



# Minutes With Messiah

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## HOW MANY YEARS?

I am now 66 years old. That in itself means very little, other than that I was able to retire according to the U.S. government. On the other hand, if I had been born in the year zero, that means that I would be living in the year the apostle Paul died. Not that I would probably have known that. It's not like Facebook or the New York Times were proclaiming his death to the world. Even if they had, the headlines would have been about Portia Kardashian, and the death of a preacher might have made page three. It might be interesting to look at some other coincidences of timing that we don't often think about.

For instance (and this is what got me thinking about such things), there were about 500 years between the book of Malachi, the last book written in the Tanach (Old Testament) and the birth of Jesus. Within about 25 years, that is the time from when Columbus first sailed to the "New World" and today. We consider that a pretty long time in America, but often read the end of Malachi and immediately start Matthew, and think nothing of what came between. Maybe you read the books of the Maccabees, but most people skip that part of history. Just as a lot has happened in the Americas since Columbus, a lot happened between the testaments. Just thinking of people, you have Alexander and his generals, Julius Caesar (and Cleopatra and Antony), Confucius, and the Buddha.

Going back to people's ages, we find some interesting facts. Jesus was "about 30" (Lk 3:23) when he started preaching. We consider Sylvester Stallone's making of the movie *Rocky* at age thirty to be late blooming, but that was about the time a person was expected to start making his mark in first century Judea. Ira Gershwin and DuBose Heyward said "Methus'leh lived 900 years, but who calls that livin' when no gal will give in to someone who's 900 years." The Bible is more specific, at 969 years. That means that if he were to have died today, he would have been 13 when William the Conqueror invaded England.

While not specifically ages, there are a couple of biblical periods that would fit into a person's lifetime. If a person who is 70 years old was born when Nebuchadnezzar began the Babylonian captivity of Israel, he would now be living when that captivity ended under

Cyrus. (the book of Daniel) That also happens to be the length of time that the European Common Market has been in existence (as of the writing of this article). Someone who is only five years older would have lived the span of time from the death of Pharaoh Nebkheprure (Tutankhaten, Tutankhamen), who is not mentioned in the Bible and probably just preceded Joseph's tenure in Egypt, to the birth of Moses. Thus we are as far from the American Civil War as the exodus was from King Tut.

Then there are the spans of time between specific events. The 1,973 years from Abraham to Jesus is about the same as from the birth of Jesus to the year I graduated college. For those to whom that means nothing, that would have been the year of the Yom Kippur War, Watergate, and *Roe v Wade*. The span from Moses to Jesus (1,300 years) is the same as that from Jesus to the Hundred Years War, and such literary greats as Boccaccio, Dante, and Chaucer. From David to Jesus was about 970 years. That is equivalent to the time from Jesus to Macbeth, or to Eric the Red's settlement of Greenland. In literary terms, that is the span from the poet Omar Khayyam to today. If Joan of Arc had died the year Jerusalem was burned by Nebuchadnezzar, then we would be living in the year of Christ's birth.

What is the significance of all of these facts? Probably nothing. Or, it may point out that we often don't think about the passage of time in the Bible. People don't realize that the church was entirely Jewish for the first fifteen years of its existence or that the computer age is as far from Jesus as Abraham. There is one other significance to all of this. Most of these events are of little real relevance today; but even after 2,000 years the death of Jesus is of paramount relevance. The Hundred Years War won't save us, but Jesus does.

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# MY TIME IN PHILIPPI

It's not easy being a prisoner; less so being a political prisoner. Being a Roman prisoner may have its advantages over some other jails; but, face it, the emperor needs to allocate more money to penal reform. This prison has no commissary; no place to buy such life-necessities as gloves, a cap, ... food. Yes, they give us water, but that is usually free. If you are in jail in an unfamiliar city, where you have nobody to bring you food, you are likely to starve to death before your sentence ends. Still, I guess it is better than vigilante justice like my companion faced in Lystra. He doesn't talk about it much, but it seems that some of the Jews in that city, and surrounding towns, decided he was worth stoning. I wasn't with him then, but I have heard the stories about how he was left for dead after a stoning. (I haven't heard of any stonings where the accused was not left for dead, by the way.) I think I will stay in a Roman prison over that, any day.

My name is Silvanus. At least, that is the Roman version of my name. From here on out I will use the shorter versions of names, so call me Silas. My companion's name is Paul, although behind his back some racists still call him Saul the Hebrew. In Lystra our party picked up a young man named Timothy. In Troas we

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## Being in a Roman jail is better than being stoned.

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added a doctor, Luke. We are what have been called deacons or ministers, or a more modern term, missionaries.

But let's "start at the very beginning, a very good place to start." We had intended to do all of our work in Asia Minor, but the Holy Spirit had other plans for us. Instead of going around by way of the Black Sea, we ended up in Troas. While there, Paul had a dream or a vision. He saw a Macedonian man begging us to come over into Macedonia and help them. If you know Paul, you will know that he wasted no time in arranging transport across the Aegean. On our first day we had made the 70 miles from Troas to Samothrace, and the next day made the other 70 miles to Neapolis, or New City, the seaport of Philippi. From there it was an easy journey of ten miles to Philippi.

Philippi is the main city of that region (and also happened to be a Roman colony). It was originally named Krenides (three fountains), but within five years Philip II of Macedon, father of that Alexander who called himself Great, had renamed the city after himself. The town gets its prosperity from nearby gold mines, and the fact that it is situated in a narrow passage that the Romans used for

one of their famous roads. When it became a Roman colony, with the full name "Colony of Augustus Julius of the Philippians," it became even richer. Thus Philippi was the place to start if we were going to reach the Macedonian people.

Paul had a basic plan of attack in any city we came to. If there was a Jewish synagogue, that was where we would start. Because it was not the Sabbath, we waited a few days in which we familiarized ourselves with the city. Also because it was a Roman colony, there was no synagogue in the city. The Roman government had recently banished all Jews from any Roman colony. On the Sabbath we went out to the river, where there was bound to be a gathering of the Jews, and particularly of Jewish women. Running water was essential to the purification rites of immersion, which was especially important to the women. Thus we figured that a river was the place to find a Sabbath assembly. On our way to the river, a maidservant saw us and called out, "These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation."

We were not disappointed in our expectation about the Jewish place of prayer. At the riverside we spoke to many Jewish women. Among these was one Lydia, a seller of purple stuff. She came from Thyatira, one of the Asian cities we had been prevented from visiting. In spite of her heritage she had accumulated a certain wealth, and traveled to maintain her business. She listened to Paul, and soon came to trust in the Messiah. As a result, she and her household servants who traveled with her were immersed to take away their sins. She maintained a house in Philippi, and insisted that we four stay there.

For many days thereafter, whenever we went out we were met by the same maidservant who repeated what she had said about us before. We were made aware that she was known to have a spirit of divination, like the Pythonian serpent that was consulted at the oracle of Delphi. Her masters had grown rich by having her prophesy to the Philippians for a fee.

After many days, Paul turned to her and, with great effort said to the spirit, "I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And the spirit came out. Why did Paul wait many days? I never asked him. He might not have appreciated such a spirit advertising who we were. Perhaps he did not appreciate that her masters were making a profit from a gift that might have come from God. Or just maybe he had let her announce to the entire town who we were, and we had gotten enough publicity that he then wanted to take away her masters' income. Whatever his reasoning, her masters lost their livelihood, and did not like it.

Paul and I had gone out by ourselves; Timothy and Luke were not with us. The masters of the maidservant caught us and dragged us to the marketplace, since there was not yet a Forum in town. The leaders of the town, and pretty much everyone else, regularly met in the marketplace. It was not uncommon for someone to bring a matter before their court unexpectedly. They brought the charges, saying, “These Jews [putting as much contempt as possible in naming the nationality] are greatly troubling our great city. They teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans.” They went on to testify that by listening to such men they were imperiling their city’s status as a Roman colony. These accusations inflamed the crowd. Therefore the magistrates tore our clothes off of us and had us beaten with many stripes and thrown into jail. The jailor was given strict orders to keep us safely. Thus we ended up here in the inner prison where the worst criminals are kept. Not only that, but he has tied our feet to a large log. He takes his job seriously.

So here we are, prisoners not for what we have done, but primarily because we are Jews and secondarily because we preach a new thing. (Although, ultimately we are here because of greed.) It is approaching midnight. Paul and I have been singing praises to God, a sort of impromptu concert for the other prisoners. We know they hear us because some are telling us to shut up. Paul’s strong baritone carries, just as it does when he is preaching. I see the jailor through the gate to the inner prison. He is sitting on his stool, leaning against the wall, sleeping. There is a critic in every crowd.

Wait! I feel the earth move under my feet. I don’t know if there are many earthquakes in Philippi, but we are having one right now. It is so strong that the gates are popping open. Even the bonds on our feet have been broken. In the light of his torch, I can see that the jailor has awakened. He must think we have all escaped because he has drawn his sword and is about to take his own life. But now my ear is almost damaged as Paul shouts, “We are all still here. Don’t hurt yourself.” The jailor is a man familiar with obedience to a command given in that tone, so he puts down his sword.

He is now taking a light and falling at our feet. He asks, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” I think he is asking how to save his own life in case someone does escape. Paul seems to take it a different way, as usual. He says, “Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, and your house.” We sit him down in the cell and start to tell him about Jesus. A couple of the other prisoners are listening outside the gate. Still others make their way in and listen as Paul and I tell them about Jesus and his salvation.

As soon as we finish speaking, the jailor risks his own life. He is taking us out of the prison and to his house next door. We again explain to all there about Jesus. The jailor has our wounds from the beating washed and

treated. And now we are all headed to the river so that he and his household can be immersed. We go back to his house and he feeds us well. After that we return to our cell in the prison.

It is now daybreak. According to the jailor, some men have come from the magistrates to order our release. As I start to get up, Paul speaks. “No. We are Roman citizens, yet they beat us without a proper trial. Now they want to sneak us out of jail. Let them come and publicly apologize, and then we will leave.”

I wish I had followed the messengers as they go to the marketplace. I would love to see the faces of the magistrates when they hear that.

It’s only been a few minutes, but here come the magistrates. They must have run, themselves, from their seats in the agora. They are out of breath, but I think the trembling is more than just from unfamiliarity with running that far. They are truly scared.

“We didn’t know you were Romans. They told us

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I don’t know if there are earthquakes in Philippi, but we are having one right now.

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you were Jews. Why didn’t you say something? Please don’t report us to the Roman garrison. I tell you what. If you will just leave Philippi, we will pay your way as far as Thessaloniki. We will give you food. Do we have a deal?”

Paul could say a lot at this point. He could negotiate for more money. He could report the magistrates and have them end up where we just spent the night. He could tell them that we are staying in town for a year, and what can they do about it? Instead, he calmly picks up his belongings, beckons me to follow, and walks out of the prison.

We have found our way to Lydia’s house. The believers were all gathered there. Luke and Timothy had prayed with them. We are now telling them our story, which I am writing down as Paul speaks. He is telling them that just as we trusted in God, so should they. They will have tough times ahead. Especially the Jews among them will have difficulty because they are Jews. But God has seen us through even a night in jail. Not only that, he allowed us to teach a man we probably never would have otherwise known. That man is now a brother to all gathered here. Paul reminds them of the jailor’s kindness to us after he came to believe, so they should be kind to him.

I suspect we are leaving town soon. But it has been a good visit, and I don’t think this is the last we will hear of the believers in Philippi.

*(Taken from Acts 16:6-40)*

# *LASTING CONSEQUENCES*

Decisions have consequences. Often these consequences are more far-reaching than anyone could imagine. After World War I, two things had disastrous consequences few could have foreseen. The first of these was the Treaty of Versailles. The first part of the treaty established the League of Nations, but other provisions arguably led to World War II. As part of the treaty, significant tracts of land were taken from Germany. The German army was limited to 10,000 men. (They were smart enough to top-load their limited military with experienced leaders so that when another war did come, they had the superior force.) The Germans were ordered to pay billions of dollars in reparations to nations harmed by German aggression. When a worldwide economic depression hit, the perception of the German people that these terms were inordinately harsh helped a man named Adolf Hitler to seize control of the government. The second action was the refusal by the American senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, primarily because of apprehensions about the portions establishing the League of Nations. These apprehensions, coupled with a new isolationism, kept the United States out of the League, thus reducing what limited enforcement power the League possessed. When Germany began taking back the land they had surrendered by the Treaty, the world was powerless to stop Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party.

King Saul of Israel made a decision that may have had long-term consequences to himself and his nation. God demanded that he destroy the Amalekites entirely.

And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the

fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. (1 Sam 15:8-9)

This decision to disobey God had an immediate impact upon Saul. Although he did kill Agag when confronted by Samuel, he lost his kingdom. After his death David would reign rather than one of his sons. The significance of his decision may have actually come hundreds of years later.

The nation of Judah (including the tribes of Simeon and Benjamin) had been taken into Babylonian captivity, but allowed to retain their identity. After Babylon fell, a king named by the Jews as Ahasuerus ruled. He married a Jewess named Hadassah (Esther). His prime minister, for personal reasons, decided to eliminate the Jews in the empire. That minister was Haman the Agagite. According to Jewish historian Josephus, he was an Amalekite, and either a descendant or a subject of the Agag whom Saul had spared (probably through a line that had escaped the annihilation). Thus Saul's decision not to destroy the Amalekites led to the threat of total destruction of the Jews. It was only through God's intervention through Esther that the Jewish nation was saved.

The holiday of Purim (which begins the evening of February 28 in 2018) is generally considered a celebration of the salvation of the Jews. Thus it involves wild parties, costumes, and general merriment. In another sense, though, it can be looked upon as a celebration of God overcoming bad decisions. Our choices to sin may not threaten millions of people around the world. Nevertheless, we can take some comfort that although we make bad decisions, God can counteract the consequences. Mostly, God can counteract sin in ourselves. That is something worth celebrating.

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