

# **The Divine Design of Undeserved Suffering**

## **(Acts 16:9-34)**

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### **Introduction**

“Why did this have to happen!?” That is the crying question that has plagued every suffering saint of God. Whether by personal experience as a sufferer, or in sympathy with another in suffering, we question the purpose of the presence of pain. We are forced by faith to confess a sovereign God who rules His universe according to His pleasure (Psa. 115:3), yet it is difficult for us to comprehend His pleasure when it involves suffering for us or those we love. If we do not think God has planned our pain, then our suffering is greater still, for we are left with a malevolent power that is greater than God, or with a helpless and hopeless struggle against blind chance. The believer has God's Word to explain His plan for pain, and it is clear in its directions of His divine design.

### **I. THE DIRECTION OF THE DESIGN (Acts 16:9-18)**

The Bible gives at least four reasons for suffering in the lives of believers:

- (1) Discipline from God as a result of sin (2 Sam. 7:14b; 12:14).
- (2) Discipline from men as a result of criminal offense (1 Pet. 4:15).
- (3) Testing by God for approval of faith (Jas. 1:2-3).
- (4) Underserved suffering for the glory of God (1 Pet. 4:16).

It is this last category of suffering, *undeserved* suffering, that presents such trouble to the mind of the Christian and provokes the question “Why did this have to happen?” No man in the Scriptures confronted underserved suffering more than the Apostle Paul. We only need read the list in 2 Cor. 6:4-10 to appreciate the myriad tribulations that he endured: “But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings; By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, By honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true; As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.” It is for this reason that we may turn to an episode of underserved suffering in the

life of this, our brother in bonds, and by the grace of God seek to understand one of our Lord's uses of suffering to His glory.

Paul was directed by God to preach in Macedonia. However, the result of his obedience to the Heavenly vision is suffering at the hands of those for whom he came. In order to discover the design of God behind this suffering we must first confirm the direction of God, which led Paul and his company into the suffering.

#### **A. The Call from God (Acts 16:9-10)**

The first thing one notices about the mission of Paul to Philippi is that it was not the “mission” of Paul at all. In fact, Paul had not desired nor imagined such a mission. He was trying to go into Bithynia but the Spirit of Jesus prevented it (Acts 16:7). It was God who first directed Paul and company (Silas, Luke, and Timothy) to go to Philippi (vss. 9-10). In vs. 9 God declared His will for the mission through means of a vision of a man begging them to come to Macedonia (of which Philippi is a district) with the gospel. In vs. 10 the men discern the will of God and determine to go according to His call. We see first of all that the direction into eventual suffering is the will of God. However, once men begin in obedience to follow the revealed will of God, that initial direction requires confirmation in the experience as well as in the heart of faith.

#### **B. The Confirmation of Philippi (Acts 16:11-12)**

After a description of the course to Philippi in vs. 11, Luke provides a brief description of the character of Philippi in vs. 12. An understanding of the strategic situation of this city, will confirm God's choice of it as the first European destination for the gospel and the first site of the local church on Paul's second missionary journey.

##### **1. Confirmation in the Geography of Philippi**

Ancient Philippi was located approximately 10 miles inland north-northwest of the modern Aegean port of Kavalla (ancient Neapolis). The original settlement was called Krenides (“springs”) because of the presence of numerous natural water sources. It was a district and leading city of Macedonia, a region in Northern Greece about the size of Vermont (see maps). The main highway from Asia to the west, the Via Egnatia, passed through Philippi and ran alongside the forum of the city (see map). Not far from this highway and near the ancient Agora (market place) were located two early Christian churches (possibly constructed on the traditional site of the original Philippian Christian assembly). Rich mineral resources and fertility were its fame.

##### **2. Confirmation in the History of Philippi**

In his commentary on Philippians, J.B. Lightfoot suggested, “the church of Philippi has lived without a history and perished without a memorial.” This is true only to the extent that the name of Philippi virtually disappeared from the annals of recorded history. Philippi’s demise is a puzzle of history for it is not known when or how the city was destroyed or abandoned. But while we not know how it died, we cannot forget how it

lived. As a fountainhead of missions in Europe, as loyal supporters of the Apostle Paul, the memorial of the Christians of ancient Philippi is written large in the history of God's Church. In order to witness God's direction in the preparation for the introduction of the gospel to Philippi it is important to review briefly the history of the city from its development by Philip II until its visitation by Paul on his second missionary journey.

In 359 B.C. when Philip II, father of Alexander the Great, took the throne of Macedonia (a segment of the vast region originally known as Thrace) he annexed the gold rich area situated in a depression of a mountain barrier that separated Europe and Asia, and renamed it "Philippi", after himself. Philip expanded and fortified the area so that in time it became a prominent commercial city. The Providence of God looms large in the significance of Philip's conquest of the City. It has been said that if Philip and Alexander had not gone East, Paul and the gospel could not have come to the West. The reason for this is that the Koine Greek (common Greek) language was developed and spread by these men through their campaigns into the Holy Land, and through the one world of Hellenistic speech which resulted, a Jew such as Paul would be able to carry the good news of Christ to the Greeks in their native tongue. Even in the conquests of pagan history we are able to discern the sovereign hand of God moving the hearts of kings (Prov. 21:21) and preparing the way for His salvation to come to the Gentiles through His chosen vessels (Isa. 49: 6; 61:11).

Two centuries after the founding by Phillip, Macedonia was conquered and divided into four political districts. In 146 B.C., Macedonia became one of the six provinces governed by Rome. God's hand again is evident in history bringing the city of Philippi into prominence, for its strategic location and status as a province led to it being the battlefield where the destiny of the Roman Empire was decided. This occurred in 42 B.C. when it hosted the historic engagement of the armies of the Second Triumvirate (Octavian, Antony, Lepidus) and of the Republicans of Rome (Brutus and Cassius). The victory of the Second Triumvirate led the conqueror to plant a Roman colony in Philippi. Its status as a colony was raised twice, once after Octavian's victory over Antony at the Battle of Actium (31 B.C.), and finally in 29 B.C. when Augustus Caesar officially gave it the title "Colonia Augusta Julia Philippensis". With the change in status the inhabitants were provided with the advantages of Roman citizenship. These privileges included freedom from arrest, scourging, and the right to appeal to the emperor (cf., Acts 16:37-38). As a miniature of the imperial city of Rome, the people of Philippi took great pride in their city and in the honor of being Roman citizens. Such background informs our understanding of Paul's statement to the Philippians in Phil. 1:27 to exercise their citizenship in a manner worthy of the gospel, and in Phil. 3:20 that the true citizenship of the believer is not on earth but in heaven. The profits of Rome cannot compete with the glories of Heaven, and though the symbol is rich the reality is far richer!

The religious culture of the city was purely pagan, with many Greek temples, and of course, the Roman imperial cult. The temple of Silvanus, the sacred guardian of the empire, was located there. When Paul, Luke, Silas, and Timothy arrived in Philippi they found no Jewish synagogue and had to meet with God-fearing Gentile worshippers by the bank of the river Gangites (Acts 16:12-13). No doubt the Christians of Philippi addressed by Paul in his epistle were persecuted as a result of their countrymen's loyalty to emperor worship and cultic practices, (cf., Phil. 1:27-30). Yet by this, these new believers learned the vital s of God's design for undeserved suffering. With this

understanding of God's confirmation of Philippi, we move to God's personal confirmation to Paul.

### **C. The Confirmation to Paul (Acts 16:13-15)**

This confirmation takes place not through the proclamation of Paul to the citizens of Philippi, and a subsequent revival as was experienced on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:37-47), but through the opening of a single Gentile woman's heart to the gospel by God, at a private worship service on the banks of the Gangites river. When Paul and company arrived in Philippi they encountered a Roman colony with its usual hostilities to religious notions not conforming to Roman custom. The Jewish population in Philippi was small for there were not even the 10 Jewish men (*Minyan*) required to form a local synagogue (vs. 13). Paul went outside the city and there found an assembly of women, one of who was Lydia, a merchant woman. Though a Gentile, Lydia was a proselyte to Judaism, and as such, had knowledge of the Old Testament. Therefore, she was beforehand prepared by God for the gospel via the messianic prophecies of the Jewish Scriptures. In these verses we see that God not only prepared for the furtherance of the gospel, but God also produced in this woman's heart faith in the gospel. The Greek word used for "opening" in verse 14 is *dienoixen*, the first aorist active indicative of *dianoigo*, which means to "open up wide" or "open completely", like a folding door in which both sides open, as the prefixed word *dia* "two" indicates. This action is attributed to God, not Lydia (through her will, intellect, or previous devotion) or Paul (through his intelligent presentation, powerful preaching, or persuasion). It was God who prepared and God who performed in the heart of Lydia (cf. Lk. 24:45). Just as Paul had understood the direction of God in coming to Philippi, he now had a confirmation of God's direction through a demonstration of God's power in bringing to faith this woman through his preaching of the gospel. She was a promise, a first fruits of the gospel of grace, which Paul had been called to proclaim to the Philippians. Though this proclamation had been effective in Lydia's salvation, it led to Paul's suffering as he further confessed it to the Philippians.

### **D. The Confession to the Philippians (Acts 16:16-18)**

After having had this wonderful confirmation of the will of God, enroute again to the place of prayer Paul and his companions were accosted by a demon-possessed slave girl. This girl was possessed by a Python (Gk., *puthona*), vs. 16, an evil spirit whose name is associated with the ancient Greek oracle at Delphi, which was also called Pytho, because the god Apollo was alleged to be embodied in a snake there (cf. English "Python" the name of a species of large, constricting snakes). Those soothsayers possessed by this type of demon could predict the future (divination), a quality that brought financial gain to their owners, (vs. 16). Such fortunetellers even today make enormous incomes off a superstitious public. This girl also gave a confirmation to Paul's mission and the gospel, for she would cry out, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation", vs. 17. However confirmation by demons of the truth is actually discrediting to the truth, for there can be no corresponding demonstration of truth by unholy spirits whose chief is the father of lies (cf. Jesus' own refusal to be testified to by demons, Mk. 1:23-25; Lk. 4:41). Paul

therefore cast the demon out of the girl in the name of Jesus (vs. 18). In doing so Paul on the one hand confessed the gospel message to which the demon had pointed, yet with a true demonstration of holy authority and God's power, and on the other hand destroyed the hope of future profit for the owners of the girl (vs. 19). This resulted in consequential suffering, which was as much the will of God as the action that produced it. It is important for us to see the development of this divine design in undeserved suffering.

## **II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DESIGN (Acts 16:19-24)**

### **A. The Capture of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:19-21)**

The owners of the slave girl sought revenge. They were not so concerned with the message of Paul as with their money. This unjust motive brings with it an unjust arrest and accusation (vss. 19-21). Paul and Silas had not so much as “reasoned” in a public place, yet they were accused of “throwing the city into confusion.”

### **B. The Chastening of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:22-23)**

To add injury to insult, the crowd, who had never before seen Paul and Silas, much less heard their message, mobbed against them. To suffer for the preaching of the gospel is one thing, but to suffer without having had an opportunity to preach is another. Further injustice is incurred when the magistrates, who are to uphold Roman law (Acts 16:37), fail to give a hearing and have them scourged publicly (vs. 22). What a shame to be treated with derision and disciplined as a criminal in the sight of the proud Roman citizens for whom they came! Moreover, the beating was quite severe, being inflicted with the terrible cat-o-nine-tails whip, which usually flayed the skin and produced terrible bruises (see illustration on last page). In addition to this unjust humiliation they were unlawfully incarcerated in the city jail.

### **C. The Confinement of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:24)**

Paul and Silas had been accused of insurrection or treason against the Roman government (vss. 20-21), since it was assumed that they were Jews (vs. 20). In reality, Paul was a Roman citizen (vs. 37), and the charge had not only been untrue, but prosecuted unlawfully. It is interesting that this same charge was used against the Lord Jesus to bring Him to an illegal trial and conviction, but then should not His followers suffer like their Master? (cf. I Pet. 4: 13). The charge had resulted in Paul and Silas being “thrown bodily” (vs. 24) into the lowest part of the prison. This was the place where the hardened criminals, the forgotten element, were confined to rot away their existence in dank darkness and human filth. To increase their troubles they were fastened in “stocks” or “irons” (vs. 24). These heavy iron devices were tightly fitted so that not only was movement of the limbs impossible, but also pain was constantly inflicted as well. In view of such injustice and confinement, Paul and Silas might well have doubted God's will for their mission to Philippi. Paul might have considered this God's discipline for his earlier dispute and departure from Barnabas (Acts 15:38-40). But God had already directed them clearly as to His will by means of the vision and call, and confirmed His will to them by

the testimony borne in Lydia and those of her household (vss. 9-10, 14-15). Therefore, the Lord must also have directed the present circumstances for His purpose. The question arises again, "Why did this have to happen?" We may thank God that in the case of Paul and Silas we may discern the reason of His will for their suffering, and hopefully find there the purpose of God for much of what we ourselves endure.

### **III. THE DESTINY OF THE DESIGN (Acts 16:25-34)**

In an ironic way, the resolution of the question of underserved suffering is dependent upon the response of those who suffer to that which they suffer. If the end is God's glory, then He must be glorified through our experience of suffering as well as our escape from it. In order to understand the design of God in the suffering of Paul and Silas, we must examine their response to their circumstances.

#### **A. The Circumstances of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:25-28)**

The circumstances of Paul and Silas would have caused the man who thinks naturally to have become resentful and vengeful. Before we look at the responses of Paul and Silas it would be well for us to place ourselves in a similar situation and ask ourselves the question, "How would *we* respond?" Some of us no doubt would be very disturbed with the local government. We might call our lawyer and demand that he get a writ of habeas corpus and get us out! We might also have a lawsuit drawn up suing the city of Philippi for false arrest and taking them for all they were worth. Within the law, we would try and do everything to make life miserable for that city and its officials. And what would our attitude be toward the jailer? He was probably a very cruel man who enjoyed inflicting pain upon his prisoners. We would want to make life miserable for him as well. We might have preached long on Rom. 1:18-32 concerning the depravity of man, and how God is going to judge such men with eternal fire and everlasting anguish in Hell! Our attitude toward the other prisoners might be one of disgust over their well-deserved condition, and we might inform them that we were not like them, but imprisoned for an unjust cause. More importantly, what would our attitude be toward God? We might feel that God had betrayed us, or else we might have thought that the Macedonian call was not a vision, but a dream, and that we must be out of God's will. We might have prayed for God's punishment, and our song might have been "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen!"

It is God's grace to us in our weakness that He has provided in the example of Paul and Silas the proper response to His directed and undeserved suffering. Despite the outward persecution and the inward pain, we see in vs. 25 that at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God. What courage! What strength! No! It is not human fortitude that is demonstrated by these men, but holy faith. They knew that just as a Christian must be careful not to suffer for sin, he must also be careful not to sin in suffering. Whether they were in the comfort of Lydia's house, down by the river, at the place of prayer, or in stocks in a Roman dungeon, God was the same, and praise was due Him, and prayer should be directed to Him. We cannot be certain for what they prayed, but the text does give some implications. They must have prayed for God to show forth His power in their weakness, for in vs. 26 an earthquake rocks the jail. They were not

praying for deliverance, for when the earthquake provided the opportunity for escape they remained where they were. They must have been praying for the Philippian jailer, for we read of his conversion in vs. 30-34 and how they prevented him from suicide in vs. 27. They must have been praying for their fellow prisoners, for vs. 25 tells us that they were all listening to them, and that when their chains fell off and the doors opened, they remained with Paul and Silas in the jail (vs. 28)! Their hymns of praise no doubt were parts of the Psalms, and the content of them may well have dealt with God's salvation, since the Philippian jailer asked in vs. 30, "What must I do to be saved?" No wonder when the earthquake ceased, the rubble cleared, and the loosened prisoners were not escaped, that the Philippian jailer should fall down before Paul and Silas trembling with great fear! It would be well for us to study this confrontation between this jailer and Paul and Silas in order to discern further God's design in suffering.

### **B. The Confrontation with the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:27-29)**

Paul and Silas had been forced into prison by men but now they were freed by God. Nevertheless, they had kept their place and had restrained their jailer from the suicide expected of one who failed at his duty. Now this jailer groveled at their feet in fear and urgency. As a result, Paul and Silas must have understood that God was seeking to glorify Himself through their imprisonment, and that to put them there was merely to direct them to minister there. Now He had even brought the one for ministry to them! In God-centered evangelism, God brings the lost rather than the lost being sought out. This is not to negate the "going" commanded of all witnesses (Matt. 28:19), but it is to say that true conviction by God produces a true desire to be saved, and does not require an evangelist to "create" a desire. (Notice that in Acts 2:37, as here, the lost give the invitation, not the evangelist!) The Philippian jailer had been brought by God to a godly fear. He had heard the gospel in the prayers and praises of Paul and Silas (Rom. 10:17), and now he comes by the work of God to seek the salvation of which he has heard, (vs. 30).

Finally, in order to understand the design of God in the suffering of Paul and Silas, we must look at the conversion of the Philippian jailer and those of his household.

### **C. The Conversion of the Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:30-34)**

The request for the knowledge of salvation is met by Paul with a simple reply. His answer does not ask the man to perform any works of righteous contrition, or penance. It does not include as a condition any act of self-effort, not even baptism, though that follows. It is simply; "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved..." And Paul added "you (be saved) and also your household." Therefore the jailer took him immediately to his house, Paul preached to them, and God granted saving faith the entire family! The glory that night went to God, for the grace of God had wrought salvation despite the worse that men could do (cf. Acts 15:11)! The changed life of the jailer and family is at once demonstrated by their care and concern for Paul and Silas (vs. 34).

### **D. The Comprehension of God's Purpose at Philippi**

What then was God's design in the suffering of Paul and Silas? Just this: the salvation of sinners to the glory of His grace. God's design was to establish the church at Philippi, and He founded it on its founder's undeserved suffering. God did not use the efforts of Paul's persuasion, or the eloquence of his preaching to establish the church. He did not even use the experience of the earthquake, for natural explanations could have excused it. He rather used the unexplainable faith of Paul and Silas, a faith that stood strong in the face of suffering. The result was faith in the Philippians that rested not on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. After all, a God who makes men like that is surely a God to be feared!

## Conclusion

Now what about you? What answer will you have for your own experience of undeserved suffering? Three practical principles may be drawn from this study of suffering that must be applied to our own perspective on pain.

First, *we may be called to witness by our behavior the truths we believe*. Donald English has said, "There is no authentic Christian service that does not have suffering written into it." Suffering is the badge of the true Christian, and we are called to wear it well before a watching world! John Collins, the 17th century Puritan preacher, observed: "The truth of the gospel gets greater advantage by the humble sufferings of one saint, simply for the Word of righteousness, than by ten thousand arguments against error." Had Paul and Silas cursed, and complained, accused each other and argued with the jailer, how many do you think would have asked them how to saved? Not many? Not any! Should it be different for us who work among the world and bear witness through our sufferings to our Savior?

Second, *if our faith will stand in the hard times, it will stand at any time*. It is the best of men who have borne the worst of sufferings. Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls. Suffering only washes our eyes with tears that we may read God's Word and will for our lives more plainly. For this reason one wise saint has said: "We should fear every sin, but no sufferings."

Third, *our sufferings have been designed by God to exhibit His glory*. The greatest glory that was ever shown to this world was shown through the suffering at Calvary. Suffering always leads to glory, and God will have the glory through your suffering. It was for this purpose that it was sent! Have you purposed to give God the glory through your suffering?

"Why did this have to happen?" Why indeed? To the salvation of some soul? To the strengthening of my soul? To the greater praise of God's glory? Next time we are tempted to ask this question of our suffering let us first petition God for the discernment to understand His divine design in our suffering and respond to it in a way that glorifies Him. May God grant some suffering for all of us who seek His glory (cf. Phil. 1:29)! To Him be the praise, even in pain, both in the Philippian church, and in our church as well!