and-now needs. The salvation that Jesus brings must meet those expectations. The gospel that the church

*Jean-Marie Estrade, *Le Tromba: Un culte de Possession à Madagascar* (Paris: L. Harmattan, 1985).

proclaims must find ways to convey liberation, protection, life, and well-being in order for people to accept it.

II. POWERS OF FINANCE AND CULTURE OPPOSE THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL

Spiritual divination was an important source of income for the owners of the slave girl. In the twinkling of an eye the name of Jesus Christ brought an end to their lucrative business. Their anger and frustration are understandable. This pattern repeats itself throughout the New Testament and in many countries where the preaching of the gospel has broken down spiritualistic and magical practices and beliefs. In Africa many political leaders and CEOs have their own diviners and counselors. This is not new to those who study the Bible, because we know very well how Saul, when overwhelmed by his enemies, looked for the help of a medium to learn the issue of the battle (1 Sam 28:8).

The spread of the gospel brings a significant blow to spiritualistic beliefs, often with financial consequences. We saw this in Ephesus as books of magic, worth 50,000 silver coins, were burned when the “word of the Lord Jesus grew mightily and prevailed” (Acts 19:20). Automatically and understandably the negative reaction of those touched in their financial interests and in their positions in society is strong. In Ephesus and in Philippi this took the form of popular riots. Defense of the culture and of the country’s identity are the reasons advanced for those riots. From their own perspective, I do not think that they are wrong, because the gospel and the newly born church will bring a new life style and new values; they will indeed upset the customary values of the society.

This pattern can be seen in the history of the church in my own country. When the Bible was translated into Malagasy and the church started to attract people, the new Queen Ranavalona clearly identified Christianity as an enemy of the country, its customs, beliefs, and identity. She proclaimed an interdiction of the new religion throughout the country, condemning its adherents to death unless they came back to the traditional religion. Thousands of Christians were speared or thrown down from the tops of cliffs.

We may condemn Christians who adopt an either-or approach to evangelization as fanatics or narrow-minded. We may prefer instead the modern and civilized concept of religious toleration. But can Christians back away from proclaiming the liberating power of Christ to those who are oppressed by evil spirits, deferring instead to toleration and a false respect of culture? Often, attacks on the church are due to the fact that the gospel of Jesus Christ destroys the privilege of some powerful and wealthy people. Certainly we should not look for persecution, but in many circumstances persecution will come, whatever precautions we may use to avoid it. Perhaps Paul tried to avoid this kind of trouble by delaying casting the spirit out of the slave girl for many days. But finally the confrontation was unavoidable.

When the gospel threatens financial interests or the establishment that is re-

lated to evil, we should expect to see oppressive reactions from those who have lost their privilege. Those reactions may bring imprisonment, fines, or even death, as we have seen in the history of the church. Christians in developing countries see corruption as the greatest enemy of the well-being of the country; they are convinced that the gospel of peace and justice calls them to stand against it. However, they know that standing against the system of corruption is to head straight into serious troubles. In countries where the establishment elite is comprised of Christians, the frequent question is, "Why is the ethos of Christian life invisible in the daily life of the country, while people who run it claim to be Christians?" The system of evil is powerful and dangerous, and it takes courage, faith, and a readiness to suffer if one wants to stand against it. Yet it remains true that the gospel of Christ proclaims liberation not only against the impure spirits but also against the system or spirit of corruption that is killing many countries today.

In spite of modernity Christians have been persecuted because of their faithfulness to Christ. Totalitarian political and religious countries continue this practice. But amazingly, the church is growing in those countries. Those churches are following the example of the churches of Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), Philippi (our text), Thessalonica (1Thess 1:6), Ephesus (Acts 19:29), Smyrna (Rev 2:10), and many others. All hearers of these texts, in whatever country, must ask themselves, "What am I willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel of Christ, since the Bible says, 'All who want to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted'" (2 Tim 3:12)?

III. THE UNSHACKLING POWER OF THE GOSPEL

"We are the aroma of Christ to God" (2 Cor 2:15). In Madagascar we used to compare this aroma to the fragrance of the Ylang Ylang, a beautiful flower that spreads its perfume the most when trodden under foot. Servants of God like Paul and Silas have never been more powerful and effective in their testimony, and thus more dangerous to their opponents, than when they are oppressed. This has been true of great leaders like Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and others. It has been true in many countries where the church has never been so truly healthy and striving than when persecuted, embattled, and challenged. The reason for this is simple: faithfulness in times of persecution stirs the divine Power to intervene, by equipping and empowering his servants to withstand the trials and by manifesting his presence to those attending the events. God is faithful and has promised to be with his children until the end of the world (Matt 28:20). Even the gates of hell cannot stand against the church (Matt 16:18). Through the vulnerability and suffering of the church the power of God for salvation is seen fully fledged.

In our text, Paul and Silas faced imprisonment and flogging with a remarkable attitude. How were they able to sing and praise God in the midst of such terrible treatment? The stories of the martyrs provide many impressive accounts of the peace and control of those who are to be killed for their faith. Rasalama, the first woman martyr of Madagascar, was reported to have sung on her way to the spear-

ing and thus to have made a troubling impression on those who killed her. Certainly Paul was also troubled when he attended the killing of Stephen. For me, those cases justify the observation that a special empowering of the Holy Spirit is given to those in extreme situations.

The role of hymns and praise was essential to the ability of Paul and Silas to withstand their predicament. Their singing demonstrates to us the importance of hymns and psalms in the piety and the life of the church. Following the example of the psalmist King David and of Jesus who prayed the psalms before Gethsemane and Calvary (Mark 14:26), Paul and Silas raised their voices to praise the Most High God from the depths of their jail. Hymns and praises have had an important place in the life of the church from its beginning. Paul's example exhorts Christians everywhere to reserve a good place for hymns and praise in their devotional life. He demonstrates the importance of singing them in the heart and by heart—both sincerely and from memory. Paul and Silas could not sing to God in a dark pit unless they knew their hymns and psalms by heart (see also Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). A favorite activity of people in my church is singing hymns not only during the services but also when traveling together on the bus to visit churches or to attend a convention. It makes the trip shorter and more pleasant and at the same time spiritually refreshing. The praising and singing church is, when embattled, the victorious church.

In our text, an earthquake shook the foundations of the prison, opening the doors and unshackling all those who were tied or in chains. What a specific work! Though the Holy Spirit may take the form of a gentle dove, when the situation demands he can take the form of a mighty liberating earthquake, breaking all that was keeping human beings in the building fastened and captive (see Acts 4:31). The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of liberation. The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus, who declared in the famous verses of Luke 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

We see in our text the fulfillment of this Lukan passage. In the name of Jesus the captive slave girl was set free from the spirit of the Python that had indwelt her. In the name of Jesus release was not only proclaimed but extended quite literally to all who were captive in the jail. This is more than a little dangerous! The text does not say whether the slave girl was given her freedom by her owners, nor does it say whether the other prisoners were liberated. Perhaps not. But genuine liberation took place here in the power of the Spirit, and full liberation remains the ultimate goal of the gospel according to Jesus himself. Jesus and his Spirit have come to set all people free from any forms of bondage.

When the gospel came to Madagascar in the nineteenth century, it came along with the policy of the abolition of slavery that England wanted to extend to

the rest of the world—and in the present case to Madagascar. England was perceived by Malagasy people as a Christian nation, so abolition was seen as a requirement of the Christian lifestyle. What a powerful message to people who had considered slavery as normal and as a way of getting wealthy! Jesus spared hundreds of thousands of Malagasy people from slavery. Blessed be the memory of William Wilberforce, who spent his life to fight for the abolition of slavery because of his Christian conviction.

Paul and Silas had the privilege of bringing good news to the poor, in the person of the terrorized jailer. The first step was preventing him from killing himself; the second was telling him the way of salvation in Jesus. This is a parable for the church's proclamation. The gospel is not just words. It brings life and stops death, not just spiritually but in the full meaning of those terms. Jesus cried out, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). What is true and abundant life? Psalm 23 gives one of the best descriptions: in abundant life nothing can separate me from God, and nothing in the present or the future can disturb my peace and put me in need. All this is mine because of what God did and does in Jesus Christ.

Life and salvation in Christ have a wider dimension than we generally imagine. If the jailer meant to ask what he needed to do for his personal, individual salvation, the answer he received far surpassed what he expected. Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is not only for him but also for his entire family and household. True salvation is not for me alone; it is for my family as well. My parents raised me and my siblings (all 14 of us!) in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Despite our education, when my parents died, more than half of us abandoned the Christian faith and life. Now, more than 20 years later, I have seen my brothers and sisters coming back to the Lord, one after the other. The promise of salvation is for all of us, as a family. We need to act on that promise and fight for it when troubles and problems make intrusion into the family. As we stand for one another, share with one another all that we have, proclaim to one another the good news, it makes full sense that the whole household rejoices when one comes to faith (Acts 16:34).

The liberating power of the gospel is seen at its fullest in times of greatest need. That need is often clear in countries like my own. But, no country is without need, and the wealthy nations know their own forms of poverty and bondage, so each reader and each preacher can hear the good news of this text: "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ⊕