

The King Is Coming

Acts is a book of adventure, telling the story of how the good news of Jesus



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Christ spread across what was considered the civilized world. There is joy and danger, success and persecution, all seen through the experiences of individuals like Saul and Silas.

At chapter 17, conflict within the church

produces good. Barnabas and Saul have a disagreement about who will join them in planting churches. Silas (his full name is Silvanus) had championed the idea that Gentiles who believed in Christ had no need for the Jewish rite of circumcision in order to be part of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15). After the theological debate over circumcision was settled the attention of the church turned once again to spreading the message of salvation across the empire and strengthening the churches already established. John Mark had been with the two experienced church planters but had deserted them when they were in Pamphylia (Acts 15:38-40). Barnabas, ever the “encourager,” wanted to give Mark another chance, but Paul refused, which resulted in two missionary teams: Paul and Silas, Barnabas and Mark. This was a period of upheaval, change and persecution. If you read the whole story in Acts you will discover miracle after miracle in spite of human conflict and hardship.

Today we are looking at Paul’s second missionary journey. While Silas says little, he faithfully stays with Paul through great danger. It was not unusual for a person in those days to have two names, as in Silas/Silvanus, John/Mark, and Saul/Paul. From this point on Saul will be known by his Roman name, and why not? He was reaching out to the Roman world. Remember, Saul the Pharisee was also Paul the Roman citizen.

In Acts 15-16, Paul and Silas visit Syria, Cilicia, Derbe, Lystra, Phrygia, Galatia and Troas, where Paul dreamed of a man from Macedonia urging Paul to cross the Aegean Sea and bring the gospel to what is modern Greece. Silas stays with Paul in Samothrace, Neapolis, and Philippi, where God leads them to Lydia, a successful businesswoman and seeker after God (16:14). In Philippi Paul and Silas were arrested on false charges, beaten and jailed

for “disturbing” the city (16:20). Paul had cast a demon out of a young girl who was exploited as a fortune teller by her owner. The owner was angry over losing his easy source of income. You probably remember the story: Paul and Silas, beaten and locked behind prison doors, sang praises to God, an earthquake shook the prison and the doors swung open, but the two missionaries did not try to escape. The jailer came to faith in Christ and the next morning when the jailer tried to set Paul and Silas free, Paul declared his Roman citizenship and demanded an apology, which the fearful magistrates of Philippi granted them (16:39).

Acts 17 has Paul and Silas moving on to Thessalonica, where Paul follows his usual strategy of beginning his ministry at the synagogue, teaching that Jesus is God’s promised Messiah. Once again the Spirit of God was at work, as some of the Jews believed as well as “a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women” accepted Christ (v. 4). Once again the synagogue leaders enlisted the help of some “ruffians in the market places, they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar ... they attacked Jason’s home ... dragged him and some others before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here!’” (vv. 5-6). They were accused of using Jason’s house as their headquarters ... breaking Caesar’s laws ... and claiming there is another king named Jesus!

Jason and his friends were fined, but it was clear more trouble was coming which would bring great harm to Jason, others who became believers, and probably the families of the synagogue as well. That night the new Christians sent Paul and Silas on to Berea to continue their mission.

Berea was a much different story: “These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so ... many of them believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing” (vv. 11-12). But the good news quickly traveled back to Thessalonica and trouble was on the way!

There is no romantic version of missionary journeys in the New Testament, no immunity from danger for those who proclaimed the good news, no

easy days of endless joy and blessings. But there is in the example of Christians like Paul and Silas the beautiful evidence that the love and grace of God is present and powerful no matter the situation.

The Christian life includes opposition from an unbelieving world. Remember that the missionary Paul was first the Pharisee Saul. Every city he visited produced opposition, even violence, from the very people Paul considered his people, those he wanted so much to understand Jesus is God’s promised Messiah, the “Son of David.” But the Christian life also includes the blessings and companionship of God. Paul was never alone; the Holy Spirit was his constant companion, and there were partners like Barnabas and Silas. In our day we need to remember that God is always with us, even when circumstances are terrible, and as with Paul, there are other Christians who share the heartaches and failures, the uncertainty and fears we face.

What do you do when you fail? As a college student I participated in a church revival in which many of us went out to share Christ one-on-one. I had never done such a thing, but I was convinced that I must be a witness. My first attempt at “soul winning” resulted in plain rejection. I literally cried over that rejection. I had to learn that reaching the world for Christ doesn’t happen with a sales pitch. “Witnessing” requires compassion, a daily life that shows the difference Christ can make, the knowledge that God’s Spirit must touch a life, the importance of relationship building and the understanding that only God can change the human heart.

Paul and Silas, and so many others through the last 2,000 years, simply trusted their lives to God’s Spirit. We must become a version of God’s love and grace wrapped in ordinary flesh and blood. Obedience is not a popular word in our society. Success is the word of the day. But the key to life beyond this world’s temporary prizes is God’s love. We are called to love, just like Paul and Silas, for in that love of God there is hope and joy that reaches beyond the problems this life places before us. Silas is not remembered for his captivating sermons, the conversion of hundreds or miraculous healings. He is remembered for his consistent faithfulness to God. May our heritage be the same.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.