

30 June 2024

My Dear Theophilus (II): Opportunity
Acts 16-19

My Dear Theophilus,

In my last letter, I told how Paul and Barnabas were sent out from the Antioch church to do ... well, to do something, and ended up becoming apostles to the Gentiles. You know: people like us. This was hard for the Jewish believers to wrap their heads around – “But the Gentiles don’t follow the Law of Moses!” – but they held a Council in Jerusalem and worked out a compromise. But I don’t think even Paul had any idea where this new direction would take the church. Let me tell more about that.

After the Jerusalem Council, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch in Syria, where they had begun their first journey, and soon Paul got restless. He does that. “We should go back and check on the churches we started,” he said. Barnabas replied, “I’ve been thinking about that, too. In fact, I’ve already asked my cousin Mark if he wants to join us again.”

Paul frowned. “Barnabas, Mark abandoned us last time, remember? He got homesick at Perga and went home to mother.”

“I know. I talked to him about that. He says it won’t happen again.”

“He said it wouldn’t happen the first time. Why do you want to take him anyway?”

Now Barnabas frowned. “I want to give him a second chance. It’s what I do. Remember?”

Paul wasn’t convinced, though, and the disagreement grew sharp enough that Paul and Barnabas split up. Barnabas and Mark went one direction, and Paul chose Silas, from Jerusalem, to be his new companion. First they visited the towns where Paul and Barnabas had been last time, encouraging the Christians there. At Lystra – the town where they had tried to worship Paul and Barnabas as Greek gods – they met a young man in the church named Timothy. Timothy’s mother was Jewish, but his father was Greek. One thing about this new faith and its openness to all: it was a perfect fit for people who were caught between worlds. Timothy and his mother had found in the Christian church a place where they could love the Hebrew scriptures and also love Gentiles. Paul was quite impressed with young Timothy. He had gifts that Paul did not, like tact, and so Paul talked Timothy’s mother into letting him go with them. One thing, though. Timothy had never been circumcised, and since Paul always started in the local synagogue, he decided that needed to be done, and Timothy agreed. Timothy *really* wanted to go.

Once they had visited all the towns Paul had been to before, they decided to keep going, but at that point everything seemed to go wrong. Every direction they tried, something got in the way. Now, it seems clear it was the Holy Spirit – herding Paul in a new direction, but at the time Paul was getting more and more frustrated. Finally they ended up in my old home, Troas, which is where I first met Paul. This isn’t my story, so I won’t go into details, except to say that Paul’s message was exactly what I had been looking for. You remember how frustrated I had been with the ridiculous stories of our Greek gods – who would want to worship gods who behaved worse than most humans? – but I was equally unimpressed with the cold, conceptual, indifferent God of

Plato. The God Paul described – a God of both righteousness and overwhelming love – was more than I had ever imagined, which is exactly what a true God would be, don't you think? I mean, a god that *we* can imagine is probably not God. I joined their party.

While we were still in Troas, Paul had a dream. He dreamed that a man across the strait in Macedonia was calling for him to come and help them. So the next day, we found a boat and headed across, coming eventually to the Roman city of Philippi. On our first day there, we met a wealthy businesswoman named Lydia, who heard the good news and promptly invited us to make her home our base. It was a good start, and the church that we began in Philippi is perhaps still the one closest to Paul's heart. This being Paul, though, it would be too optimistic not to expect some sort of civil disturbance, and one came. There was a slave girl in Philippi who had an unclean spirit, which gave her certain fortunetelling gifts that had much enriched her owners. This slave girl began following Paul around, calling out that Paul was a servant of the Most High God. After a few days, Paul decided he didn't need to be associated with that sort of spirit and cast it out of her. Her owners, furious, had Paul and Silas arrested, beaten, and thrown in jail.

That night, as Paul and Silas were staying up all night singing hymns and, no doubt, endearing themselves to the other prisoners, there was an earthquake. The prison walls sagged; the doors burst open; even the shackles on the prisoners came open. The Roman jailer rushed in, saw the open doors, knew he'd be blamed for the prisoners' escape, and prepared to kill himself. Paul called out, "Hey, don't do that! We're all here!"

When the jailer saw that Paul was telling the truth, he sank to his knees. "Who are you people?" he asked. "And what do I have to do to become like you?"

"Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved," Paul replied. "You and your whole household."

That night, the Roman jailer's family was baptized into the faith, and the next morning, the city magistrates dismissed all charges, with an official apology. The Philippian church, though, thought it might be best if Paul and his friends were out of sight, so we went on to the next town, Thessalonica. Here, Paul followed his usual pattern. He started by speaking to the Jews, who rejected him, then went to the Gentiles, some of whom accepted the good news. That, as usual, angered the Jews so much that they ran Paul out of town. By now it was a familiar pattern, but the Jews of Thessalonica *really* disliked Paul, because when they couldn't find Paul, they grabbed anyone they could find from the new church, dragging them to the city magistrates, screaming "These are those Christians, who are turning the world upside down!" Paul and the rest of us had gotten out of town just in time, but even that wasn't enough for the Thessalonian Jews. They followed us to the next town, Berea, and started a riot there, too.

Timothy and Silas and I took Paul aside. "We don't mean to be critical, or anything, but have you ever noticed that the riots only happen when you're around? We've been thinking that maybe the three of us could stay on here and help the new church in Berea get established, and you could take a little vacation. Why don't you go to Athens? See the Acropolis? We'll join you later, all right?"

So it was that Paul went on alone to Athens, the center of our culture, our thought, our literature. Now our giants of philosophy and drama – Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Euripedes – are long gone, but Athens holds on to that legacy, and on any fine day you can still find philosophers

up on the Hill of Ares debating Stoic or Epicurean philosophy. It's both our pride and our hobby. Paul arrived at Athens and spent several days just walking around, examining the great temple of Athena on the Acropolis, but also all the smaller shrines to the rest of the gods.

He found a synagogue, of course, and went to argue with the Jews as was his custom, but in between Sabbaths he was left to wander around town. Soon he had struck up conversations with some of the philosophers he met. Finding this Jew to be articulate, well-read, and thoughtful, they invited him to a public forum up on the Hill of Ares, to explain his new ideas. Paul took his place in front of a crowd unlike any he had ever faced.

"I've been walking around your city," Paul said, "and I'm glad to see you're very religious. So many altars and temples and shrines. I even found one dedicated 'To a God Unknown.' That's sensible, I suppose. But in a way, that's why I'm here. I want to tell you about that God Unknown, a God that is above every name, beyond every image, behind every idea, and vaster than any definition.

"I speak of the One God who created all and is Lord of all he created. This God Unknown is too large to fit in any shrine and too great to require any service offered by human hands, for there is nothing lacking in this God. Quite the opposite, this God gives to us, in inexhaustible generosity, the breath you breathe, the life that quickens your being, the world that gives you food and water and the very boundaries of your existence. This is the God who made you yourself, and who implanted in you that emptiness that drives you to this hill to look for meaning. This is the God who sends you to the heights of philosophy and to the temples of religion, groping desperately for something. If you only knew, what you grope for is this God Unknown. But he can be found, for he is not only immeasurably beyond our understanding, but he is also as near as your every movement. As one of your own poets puts it, 'In him we live and move and have our being.'

"And I am also here to tell you that this God Unknown has now made himself Known and has called all people, wherever they grope for meaning, to turn to his true image, for this God came to earth as a man to heal the ages of ignorance, and to fix a day when all will be made right. This will take place through the mediation of this man, who was born, lived, and died, but whom God raised from the dead."

I have heard this sermon many times now and it still brings me chills, but this was the first time Paul preached it. It was tailored perfectly for his audience. Paul spoke to the Athenians in their own language of philosophy and poetry, but for one detail: the resurrection of Jesus. And that was the point where the Athenians grew restless and started to sneer. A very few of the Athenians stayed to hear more, but the rest wandered away, looking for a new philosophy to play with. I suppose if it is your hobby to look for meaning, you don't really *want* to find it.

From Athens Paul moved on to Corinth, still traveling alone, but once there he fell in with a couple of Jewish Christians named Priscilla and Aquila, who had recently arrived from Rome. They took Paul into their tent-making business, and Paul, for his part, took them into his church planting line. By the time the rest of us caught up with Paul in Corinth, he and Priscilla and Aquila already had a church going. Then we stayed there for a year and a half without Paul getting run out of town, a new record. While he was there, he even had leisure to write encouraging – or, sometimes, *corrective* – letters to some of the churches he had started.

After eighteen months, there was a bit of a riot in Corinth. This one wasn't even Paul's fault, much, but he decided to move on anyway. Like I said: he gets restless after a while. Silas and I stayed on at Corinth. Timothy was somewhere else – Philippi maybe? So Paul took Priscilla and Aquila with him and went to Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila stayed there, and Paul went on alone to Caesarea, Jerusalem, and eventually back to Antioch.

I've spent a lot of time talking about Paul, and that's appropriate. He's a genius – as creative and as infuriating as geniuses are apt to be. But I don't want you to think that he's the only one taking the good news to the world. Remember: Priscilla and Aquila had become Christians in Rome, and Paul had never been there at that point. Also, while they were in Ephesus, a Hellenistic Jew from Alexandria named Apollos arrived. He, too, was already a follower of Jesus, although he had some peculiar ideas. Priscilla and Aquila recognized his potential – he was an amazing orator – and once they had sorted out his theology, they sent him back to Corinth, and he stayed there for years. So, yes, Paul is a towering figure in the story of the church, but this was not Paul's movement. This is the Spirit's movement, and the Spirit's church was growing everywhere it went.

That success would come at a cost, though. One of the ways that you can see that faith in Jesus is not like other cults or mystery religions or messianic movements is how its followers deal with adversity, persecution, and even death. Faithfulness before death is the ultimate test of commitment. But I'll save that for my next letter.

Your friend, Luke