

## Catching Joy ~ A Study of Philippians

Introduction & Acts 16:11-40

### Introduction

You might be wondering why we're starting off a study of Philippians by looking into the book of Acts. The answer is simple enough. In Acts 16 we see the "origin story" of the church at Philippi. As we read the letter to the Philippians we will see how fond Paul was of the Philippians and the great affection he had for them. Acts 16 will give us some of the backstory of that.

Philippians is arguably the most joy-filled book of the New Testament. So it makes sense, then, that with our theme of the year being Joy & Justice, we would want to spend some time in Philippians. Interestingly, what we'll discover is that joy is found in the midst of suffering...which, admittedly, is counterintuitive. Along with Joy, Unity and Humility are also major themes in Philippians.

A little bit about the city of Philippi. It was originally named Crenides, but was conquered and expanded by King Philip of Macedonia, who also named it after himself. Philip was the father of Alexander the Great. It was later conquered by the Romans and turned into a Roman colony which is what it was as we come upon it in the New Testament. Philippi is in modern-day Greece.

From Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary, *"The city itself was organized by the state of Rome and functioned as a military outpost. The people who settled the city were probably army veterans, who were given the rights of Roman citizens. Typically such a colony would possess an autonomous government and be immune from tribute and taxation. Because of its proximity to the sea as well as to one of the major roads to Europe, Philippi was a commercial center in Macedonia. Its influence throughout the region made it a good place to begin preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ."*

As far as we know, it was in Philippi that the gospel first breached the continent of Europe when Paul came to this city on his second missionary journey. We read about how that transpired in Acts 16. This took place around 51 AD, and the letter to the Philippians was written about a decade later.

The letter came about because Paul was imprisoned in Rome, and the Philippians sent him financial/material support through one of their own, a guy named Epaphroditus. While in Rome, Epaphroditus became gravely sick, and word of his illness had reached the Philippians. So Paul was writing to them to thank them for their support, to express his joy over them, to encourage them, and to send Epaphroditus (who had since recovered from his illness) back to them.

Unsurprisingly, here's a link to an overview of Philippians by our friends at the Bible Project. 😊  
<https://bibleproject.com/videos/philippians/>

What stands out in this letter to the Philippians is Paul's enthusiastic commitment to Jesus, as seen in some of the unique hallmarks and treasures of this book that we'll see as we journey through it. But just to whet your appetite...

- *“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”* (Philippians 1:21)
- The great Christological poem/hymn in chapter 2 (2:6-11).
- *“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him...”* (3:7-8)
- *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”* (4:4)
- *“I can do all things through Him who gives me strength.”* (4:13)
- *What or who brings you joy?*
- *How, or in what ways, has your relationship with Jesus brought you joy? How, or in what ways, has your relationship with the church brought you joy?*

#### Acts 16:11-40

Actually let's back up a few verses and start at 16:6. Paul and his companions, Silas and Timothy, were in the early stages of what we know as Paul's second missionary journey. As they were traveling about, preaching the gospel, retracing some of Paul's steps from his first missionary journey, it appears they were hoping to go further south (into the province of Asia) or further north (into Bithynia) but the Holy Spirit kept them from doing so (see 16:6, 16:7). So they made their way to the city of Troas. Incidentally, they seemed to have picked up another traveling companion while in Troas...the author of Acts...who we know is Luke. (Notice the subtle transition from “they” to “we” that takes place from 16:8 to 16:10.)

While in Troas, *“During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”* (16:9-10) So they sailed across the Aegean Sea and after unnoteworthy stops in Samothrace and Neapolis, they arrived at Philippi, a leading city in the region of Macedonia, which is in modern day Greece.



Paul's basic M.O. when he entered a new town was to head to the local synagogue, typically on a Sabbath day, and preach the gospel. The first noteworthy thing about his time in Philippi is that Paul broke that pattern and instead, "*On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer.*" (16:13) This is very telling. It means that there was no synagogue in Philippi, meaning there were fewer than the requisite 10 Jewish men in the area in order to have a synagogue. (FYI...today it requires 10 Jewish adults...it's nice to see progress.) In such a place they still expected to find some people who prayed to and worshiped YHWH. Lacking a synagogue it was customary to find the religiously observant (most of whom would likely be women) gathering near a river under the open sky. Sure enough, that's exactly what Paul and company found.

A Gentile worshipper of God named Lydia responded positively to the gospel. Notice how it is described, "*The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.*" (16:14, emphasis added) This raises a most interesting theological question that people (Christians) have wrestled with since the beginning of the Jesus movement...what is God's role versus what is the human role in the whole salvation process? There seems to be a "both/and" dynamic at play, but with God playing the bigger role, doing the heavy lifting. Humans (in this case Paul) communicate the message, but then there's something mysterious that goes on between the Spirit of God and the human soul of the hearer. The human recipient needs to be humble, open, receptive, but at the end of the day it's spiritual work happening on a soul level. It is beautifully mysterious. It also means that we don't/can't manufacture believers/disciples. Metaphorically, agrarian and organic images are more accurate than industrial/fabricating images in describing the process...but even those fall short.

I imagine if you were to describe how you came to believe in and follow Jesus, you could identify some pieces of the puzzle, while other pieces of the process would be hard to name or articulate. That appears to be wonderfully normal. But praise God that He did His part.

- *As you consider your own story/experience, what role did God play, what role did you play, what role did others play in you coming to faith in Jesus?*

Seeing as God does the lion's share of the work, what is the role of disciples of Jesus in God's saving, redeeming, restoring project? Paul provides a good answer to that question and a good example to follow. He did four primary things that we too are called to do:

- Pray
- Communicate the message (the gospel)
- Embody the message (live out the truth/reality that the gospel declared)
- Teach others how to do the same

Basically, our part is to obey the Great Commission (remember how the Gospel of Matthew ends). In the midst of us doing that, God does His work in the hearts of those who listen to us, observe us, and interact with us.

And how did Lydia respond to the message? She was baptized. In the New Testament, and throughout Church history, baptism is the way to positively respond to the message of Jesus; the way of saying "Yes!" to Jesus. Baptism is our pledge of allegiance to Jesus and is our initiation into the New Covenant and into the community of Jesus (i.e. the Church). Throughout the book of Acts we regularly see people baptized as they respond to the gospel.

- *How would you describe your initial response to the gospel?*

Lydia also opened up her home to Paul and his friends. She was likely pretty well off as she was a dealer of purple cloth (see 16:14). Purple was an expensive dye, so those who traded in it tended to be wealthy. The fact that she could host four people, plus her own household, supports the idea that she was a person of means.

The gospel rarely advances, rarely makes inroads, without some level of conflict and resistance. That conflict, in this case, came through an unexpected source. Typically in Paul's journeys it is the religious establishment who give him problems because they are threatened by the implications of the gospel. In Philippi, however, the conflict came from human traffickers (as we would call them today). Paul had caught the attention of a slave girl (or, perhaps more accurately, he'd caught the attention of a spirit that possessed the slave girl) who seemed compelled to shout to anyone who would listen, "*These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.*" (16:17)

Now you might think that this free advertisement might be welcomed...I mean, she was declaring the truth, after all. But Paul was "*troubled*" (16:18) by this and, after many days of this going on, finally said, "*In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her! At that moment the spirit left her.*" (16:18)

The owners of the slave girl were none too happy about this, as their means of income was cut off, "*She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling.*" (16:16) Well, no good deed goes unpunished as "*they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities.*" (16:19) with the accusation being "*These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.*" (16:20-21) This accusation was not entirely untrue. The gospel does tend to be disruptive...

though there seems to be no indication beyond the slave owners' loss of income that anything negative had resulted in Philippi by the missionaries preaching the gospel.

*“The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas”* (16:22) This highlights the tendency for humans to “other”...to see foreigners and strangers as threats for no apparent reason. The “case” (if we can call it that) against Paul and Silas was dubious at best. But nevertheless they were stripped, beaten, severely flogged, thrown into prison, feet in stocks, and guarded carefully. (see 16:22-24) Seems a bit overkill if you ask me.

- *How have you seen the gospel (the message of Jesus) disrupt the status quo? In what ways would you like to see the gospel be disruptive?*

Now comes the part people are most familiar with...Paul and Silas praying, singing, worshipping while in prison. It makes for a great Sunday School and VBS lesson. **Joy in the midst of suffering.** (Hold on to that idea...it's a major theme in the book of Philippians.)

What do you think Paul and Silas were praying for/about? If it were me, it would have been something like, *“Lord, get me out of here!”* But, clearly, that's not what they were praying for, because when the prison doors were opened and the chains fell loose...they stayed there. I've got to believe that the substance of their prayers was more like, *“Lord, let this situation turn out for your glory”*, because that's what happened.

- *When you experience unpleasant circumstances/situations, how do you pray? Or what do you pray for?*

The jailer, thinking that the prisoners had escaped, was about to kill himself. In Roman culture, suicide was considered a more noble option than execution. And execution would have been the jailer's fate had the prisoners actually escaped. Now here's where things get really interesting. The jailer *“...rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas....and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’”* (16:29-30, emphasis added)

Hmm, what do you think the jailer meant, or had in mind, when he asked about being saved? There's absolutely nothing in this story that would lead us to believe that he was asking how to get to heaven when he died or that such a concept would have been on the mind of a pagan jailer. So what exactly was he asking? In the words of Bishop Stephen Neill, as quoted by N.T. Wright, it was something like, *“Will you please tell me how to get out of this mess?”*

The jailer had witnessed something extraordinary: a violent earthquake that shook the prison to its core and prisoners who didn't run off when given the opportunity. There's also a good chance that the jail was more like a basement dungeon underneath the residence of the jailer. So it's possible he heard some of the praying and singing, which may have piqued his interest...that's simply speculation, but not outside the realm of possibility.

Their response to the jailer's question was, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved—you and your household.”* (16:31) Verse 32 would indicate that they offered up more than

a one-sentence answer/explanation, “Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.”

I think the conversation went something like this, “Let us tell you about reality and who’s really in charge here...”, and then they proceeded to tell them all about Jesus...His life, His death, His resurrection, the kingdom He ushered in and was inviting the jailer and his family into. To which the jailer said, “Sign me up!” (my paraphrase), and he and his family were baptized. (Notice baptism again as the positive response to the gospel and the way of being initiated into the Kingdom.)

- *As you understand it, what does it mean to be “saved”? And what does someone need to do to be saved?*

But the story is not over yet...it gets even more riveting with political intrigue. The authorities/magistrates must have decided that a good beating and night in jail was enough for Paul and Silas and sent to have them released. Oh, but not so fast. Paul has a little detail he wanted to talk over with them. Why were Roman citizens (which Paul and Silas were) treated this way?

Rome was very proud of its justice system and of the high value placed on being a Roman citizen, with all the rights and privileges therein. And those rights had just been violated. Heads were going to roll, as the saying goes...or at least that was the fear Paul and Silas struck into the hearts of the magistrates.

Now here’s the burning question: why didn’t Paul and Silas disclose their Roman citizenship BEFORE they were stripped and beaten? Did they only just remember the perks of their citizenship while they were sitting in jail? No, I suspect something deeper was going on here. Paul understood how hard, even dangerous, it was to be a small community of Jesus followers in a pagan town. I contend that Paul allowed this to happen in order to buy the fledgling little church in Philippi some time and space. The authorities had done Paul and Silas wrong, and there could be hefty penalties to pay for that. So they would likely leave any associates of Paul alone out of fear of being reported. In this way Paul demonstrates his protective pastoral heart.

I also wonder if this explains why it took Paul so long to act when it came to freeing the slave girl from the possessing spirit. It’s possible that he could foresee what would likely occur, and maybe he was preparing himself. (You have to psych yourself up for knowingly getting flogged. Again, this is just conjecture/speculation...but it’s possible.)

- *What rights, privileges, and advantages does your citizenship afford you? How are you using that for the Kingdom? How do you ensure that your Kingdom citizenship takes precedence over your earthly citizenship? (Where do you find your ultimate loyalty and allegiance, and how does that play itself out?)*

So now we have a church in Philippi where there once was not one. Who made up this new church? Lydia and her family. (Some scholars believe that Lydia may have been the pastor of

this church after Paul left town and that the church probably met in her home.) In all likelihood the jailer and his family were part of the church. Maybe (hopefully) the slave girl too (again, speculation/conjecture, but within the realm of possibility). Oh, and maybe one more person...notice that chapter 16 ends and chapter 17 opens with “they”...so apparently the author (Luke) stayed in Philippi, likely providing some leadership and stability as well.

As we close out this first week, I just want to highlight all the “spiritual” stuff that occurred that helped birth the Philippian church...

- The Holy Spirit blocking/guiding the missionaries’ travels (16:6-7)
- The vision of a man from Macedonia (16:9)
- The Lord opening Lydia’s heart to believe (16:14)
- A slave girl with a (unclean) spirit following and shouting at Paul and friends (16:17)
- Paul exorcising that spirit out of the slave girl (16:18)
- A violent earthquake with prison doors opening and chains falling loose (16:26)

My point is, the advancement of the Kingdom is Spirit-empowered work, with stuff going on beyond what our senses can pick up. As we desire to see the Kingdom advance here and now through CUMC, may we learn to rely on the Spirit to lead/guide, empower, and do the beautiful, powerful, mysterious work that the Spirit does.

- *How open are you to “spiritual” things (i.e. things beyond natural explanation)? Or, what do you think about spiritual forces at play in the world? How open is CUMC to such things? How might we be more open to, and even reliant upon, the Spirit moving in and through us?*
- *How is the Spirit guiding and empowering you/us?*

#### Soul Training Exercise ~ Reading Scripture

I have a personal affinity to the book/letter to the Philippians. When I was in college I, along with a married couple, led a youth bible study from our church. For a semester we went through Philippians. I read Philippians (the entire letter) every day for an entire semester.

I’m not going to invite you to do that (unless you want to). But I will encourage you to read the entire letter once a week for the duration of this study (6 weeks). Perhaps read it in a different translation/version each week.

As you read, read “actively”...meaning, ask questions of the text, make observations, underline parts you find interesting or meaningful, etc. I can almost guarantee that if you accept this invitation your conversations in Table Group will be enhanced.