



Best Supporting Actor

BY Danny and Jackie Gasperson

Each year the Academy of the Motion Picture Industry awards Oscars to the Best Actor and Actress. Setting aside their own identities, these highly gifted performers totally embrace a movie character's persona. Their roles are so prominent, and their performances so convincing, they carry the story's weight. Easily recognizable, they are the superstars of the industry.

But the Academy also knows that no matter how talented the lead actor or how powerful the performance, a single actor cannot tell the story without help. They must be surrounded by other performers who assist with the narrative; who *support* the leading role. Those parts may not be as noticeable, but their contribution to the story is just as critical and they are stars in their own right. Therefore, the Academy also appropriately recognizes and awards these actors with Oscars for Best 'Supporting' Actor/Actress.

Ministry often occurs in a similar fashion. To some God has sovereignly bestowed obvious gifts and given visible roles and responsibilities within the Kingdom. Their names and ministries are well-known and celebrated. But seldom are they working alone. Surrounding them are critical co-laborers whose roles are not as visible, but whose contributions are equally valuable. Without them, the work would be less effective or possibly non-existent.

This lesson will highlight one such *supporting actor*. The text is found in Acts 16.

The Context

Paul and his new traveling companion, Silas, embarked on what is commonly known as Paul's second missionary journey. On a mission of encouragement, they revisited the churches from Paul's first journey. Prevented by the Lord from going into new areas in Asia Minor and Galatia, they made their way to Troas. During one night, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with him to "Come to Macedonia and help us." Realizing this was the Lord's leading, the team set sail and made their way to Philippi, a Roman colony and leading city of that



district of Macedonia. Philippi, an ancient city, was renamed after Philip of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great. As a Roman colony, her status gave the citizens of Philippi the same rights and privileges as those who lived in Rome itself.

In a new place Paul typically began his ministry by attending a Sabbath meeting at the local synagogue, a Jewish place of worship. But apparently, Philippi had no synagogue. Jewish custom required a minimum of ten men to establish a synagogue; perhaps, they did not meet that standard. Nevertheless, Paul's team found a group, composed primarily of women, who regularly met for prayer beside the river. Paul shared with them the gospel, and Lydia, a worshiper of God from Thyatira, was saved. She and her household were converted and baptized. Lydia invited the team to stay in her home where they remained for several weeks sharing the gospel. They saw souls saved and a church established.

The Circumstance

Paul and Silas regularly traveled to that place of prayer beside the river to preach and teach. One day, a young slave girl, possessed by a demon who enabled her to predict the future, began following them, crying out and causing quite a disturbance. After several days of this, Paul, troubled by the situation, turned and in the authority of Jesus' name, commanded the spirit to come out of the girl. She was miraculously delivered.

This wonderful healing created a problem for the slave girl's owners. They had been exploiting her demonic ability for financial gain. When they realized their potential for making money was gone, these men became irate and seized Paul and Silas, dragging them before the magistrates. (Magistrates were officials appointed by Roman authorities who were responsible for maintaining public order. Being accountable to the Emperor of Rome explains their actions toward Paul and Silas here and later.) The slave owners did not care about Paul and Silas' preaching, but because their loss of revenue was not a charge-

able offense, they accused them of teaching customs unlawful for Romans to practice. This was clearly a bogus charge, but when the crowds joined in the attack, the magistrates, probably motivated to restore peace quickly, ordered Paul and Silas to be stripped of their clothes, beaten with rods, imprisoned in stocks, and carefully guarded.

Around midnight, Paul and Silas, in pain and restrained, were praying and singing praises to God. Everyone in the prison heard their worship. God responded by sending a powerful earthquake that shook the foundation of the prison, opening all the doors, and loosening the prisoners' chains. The tremor also awakened the jailer. When he saw all the doors open, he assumed everyone had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. Paul called out to stop him, assuring him that all captives were still present.

This powerful demonstration brought fear and conviction to the jailer's heart. "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (v. 30). Paul explained the gospel to him, and salvation came to him and his household.

In gratitude, the jailer brought them to his home, washed their wounds, and prepared a meal for them. He and his whole household were baptized that night.

The next morning the magistrates sent officers with orders to release the prisoners, but Paul refused to leave. His reasoning shook the magistrates more than the earthquake had shaken the jail. Paul revealed that he possessed Roman citizenship and their unjust trial and his public punishment violated his rights as a Roman citizen. Because the consequences of their actions could be severe, the magistrates personally came and sheepishly escorted Paul and his friends out of prison, requesting they leave the city.

The Characters

Several important characters contributed significantly to this story, but we will limit our focus to only two.

The Apostle Paul plays the lead role. His gifts, calling,

Paul understood it was the prison guards who were chained to him.

and commitment are extraordinary and obvious. God used him to accomplish great things for the Kingdom. Although most would feel unqualified to play a role of such magnitude, we can learn much from Paul to help us in the important parts God has assigned to us.

Many glaring questions must be addressed with Paul in this story. Why did he wait until the next day to claim his rights as a Roman citizen? He had the ultimate *get-out-of-jail-free card*, yet he refused to play it. How and why could Paul and his friends offer prayer and even praise to God under such unimaginable circumstances? Why, when their chains were loosened, did they not escape? We are not told Paul's reasoning, but some clues point us in the right direction.

One answer is: Paul had learned to live with *kingdom perspective*. Because of his trust in God and his obedient submission to the leading of the Lord in his circumstances, the jailer was exposed to the gospel and was converted. Years later, in his letter to the church that eventually grew out of this series of events, Paul, again in chains for the Lord, explains that his circumstances were serving to advance the gospel. Some might say Paul was chained to the prison guards. Paul understood it was the prison guards who were chained to him! He proclaimed the gospel to a captive audience. He realized this God-ordained situation allowed the gospel to be made clear throughout

the entire palace guard (Philippians 1:12-13). This perspective taught him to be content whatever the circumstances of his life (Philippians 4:11). He understood that for him to live is Christ and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21). Our Lord taught him to pray, "Nevertheless, not my will but Thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). And just like Paul, living with *kingdom perspective* enables us to remain faithful and praise the Lord in the most challenging circumstances.

Application:

What is our natural response to adversity or hardship? How can we gain God's perspective?

Paul's admonition to the church in Philippi applies to us as well, "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have" (Philippians 1:27-30 ESV).

Now we come to the main focus of our lesson—the role of the prison guard, someone with whom most of us can identify. Who was he? We are given little information, so we must fill in the gaps. His name appears nowhere in the credits, but he plays a critical role in the story. His life can also teach us valuable lessons.

How did he get this part in the story? He was just an average guy. His position carried a level of responsibility that he probably earned by working hard and being faithful. Philippi was a destination for many retired Roman officers and soldiers, so perhaps he merited the position from his honorable military service. He had a family and obviously influenced them for the gospel successfully. Others may have described him as a good man.

Regardless of the accuracy of our speculation, we can be sure his inclusion in this story was not accidental. This man was loved by God and in need of salvation, and God was at work orchestrating his inclusion in this exciting drama.

Application:

Can you think of times when God ordered your steps to lead you to unexpected divine appointments? What led this man to a place of faith?

Let's look at the series of important events that preceded his salvation. Try to imagine how this eventful day transpired for him. No doubt he expected it to be just another typical day. On this night he worked the graveyard shift. No doubt he was hoping for a quiet, uneventful evening. We do not know if he witnessed the accusation and punishment of his new prisoners, but at some point, he knew they would be spending the night with him. He was probably also aware the charges against them had no merit and braced himself for a long night of constant groaning, complaining, and cursing (typical behavior of his usual clientele). But when these men, who had been falsely accused, brutally beaten, shackled, and chained in a filthy jail, lifted their voices in prayer and praise to their God, it must have shaken him as much as the subsequent

earthquake. Neither did they escape when given the opportunity and even showed concern for him when he was about to take his own life. In response to their praise, the power that God displayed surely convinced him their God was far superior to the marble figurines the Romans worshiped. This was a God that he wanted to know and needed to know, so he asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (v. 30)

Application:

Is your life marked with distinctions that make others want to know your God?

The Contribution

As soon as someone is saved, God adds the new believer's name to the cast of characters in the grand drama of His will. That night the jailer played an easily overlooked, but very important role in this story.

I am confident the jailer was saved, and this was not just an emotional response. His was not just a decision, but a commitment. His new faith was evident in his actions; he took the prisoners to his home. He shared his experience with his family and encouraged them to join him in his commitment to faith. He offered care and hospitality to his new friends. All these things placed the jailer and his family at great risk. Just hours before, he had considered suicide out of fear for what the authorities might do to him; now, he is willing to risk all to do the right things. This jailer had gained a new 'perspective.' He trusted the Lord the way he had seen modeled by Paul and Silas.

Application:

What is the difference between making a decision for the Lord and making a commitment? How does your life demonstrate a committed life?

The jailer's contribution to Paul's ministry is far from insignificant. He cared for their physical needs. Paul and Silas had been stripped and brutally beaten, possi-



REVIVAL

bly repeatedly thrashed with a cane or stick, resulting in bruised muscles, open lacerations, and perhaps broken bones. Tossed into a damp and dirty prison cell, they were susceptible to dangerous infections and other physical problems. This new believer's medical care may have saved their lives. It undoubtedly hastened their recovery.

He ministered to their emotional needs with food, hospitality, and, most importantly, love and kindness to his new brothers in Christ. And he did all this at personal expense and great risk for him and his family.

Some might say the jailer only played a small role. But I suspect Paul and Silas would claim at that moment in time, he was the "Best Supporting Actor."

Application:

When our role is not in the limelight, do we give our full diligence to fulfill our responsibilities?

How can we encourage and show appreciation to someone who faithfully serves and makes essential contributions in a less visible ministry role?

The Continuation

The Bible does not say what became of this man and his family. But we know that following this event,

more people came to faith, and a church was born in Philippi. Very possibly this man played an important role in that. Sometimes great supporting actors are given a larger role. It is probably not coincidental that this same compassionate, generous support for Paul demonstrated on this night by the Philippian jailer, became the ongoing nature and practice of the church that became so dear to Paul's heart and instrumental in his ministry. Later, Paul would write to this church that became his "Best Supporting Actor" (Philippians 1:3-6).

Application:

Read Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, imagining that the jailer might be part of the original recipients. Can you find ways that his 'Best Supporting' role may have influenced how this church ministered to Paul? *W*

About the Writer: Danny and Jackie Gasperson have been married for 41 years. Danny serves as the Director of The Hanna Project, and Jackie works for both IM and WNAC. The Lord has blessed them with two grown children and two wonderful grandsons.