**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Paul’s Treasured Friendships (3): “Silas, A Hidden Hero”**

**Acts 15:22, 27, 32-34, 40-41; 16:1-17:15; 18:5**

**September 10, 2023**

It would be impossible for us to speak of the Reformation without mentioning the name of Martin Luther. What Henry Ford was to the auto industry, and Ben Franklin was to electricity, and Albert Einstein was to nuclear physics, Martin Luther was to the Protestant Reformation.

After he posted his ninety-five protests on the church door in Wittenberg, Luther set fire to the slumbering saints all across Germany, and beyond. In the years that followed, he would go on to say, “I am born to fight against innumerable monsters and devils. I must remove stumps and stones, cut away thistles and thorns, and clear the wild forest.” Most would agree that he was truly larger than life; and his legacy is known the world over.

But back in the shadows, behind the massive personality of Martin Luther, was a hidden hero of the Reformation. He was the gentle intellectual who bonded with Luther and who wrote a systematic theology emphasizing Luther’s new theological discoveries. He enjoyed a lifetime of friendship with Luther, and he grew in prominence at virtually the same pace with Luther. Yet to this day most Christians aren’t familiar with the name of Philip Melanchthon.

In the words of one popular author, “Luther had warmth, vigor, and explosive strength; Melanchthon, however, had clarity of thought, discretion, and mildness. Luther energized his quiet friend; Luther tempered his. ‘Master Philip,’ he wrote, ‘comes along gently and softly, sowing and watering with joy, according to the gifts which God has abundantly bestowed upon him’” (Swindoll, Come Before Winter).

In the same way, Silas was an exceptionally gifted man who faithfully served alongside of Paul. Yet he was overshadowed by the dominating personality of the great apostle. He comes on the scene at the end of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:22) and becomes the close companion of Paul during the second missionary journey (Acts: 15:36-18:22). Although hidden in Paul’s shadow, he proves to be indispensable to Paul’s mission. It’s hard to imagine how Paul could have endured the immense difficulties he encountered without the constant support of Silas, one of “the hidden heroes” of the early church.

**A. His Name.** In the book of Acts, the shorter form of his name always appears (“Silas”); while the longer form is always used in the epistles (“Silvanus”). *Silas* is apparently the Greek form of his name in Aramaic (*Saul*), which was a Jewish name. *Silvanus* was his Latin name. In Acts, Luke retains the name that he went by in the Jerusalem community (Silas); while the epistles refer to him by the Latin name he would use in Greek and Roman circles (Silvanus). He was the coauthor of the Thessalonian epistles, and the secretary of Peter’s first epistle (1 Pet. 5:12). Like Paul, he was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37).

**B. His Place in the Jerusalem Church**. At the Jerusalem Council, the church had concluded that Gentiles would not be required to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. They also decided to appoint delegates to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch to report their findings:

“*Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose some of their own men and send them with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers*” (Acts 15:22).

This last point is worth stressing. It was no small thing to be recognized as one of the leaders of the large Jerusalem church. We don’t know if they were elders, but one possible source of that esteem comes from Luke’s statement that they were “prophets” (15:32). They belonged to a select group of men in the early church through whom the Lord gave *direct* revelations of His will for His people. Although the prophets occasionally predicted future events (Acts 11:27-29), they primarily served to give prophetic words of exhortation and encouragement to strengthen the saints in light of their present day circumstances (1 Cor. 14:3). Judas and Silas were such teachers, thoroughly equipped to present the will of God to the people of God on the basis of God’s revealed Word to them.

It's also important to note that in Luke’s introduction of Silas, his name comes *second*. In fact, except for three instances where his name is coupled with that of young Timothy (Acts 17:14, 15; 18:5), Silas’ name *always* comes second. This calls attention to the fact that he modestly served in second place, always overshadowed by the more gifted men with whom he worked (especially Paul). As a hidden hero of the early church, he was never in the spotlight.

**C. His Ministry in the Church at Antioch.** When the delegation left Jerusalem, they were commissioned to read and expound the apostolic letter from the Jerusalem church to the saints in Antioch. Here’s how the letter begins: “*We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul – men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing*” (Acts 15:24-27).

This was an important assignment, and the Jerusalem church considered both men fully qualified to carry it out. So what was the result? When they read the letter, the saints in Antioch “*rejoiced because of its encouragement*” (v. 31). But we also read that “*Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words*” (v. 32). This further encouragement of Judas and Silas was precisely because they possessed the same gift of prophetic exhortation that was exercised by the five chief teachers of the Church of Antioch, including Paul (Acts 13:1). Judas and Silas then returned to Jerusalem, but Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, serving the Lord there together (Acts 15:33-34).

**D. His Close Association with Paul.** Following the sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:37-39), Paul now had to find a new travel companion for his next missionary journey. **Q.** So what did he do? **A.** He “*chose Silas*” (15:40). Either Silas had already returned to Antioch from Jerusalem, or Paul had sent for him. For Silas, that would have been a 600 mile round trip. **Q.** But why not choose one of the other devoted and capable men in the church of Antioch? **A.** Because Silas possessed a rare combination of unique qualities that had caught Paul’s attention:

**(1)** He had observed Silas’ gifted ministry and zeal at Antioch, and his clear views on the freedom of the gospel for both Jews and Gentiles alike. **(2)** The commendation of the Jerusalem church was also important, proving that there was harmony between Paul and the elders/apostles of the “mother church.” **(3)** Like Paul, Silas was a Roman citizen and could also claim the protection that such citizenship provided whenever they might face “*perils from the Gentiles*”

(2 Cor. 11:26).

Last, but not least, Silas had “the rare qualification of being a good follower and steady companion to a man, who, because of his apostolic commission and aggressive personality, was accustomed to lead. The call required deliberate self-effacement on the part of Silas, but he was willing to take second place” (Hiebert, In Paul’s Shadow).

Small wonder the church of Antioch approved Paul’s choice; for when they started out they were both “*commissioned by the brothers to the grace of God*” (Acts 15:40), and they both went through the churches of Syria and Cilicia, encouraging the saints. However, Luke only references Paul when he writes, “*He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the* churches” (v. 41). Where was Silas? Right alongside of Paul, but from Luke’s vantage point, Paul was the obvious leader – throughout the entire trip: **(1)** At the outset of their journey (16:1-5), Luke once again uses the singular pronoun, referring to Paul: “*He came to Derbe and then to Lystra . . .*” But Silas was at Paul’s side, as his friend and faithful comrade, sharing in the joy of instructing and strengthening the young churches in that region of Asia Minor.

**(2)** When Paul cast out the demon from a slave girl at Philippi, “*Paul and Silas*” were arrested. Although Paul excised the demon, Silas also shared in the ill treatment that followed – a merciless public beating, and an unjust imprisonment in a maximum-security cell (Acts 16:16-24). Yet instead of filling the jail with their protests and complaints, Paul and Silas “*were praying and singing hymns to God*” (Acts 16:25).

**(3)** When they began their ministry in Thessalonica, Luke says that “*Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures.*” But when the opposition turned on Paul and started a riot in the city, both Paul and Silas were hurried out of town in the dead of night(Acts 17:1-9).

**(4)** At Berea, they both went to the Jewish synagogue; but Luke says that the Bereans examined the Scriptures every day to see if what *Paul* said was true. Shortly thereafter, when the Jewish opponents from Thessalonica caused another riot, the Berean brethren immediately rushed Paul out of the city, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. For the first time on the trip, Silas left Paul’s side. As the older member of the two who remained, Silas would have taken the leadership in directing the young church through the crisis (Acts 17:10-15).

**(5)** Later when Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul at Corinth (Acts 18:5), they brought along a monetary gift from the Macedonian brethren, apparently from the Philippian church which they had revisited (2 Cor. 11:9; Phil. 4:15-16). This gift relieved Paul of the need to support himself and enabled him to concentrate on the preaching of the gospel (Acts 18:5-8). It’s also clear that Silas played an important role in the founding of the Corinthian church, something which Paul only mentions in passing (2 Cor. 1:19). With the close of Paul’s missionary work in Corinth, the curtain falls over the story of Silas.

Someone once asked the late Leonard Bernstein, famed conductor of the New York Philharmonic, what he believed to be the most difficult instrument in the orchestra to play. Without hesitating, he said “second fiddle.” Silas was one of those support people, *gifted* in his own right, but *content* to play his part seated in the second chair. He proved to play that role well; in fact, it is hard to imagine how Paul would have endured this difficult trip had Silas not been by his side, through thick and thin. His true greatness was his willingness to subordinate himself in the service of others. That’s the kind of person we should *want to be* in the lives of others, and the kind of person we *need to have* in our own lives as well. The Christian life is a team effort. That’s the way God has designed it!