

Introducing the Church in Philippi

To the Citizens of Heaven, Part 1

Selected Scripture

Had the Apostle Paul and his missionary partner Silas gotten their way – had God answered their prayers and affirmed their desires for what they *thought* God wanted, a church on the coast of Greece – in fact, the very first church in Europe – would never have been planted.

For a season of time, everywhere Paul wanted to travel and preach was blocked by God saying “no”.

- Maybe we’ll go further east into Asia – God’s Spirit said “no”.
- Well why don’t we go east into Bithynia – and God’s Spirit said no.

Paul’s ministry had become a series of dead ends.ⁱ

But then one night, according to his own testimony, he had a vision – evidently from God – a vision of a man calling to him – not from the east – but from the west, on the coast of modern day Greece.

And the man was calling out, “Paul . . . come over and help us! Come over and help us!”

Paul correctly assumed the vision was from God; this was God’s new download into the GPS of his missionary path . . . and so God’s “no” suddenly became God’s “go”. And off they sailed.

That direction will change the course of church history . . . and world history . . . as gospel moves from the east to the west – and into what we now refer to as Europe.

Ten years later, the Apostle will write a letter back to the first church in Europe . . . a thriving, healthy church located in the town of Philippi. We know it as the Book of Philippians. Turn there if you would. As we begin our study together.

One author called this letter a dance of words, with exclamations of delight.ⁱⁱ

Another called it, short and sweet; magnificent though brief – a priceless parchment . . . a journey into joy.ⁱⁱⁱ

The letter is only 104 verses long; in fact, it’s shorter than the average newspaper article and you can read the entire letter in less than 15 minutes.

Now if you look up at chapter 1 – I mean just above chapter 1 – at the top of the page, it probably headlines with something like The Letter of Paul to the Philippians.

You see that? That’s as far as we’re going to get today.

This is going to take us longer than 15 minutes.

Your translation might read, The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians. The word epistle, or epistle is simply the Greek word for letter.

And in order to understand the flavor of this letter – the perspective and encouragement given to these people, what I need to do first is introduce you to the church at Philippi.

This is one of the few New Testament churches where we actually have the opportunity to meet some of the charter members of this first church plant in Europe.

I think this is hitting me more than it might any other time, and that’s because today, September 7, this same Sunday 28 years ago, Colonial held its first service in the band room of East Cary Middle School. Today is our 28th birthday.

Look at the person next to you and say, “Happy Birthday and I didn’t buy you one thing!” That was fun, wasn’t it?

But listen, if you go to a restaurant today, you can tell them you are indeed celebrating a special birthday – and if it’s Red Lobster, they’ll bring you a piece of chocolate cake and vanilla ice cream

covered with chocolate drizzle; I celebrate my birthday there . . . 3 or 4 times a year.

Not really . . . but I'm tempted.

As I re-read the history of the church plant in Philippi, and the variety of people that God collected together around the gospel, I couldn't help but think back to those early months where God collected together, here in Cary, a mechanic, a school teacher, a stock car racer, a computer executive, a medical doctor and a retired colonel who had been shot down over Berlin at the end of World War II . . . talk about variety.

The church is to be a living demonstration of the unifying, forgiving, motivating power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And this body of believers in Philippi will become a model church – for many reasons we'll uncover together – and its little wonder why they will become one of Paul's favorite churches in the years to come.

But I got to tell you, when it first started out, it didn't seem to even have much of a chance of getting off the ground.

Let me show you why.

Turn back to *Acts chapter 16* – this is the delivery room where the Church in Philippi is about to be born.

And keep in mind, a church is people . . . not a steeple. If you have a steeple, terrific, but the church is a living body – an assembly of redeemed sinners committed to following Christ and fulfilling His great commission.

So the spotlight of attention isn't on their first building project, but on the spiritual birth of the first believer. In fact, in this chapter we'll be given the testimony of the first 3 members of the church in Philippi.

The first person mentioned is a woman named Lydia.

Notice verse 11. So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, 12. and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.

Tuck that little comment away for a little later on. Now this is where he runs into problems.

Paul's typical strategy when he entered a town was to go first to the Jews and find a synagogue where he can preach. (cf. Acts 14:1).^{iv}

The problem he and his team experience is that there isn't any synagogue. And that's extremely telling here.

The Mishna – the collection of oral traditions, rules and regulations that the Jewish rabbis began compiling long before the birth of Christ – stipulated that in any city if there were at least 10 Jewish men living there, they were to establish a synagogue.^v

A synagogue was a consecrated place for the primary purpose of prayer.

But Paul can't find a synagogue anywhere in this city. Which means there aren't at least 10 Jewish men in this city of 15,000?

That's highly unlikely – what is more *likely* is that this means there aren't even 10 Jewish men in the entire population interested in following God and establishing a place of worship.

So Paul and Silas hunt around for some faithful Jews who still care about God . . . they spend several days asking around and they're finally told that there's some kind of prayer meeting down at the riverbank.

Notice verse 12 the latter part – we remained in the city several days 13. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.

Get that . . . not one Jewish man involved . . . it's outdoor . . . implying that no husband wants any of this nonsense taking place inside their home . . . especially on the weekend.

The only spark of genuine spiritual interest is a group of women.

You've got this Ladies Bible study going on down at the riverbank – they're doing an inductive Bible study through the Book of Exodus.^{vi}

Or maybe the minor prophets . . . they're studying the law and coming up with more questions than answers . . . and imagine . . . here comes a former Pharisee, a scholar, a teacher of the law by the name of Paul who says, "Ladies, would you mind if we sit down here with you and fill you in on what comes after the Book of Malachi?"

Look at verse 14. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God.

In other words, she's an Asian who's interested in the God of Israel.

Which is remarkable, given her status in society.

Luke writes here that she had a license to sell goods, or fabrics made of purple. Purple fabric was the most coveted, highly prized and most expensive fabric in the empire. It took harvesting 8,000 shellfish to produce 1 gram of purple dye. Purple garments were worn by the emperor; each Roman senator wore a white outer garment trimmed with purple cloth; private citizens wore splashes of purple scarves and clothing to show off their incredible wealth.

Lydia owns her own supply chain along the primary interstate leading to Rome; she's wheeling and dealing with the most expensive cloth on the planet.

We're told here she owns homes in Thyatira and Philippi – both major crossroads. If she were living today, she'd be the CEO of her own fashion enterprise with homes in LA and New York and probably Paris.^{vii}

But in all of it, she's come to the conclusion that she doesn't have what she really needs. And she's been attending a Jewish prayer meeting of women on the Sabbath day.

And God opens her heart – *verse 14b – to pay attention to what was said by Paul.*

That's another way of saying, God saved her . . . she believed the gospel delivered by Paul that day.

Sometime later – evidently not right away because by now she's got her staff, servants and family members involved – *verse 15 – And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.*

She's not the kind of woman to say no to . . . and her house is not only big enough for this missionary party of as many of 4 four men, if Timothy and Luke are with them, it's large enough to house them all.

Isn't it wonderful to find a business person who connects what they have with what God can do?

Somebody who says, "My home and my stuff actually belongs to God – it's at His disposal."

As a church planter, I can tell you how significant a place to stay can be. I had moved here to find a place to rent – 28 years ago – and a place to live so that I could move my wife and our twin babies out here with me and start the church. We were fairly certain the church would be planted in north Raleigh.

Through a series of events too long to retell, a man by the name of Eddie told me, "Listen, you

need a place to stay for a while until you settle your family – you stay with my wife and me . . . we've just finished building a home and we don't have any children, at that time, and you can have the top floor. Eat your meals with us . . . my wife will even do your laundry." I hoped he asked her first. Actually they both agreed to do whatever they could to help . . . I moved in . . . they lived in Cary – not too far from this location – which at the time was farm land. I'd get up in the morning and drive around North Raleigh and see church after church . . . then drive back to the Watkins home here in Cary, just down the street. I can remember coming to the realization that God was shifting my attention to base our ministry in Cary. Eddie helped me connect to another pastor in the community for advice on where to locate; Betsy sat at the kitchen table – I can still remember that moment – where she wrote out a list of possible schools in Cary to call as places to rent for church services. East Cary Middle School was on the list. After calling around, I found out East Cary Middle School was not only available, it was the only school that had air conditioning. I didn't even need to pray about *that*. Timely, gracious . . . providential . . . unexpected hospitality.

I have a personal and deep appreciation in the unwritten volume here surrounding the invitation from a woman named Lydia – a woman who said to this church planting team, "My home is yours."

We have a student at Shepherds right now, living in the back apartment room of a widow in our church – living there on a dime – he's here from India to cram a three year course into 2 years so he can get back to his family and ministry. He just finished his first year and went back home to India this past summer to see his wife and, by the way, to see his 11 month old baby daughter for the first time. He sent me a picture of them this past week when they met him at the airport. He's holding his daughter and she's looking at him like, "Who in the world are you." Can you imagine that kind of personal sacrifice? It's not a quick trip to India . . . and he doesn't have the money to travel back and forth – nobody in our church owns a Boeing 747. If you do he wants to pray for you. But listen, he doesn't have much free time anyway . . . he's on a mission . . . he's going to graduate this coming spring and return home to his family and become the president of a Bible college and seminary his father started several years ago.

In the meantime, there's a gracious widow who said, "My home is yours."

I find it fascinating that the first church in Europe was strategically impacted by someone who understood the connection between what they had and what God could use for His glory.

There's another charter member you've gotta meet here in Philippi. **Notice verse 16. As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.**

The word here translated divination comes from the Greek word *python* (πυθων) from which we get our word *python*.^{viii}

This was occultic, demonically empowered fortune telling.

How do we know that they are demons and not good angels?

Because God's word expressly forbids divination, attempting to contact the dead and fortune telling (Deuteronomy 18); and God He forbids it, not because it's all hocus pocus and smoke and mirrors, but because it can be legitimately connected to the demonic world that wants more than anything to provide information that can and will distract someone from the simplicity of the gospel and a walk of faith and trust in the living Lord for guidance and discernment.

They won't deny the Bible's wisdom necessarily . . . they'll just open people's minds to the possibility that they have something *better* than the Bible.

And listen, demons know the nickname of your great grandfather; they know where your uncle lived; they know the last thing your mother said to you before she died; they know your deceased brother's favorite baseball team; and they know other things too . . . they know the fact that you're going to be hired by that company – not because they know the future – they don't – anymore than you do – but they have global network that can relay information and they just happened to be listening in on the conversation at headquarters where you applied and can relay all of this through their network of communication we can't even imagine and into the impressionable and pliable and fallen minds of people in tune with the fallen spirit world who then feed it to others.

These conduits of communication are connected to the demonic world.

Don't play with it. Don't read your horoscope in the newspaper – don't put stock in a fortune cookie –

don't watch TV shows where necromancers are contacting the dead and bringing people to tears with what they reveal; not because what they communicate isn't true, but because it might come true . . . and you'll soon face temptation and distraction from waiting on God and studying His word and relying on His Spirit like never before.

It isn't long before the occultic practices of Philippi begin to harass Paul and Silas.

Here's this temple servant girl who made a lot of money for her owners, more than likely temple priests.

In fact, the imperfect tense of the verb reveals that she was not only making money, she was bringing in a steady, ongoing source of revenue.^{ix}

And would you notice she's actually telling the truth. **Verse 17. She followed Paul and us, crying out – literally screaming – "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."**

Obviously, she was telling the truth, but she was also the wrong person to do the advertising campaign. Her connection with Paul only discredited the gospel.

This is kind of like a heavy weight boxer who finishes pummeling his opponent into unconsciousness and then as they cart the guy off the hospital, the boxer stands there with blood all over his face and says, "I just want to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

It would be better to leave Jesus out of it.

This is like an adulterer in the office inviting everyone to his church.

In other words, the name of Jesus Christ and the church of Jesus Christ can be discredited if the wrong person is doing the advertising.

Paul and Silas just can't shake this girl off . . .

Finally, after several noisy days, Paul – **verse 18 – turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.**

The church in Philippi has just doubled in attendance.

Two women – and they couldn't be any different – have now been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the marvelous kingdom of light:

- Lydia was Asian, this girl was Greek;
- Lydia was in control of her business enterprise, this girl was a slave to an enterprise

- Lydia was cultured and refined; this young girl would need to be cared for and taught the very basics of life
- Lydia had been living the dream . . . this girl has been living a nightmare.
- Lydia was known by name and had all the right connections; this girl was an anonymous slave who had all the wrong connections.

And the liberating gospel rescued them both . . . don't miss it . . . they both needed saving . . . they both were going to hell. One of them just had better manners and prettier clothes.

Now this second rescue made headlines. And the next paragraph sets the scene for the third church member to find the Savior.

You're probably familiar with this narrative – but I want you to look again and pick up on the attitude of the Philippian culture. Notice *verse 19. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers* – magistrates. Notice their twofold accusation: Number 1, *These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city.*

This text reveals a deep seated Anti-Semitism in the community – these men are Jews . . . and they are bothering us. In other words, they really don't belong to us Romans citizens . . . they're Jews and they really don't fit in.

Perhaps this is why there wasn't a synagogue . . . maybe this is why Jewish men kept their heritage a secret . . . or at least on the backburner.

Secondly, *verse 21. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.*

Oh really? So far, all the missionaries have been doing is praying. And that was okay, by the way.

But now they've messed up the commercial standing of a local business. They've touched the almighty Roman dollar.

The fact that Paul and Silas dared to contradict the established customs of this culture – even though it was nothing more than demonism; the fact that they inadvertently affected commercial practices – even though it involved wretched enslavement of this girl to a pagan temple – that didn't matter. This is how we Romans live and make money and act . . . don't dare tell us otherwise.

One author wrote, you can hear the Roman pride breathing through these charges against Paul and Silas.^x

This issue will be addressed in Paul's letter as he reminds the church in Philippi to take a stand against this kind of pressure; he reminds them that they are first and foremost citizens of heaven (*Philippians 3:20*).

Look at the violent reaction against them *verse 22. The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods, 23. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely.*

Stop for a moment.

If you were a church planter moving into the city of Philippi, you might assume that God's plan for this city was just about over. You'd won two converts and a handful of associates connected to Lydia's business to faith in Christ. You'd seen God do wonderful things by opening the eyes and heart of two women that only the grace of God could open.

You would never imagine Paul and Silas, deep into that prison saying to one another, "Man, this has been a great start . . . God obviously has so much more for us to do in this city."

And you would never imagine Paul and Silas thinking that their next conversion to Christ – obviously not that powerful a God because looks where His missionaries are – that their next conversion story would be the jailor.

We often rush to the earthquake that releases them and overlook how uncaring, uninterested and unkind this Prison Warden was.

He takes Paul and Silas a step downward. The magistrates said to keep these prisoners safely. *Verse 4 tells us that he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

Listen, he's not afraid they will escape . . . he's only interested in torturing them.

Their backs have been beaten bloody – and now he adds his own touch to these Jews – he puts their feet in stocks – the Greek word refers to a Roman instrument of torture. It was a long block of wood with numerous holes so that, depending on their height and build, their legs would stretched apart as far as possible – until their tendons and joints would be terribly stretched – and then their feet would be locked into position.^{xi}

On top of that, to lie down would bring even more excruciating pain from their lacerated backs and bloody wounds.

What do you do now?

The next verse tells us that about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them.

I'll bet they were.

Because you don't sing with open wounds and an unknown future in prison . . . at midnight.

Paul is about to demonstrate what he will write 10 years later in his little letter for the church to demonstrate now that they faced persecution and poverty . . . *Philippians 4:4 . . . rejoice in the Lord always . . . and again I say, rejoice.*

An earthquake interrupts the third stanza and all their chains fall off – from off all the prisoners (verse 26). Notice, *verse 27; when the jailor woke and saw that the prison doors were opened he drew his sword and was about to kill himself.*

Why? Because he's a dead man.

The Roman code of Justinian declared that if a jailor allowed a criminal to escape he would be given their punishment. Obviously then, there were some prisoners on death row – perhaps they included Paul and Silas.

If they escape, he's going to be tortured and killed – it'll be easier if he takes care of it now.

Paul interrupts him in *verse 28* with the shocking news that none of them have escaped and they are all here.

That blew this jailor's mind.

Keep in mind he hadn't been listening to Paul and Silas singing at midnight . . . he'd probably heard enough of their gospel message before turning in, more than likely thinking to himself, what a bunch of kooks.

How do we know he wasn't listening, lying in bed, growing under conviction by their singing at midnight? Because verse 27 informs us that he awoke *after* the earthquake and after all the prisoner's chains had been loosed.

It's actually possible to understand from this text that some time elapsed between the prisoners being freed and the jailor being awakened.

Which implies that these hardened criminals have been arrested by the Spirit of God – the message they'd heard preached and prayed and sung – they had listened – and we have every reason to believe there had some sort of mass conversion inside this prison; how else would a man allow a jailor to put him back in his cell? That isn't natural.

Something dramatic has happened – not just in the loosing of their bonds, but in the actions of all

these inmates – this gospel message was indeed *supernatural* . . . *“Sir's, he falls to his knees and begs, “What must I do to be saved.” (verse 30)*

Believe . . . place your faith in . . . the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. (verse 31).

He believed – *verse 32* informs us *that his entire household heard the gospel and believed as well . . .* and they all immediately identified with this crucified, buried, risen Savior through baptism and publically took their stand as followers of Jesus Christ.

The magistrates finally get Paul and Silas to leave town, but not after Paul receives an apology for having been beaten without a fair trial – for he was, to their great horror, a Roman citizen too.

He did that to protect this growing congregation and keep them from immediate harm, at least for the time being.

Now, fast forward 10 years.

Paul writes this congregation a letter.

Imagine with me, sitting in that congregation is a fashionable businesswoman; a former demon possessed girl; and a blue collar Prison Warden along with his family and all their friends.

These first three charter members represented three different nationalities; Asiatic, Greek and Roman;

They were from three different levels of society;

- Lydia was wealthy;
- the girl had been a slave;
- the Jailor was a member of the middle class;

they represented the top, the bottom and the middle of society.

In fact, the entire empire was represented by these three people.

Do you think this was a coincidence? Did God have a subtle, not-so subtle message up His divine sleeve as this first church in Europe was founded?

Oh yes . . . this is the gospel; this is the power of Christ to rescue anyone – no one is too high to reach and no one is too enslaved and low to redeem . . .

This is the unifying transforming principle that binds a church together . . . redeemed sinners who find forgiveness in Christ and a church family where the ground is level and grace binds our hearts together and to our Lord, the chief shepherd of His church.

With that Paul begins his letter where he will define and profile, illustrate and encourage what it

means to not only be a Christian . . . but a fellow member of a local, New Testament, Christ following, church.

He'll do all of that and more in his Letter to the Church at Philippi.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/7/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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iv R. Kent Hughes, Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel (Crossway Books, 2007), p. 17
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ix Ibid
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