

“From There to Philippi”

The First in a Series of Sermons on Philippians

Texts: Acts 16:1-15; Isaiah 42:1-9

We are beginning a new series on two of Paul’s letters, Philippians and then Colossians. Some of you may be asking, “why begin a series on Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi by starting in the sixteenth chapter of the Book of Acts?” I am doing so because the entire sixteenth chapter of the Book of Acts is devoted to the establishment of the first Christian churches on the European continent, including the founding of a church in the Roman city of Philippi, named for Phillip II, the father of Alexander the Great. Acts 16 contains the record of Paul’s second missionary journey about 50 AD. Since Luke (the author of Acts) give us such a detailed account of Paul’s bold preaching of the gospel which led to a church being founded in Philippi, this passage serves as a good place to start our series, so that we know something about the church to which Paul sends his Philippian letter a dozen or so years later, in 62 AD, while the Apostle was imprisoned in Rome.

In verses 6-10 of Acts 16, Luke recounts the so-called “Macedonian call.” Paul has a vision of a man urging him come and preach the gospel in Macedonia (a region in Greece). In the 16th chapter of Acts we also find the account of the conversion of Lydia (vv. 11-15)—possibly the first convert to Christianity on the European mainland—followed by Paul’s encounter with a demon-possessed girl, which led to Paul’s arrest (vv. 16-24). And then there is the wonderful account of the conversion of the Philippian jailer (vv. 25-34). All of these events are behind the formation of a church in Philippi to which Paul writes his letter some years after first visiting the area and preaching the gospel. So, before we take up the text of Paul’s Philippian letter next week, we will begin with a survey of Acts 16, and Luke’s account of the initial spread of the gospel into Europe.

In the 16th chapter, Luke describes events which transpired while Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke were together in the city of Philippi. The background to Paul’s arrival in the city is the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15, when the Apostles and elders of the church gathered to settle the question of Gentile salvation. After the council had concluded, Paul and Silas made a pastoral visit to those churches which were founded during Paul’s previous journey to Galatia (in what is now central Turkey). These churches faced the threat of Judaizers—those who were teaching that in addition to believing that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah, one must also be circumcised, and even embrace elements of Jewish religion—keep the Jewish feasts, eat a kosher diet, etc. Silas was one of those commissioned by the churches to take the Jerusalem Council’s decree to the newly founded churches in Galatia plagued by this false teaching (Acts 15:22).

Prevented by the Holy Spirit from going to Asia Minor and Bythnia (Acts 16:6), Paul, Silas and two others newly added to the group, Timothy and Luke, crossed the Aegean Sea. In response to the vision given him (the “Macedonian call”), Paul began to preach the gospel in Macedonia on the European mainland. The reason why the Spirit prevented Paul and the others from going back to Asia Minor now becomes clear—God had other plans for Paul, namely taking the gospel to the very heart of Gentiles lands in Europe. We read in verses 11-12. *“So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days.”*

Philippi was the site of a fierce battle in 42 BC when Mark Anthony and Octavian defeated the forces of

Brutus and Cassius, Julius Caesar's assassins. When Octavian and Mark Anthony subsequently fought one other in 31 BC (the battle of Actium), Octavian ordered that the city become a colony for Antony's disbanded army. This is why Philippi is a Roman city (non-Greek) with little if any Jewish population. The city was located on the *Via Egnatia*, an important Roman road running from Italy to Asia Minor.¹ Philippi was a very important place for a Christian church. As we read in our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 49, the messianic prophecy regarding YHWH's servant, indwelt by the Spirit, who will be proclaimed to the nations begins to unfold in the light (truth), righteousness, and justice proclaimed to the Greeks and Romans by the Apostle Paul.

During his missionary journeys, it was Paul's custom to find the local synagogue and begin preaching to Jews there that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of those Old Testament prophecies of a coming Messiah. Once a core group of Jews embraced Jesus as their Messiah, they began to reach out to Gentiles. This is not the case in Philippi which likely had no synagogue. According to verse 13 that "*on the Sabbath day we [Paul and Luke, and perhaps Silas and Timothy] 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.*" The few Jews in the area congregated outside the city's gates, a good indication that there was no synagogue within the city. "*One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira,*" (a city in Asia Minor), "*a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God.*" "Purple goods" were likely expensive fabrics dyed with juice from the madder root. These were well-known in Thyatira.² Lydia is a Gentile convert to Judaism or among those considering conversion—a proselyte.

As Luke tells us, "*the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.*" The Holy Spirit sent Paul to preach in Macedonia, and then opened the hearts of those who heard Paul's gospel so that they trust in Jesus. According to 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.*" As evident throughout the Book of Acts, just as soon as Lydia professes faith in Jesus, she and her entire household are baptized. As with Jewish converts, Gentile converts received the sign and seal of the new covenant (baptism) which included everyone in their household (including children). This is a strong argument in favor of infant baptism—unless, as our Baptist friends must assume, there were no children under the mythical "age of accountability" in any of the households (families) of the New Testament. Lydia expresses her new faith in Christ with an act of charity (hospitality) inviting Paul and his companions to stay at her house. In many ways, this is one of the first indications of a church forming in the city—a well-to-do convert, providing a place to meet.

But when the gospel first comes to a new area, another response is direct opposition from Satan. Luke recounts in 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. She followed Paul and us, crying out, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.' And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, 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.*" Going the same spot where they had previously encountered Lydia, the missionaries were met by a slave girl, possessed by a demonic spirit which enabled her to predict the future.

¹ Peter T. O'Brien, Commentary on Philippians, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 3-8.

² O'Brien, Commentary on Philippians, 6.

This poor girl was exploited in the worst possible manner by both her owners and by the demonic spirit which possessed her. Through the occult power of this demon, the girl was able to foretell the future—or more likely, she was able to convince people that she was able to tell the future. Since human nature hasn't changed much in the two-thousand years that have elapsed between our age and hers, people in Philippi were every bit as willing to spend great sums of money to learn of their future destinies, just as Americans are today.

In the Greek, Luke describes the girl as a “pythoness” (a “diviner”)—a follower of Apollo, the Greek god whom was thought to give oracles about the future. In the Greco-Roman world, the python was the mythological serpent which supposedly guarded the temple and oracle of Apollo, after Apollo had killed it in battle. Over time, “the word *python* came to mean a demon-possessed person through whom the python spoke.”³ The spirit of the python supposedly seized control of an individual's vocal cords and spoke through them, much like a ventriloquist does through a hand-held puppet. This slave girl was regarded by the local populace as a voice-box for the spirit of the python, (Apollo). Based on Luke's account she was likely well-known in the region, which explains why her prophetic abilities were in such great demand and why the merchants wanted her to keep on giving oracles.

The python girl kept following Paul and the others as they preached the gospel. She would yell at those who were listening to Paul, “*these men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.*” Even though possessed by a demonic spirit, this girl—or at least the demon speaking through her—was decent theologian, for she knew full well who these men were and about whom they were preaching. The title “*Most High God*” is used of YHWH in the Old Testament. In Numbers 24:16, Balaam's fourth oracle was uttered in the name of the “Most High.” The Psalmist describes how the people of God knew YHWH as their great rock, and “*God Most High*” is their redeemer (Psalm 78:35). The demon knows who Paul is and opposes the gospel the Apostle preaches.

It is interesting to note that Isaiah describes Satan's desire to ascend God's throne as follows; “*I will make myself like the Most High*” (Isaiah 14:14). Furthermore, the slave girl's words echo Luke's account in his gospel of our Lord's conflict with another evil spirit while in Capernaum. In Luke 4:34, when Jesus encountered a demon-possessed man, the demon cried out at our Lord's presence, “*Ha. What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth. I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*” Later in that same chapter—after Jesus performed a number of exorcisms—the demons proclaimed “*you are the Son of God*” (Luke 4:41). The demon who possessed this girl recognized that these men were servants of YHWH and the Lord Jesus Christ—the “Most High God.” The presence of these missionaries preaching Christ in Philippi was a real threat to the continuance of this rather profitable fortune-telling enterprise.

We ought not miss the fact that the demon connected the name of the “Most High” with the declaration of the “way of salvation.” This reflects the biblical teaching that anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord (“the God Most High”) will be saved. The Romans of Philippi were not familiar with the Old Testament. When Paul and Silas proclaimed to them that salvation was to be found in the God of Israel, they would have heard this message through the grid of pagan religion, in which deliverance from the material world to a non-material spirit-world was the goal. This was very typical of these proto-gnostic mystery religions (much like the “force” in Star Wars). Paul must spend much time explaining to such people that God Most High, the God of Israel, is the one who has made the heavens and the earth. YHWH is not connected with the sun, moon, or the pantheon of Gods, who were more like contemporary

³ Richard Longenecker, The Acts of the Apostles, 462.

super-heros than the biblical conception of YHWH, the God Most High.

Eventually, Paul had enough of this girl following the evangelists around yelling at them. After many days of this, Luke says, “*Paul, having become greatly annoyed, 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 spirit immediately left her and she was finally free from the clutches of this pythonic spirit who had terrorized her. As F. F. Bruce nicely puts it, “when Paul exorcized the spirit that possessed her, he exorcized [the local merchant] means of income.”⁴ Not long after this, Paul is in serious trouble with local authorities.

People will tolerate just about anything until it hits them in the wallet. It is not surprising that the only times in the Book of Acts Luke reports attacks by pagan Gentiles upon Christian missionaries is when the preaching of the gospel interferes with the profits of the merchants who make their living by supporting pagan practices, such as the slave girl’s prophetic abilities described here. The girl’s handlers won’t stand for it. In verses 19-24, we read, “*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. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.’ The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.*” A similar thing will occur in Acts 19, when Demetrius the silversmith rallies the merchants of Ephesus to oppose Paul and the preaching of the gospel.

Paul and Silas are arrested, but not Luke or Timothy. Paul and Silas were observant Jews and probably dressed accordingly even though both were Roman citizens. Timothy and Luke, on the other hand, were Greek, and very likely looked and dressed much like the Philippians. Anti-Semitism is clearly an issue here, for when Luke describes the crowd as saying these “men are Jews,” he also notes that the Philippians accused them of opposing Roman religion. It was not illegal for Jews to proselyze Roman citizens, but the practice was certainly frowned upon, especially in regions such as Macedonia, where there was not much of a Jewish presence and where Jews and their distinct customs and dress would have made them highly visible outsiders.

According to Roman practice, the city of Philippi had at least two magistrates before whom Paul and Silas appeared. The magistrates were responsible to keep order and administer punishment to those who disrupted the peace. There is no mention made by Luke of the fact that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens who were, therefore, completely exempt from such harsh treatment as they received here. Perhaps the slave owners, who likely had great influence over the magistrates, dismissed Paul and Silas’ claims to protection under Roman law since they were obviously also Jews. There was no attempt to weigh the evidence against them as Paul and Silas were summarily stripped, and then beaten severely with wooden rods, known in Latin as *fasces et secures*, symbolized as a bundle of wooden slats nearly two millennia later by the Socialist Party of Mussolini, and from which we derive the term “*fascist*.”

In 2 Corinthians 11:23, 25, Paul speaks of being beaten with rods three times, one of the instances described here, while the other two are not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. Adding insult and further injury to injury, Paul and Silas were and placed in stocks. Romans stocks had variously

⁴ F. F. Bruce, The Book of Acts, 314

spaced leg holes so that the person placed within them would be subject to painful leg-cramps and unbearable agony. People often fainted from the pain and could not walk for days after their release. This was no minor penalty. Philippi was not going to tolerate any affront to its influential merchants.

Well, we have encountered Lydia and then the python-girl, next we meet the Philippian jailer, the third person immortalized in Luke's narrative recounting the gospel first coming to Philippi. Usually, jailers in Roman cities were retired soldiers who were strict disciplinarians. They knew full well that if any of their prisoners escaped, they would be subject to the same penalty that the escapee was to have been given. After Paul and Silas were beaten, the jailer put them in what would be maximum security, in the inner cell, fastening them in stocks secured with chains. The Philippian jailer has no idea how his life was about to change because of these two new inmates.

Beginning in verse 25, Luke gives us one of the most amazing and joyful accounts in all the New Testament—the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his household. *“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’ And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.”*

It was around midnight that Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, when God sovereignly intervened to deliver them. We can only marvel at Paul and Silas' faith and composure under such horrific duress. As church father Tertullian once put it, “the legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven.”⁵ The other prisoners, Luke says, were listening to the two of them praying and singing, no doubt, perplexed at their behavior in the midst of terrible misery.

At this exact moment a great earthquake rocked the jail, the foundations of the prison were shaken, all the doors flew open, and the lag bolts which held the prisoner's chains in place were loosened. The jailer was startled from his sleep and awoke to see the jail doors swinging open. His first thought must have been sheer panic since any missing prisoner meant his own death. Drawing his sword to kill himself, the jailer must have been equally startled to find out that his prisoners had not taken the opportunity to escape, but had remained in their jail cells. Ordering the guards to bring in torches to light the building, the jailer was shocked by what had happened. He falls at Paul's feet and after bringing Paul and Silas out of the inner cell, humbly asks of them, *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”*

It is difficult to know how much the Philippian jailer understood of Paul and Silas' message when he asked them about the salvation they had been proclaiming. He had heard the python-girl's comments, or at least knew about them, namely, that Paul and Silas were preaching in the name of the *Most High God* a way of salvation. Perhaps indifferent to it at the time, this salvation was now clearly seen in their

⁵ Cited in Bruce, *Acts*, 317.

deliverance from the earthquake and in the surprising joy on the part of Paul and Silas after suffering such a savage beating. Their God—the God Most High—was great indeed, granting joy in affliction and then rescuing his people from their enemies. Paul and Silas respond to the jailer’s question with the famous gospel imperative, “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.*”

Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all of those in his house. The jailer and his entire household (*oikos*) heard the instruction from the word, and then after washing Paul and Silas’s wounds, the jailer and all the members of his family were baptized. The great preacher of the Eastern Church, Chrysostom, once declared about the jailer, “he washed and *was washed*, he washed them from their stripes, and was himself washed from his sins.”⁶ Luke tells us that they all rejoiced because they had come to believe in God and celebrated with a meal prepared for all of them. This is the first potluck in the new church in Philippi.

Luke’s account clearly supports the principle of household baptism as seen throughout the New Testament, when, after the profession of faith by the head of a household, the whole household is subsequently baptized. When Lydia was converted, she was baptized along with her household (v. 15). In 1 Corinthians 1:16, Paul speaks of baptizing whole households. The term used here, “*oikos*” includes the jailer’s entire family, including infants and small children, and would even extend to any servants and their families within his household.

As Paul explains to us, baptism is the fulfillment of circumcision (Colossians 2:11-12). In Romans 6, he describes baptism as “into” the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:1-11). Paul also speaks of baptism as the “putting on of Christ” (Galatians 3:27) as well as a “washing of rebirth” (Titus 3:5). Since Paul saw baptism as the fulfillment of circumcision, and since the Old Testament sign changed from a knife and cutting ordeal—the removal of skin—to a water ordeal, as in baptism in the New, then there is no reason to believe that even though the sign of the covenant changes from circumcision to baptism, that the thing signified would change. The thing signified is God’s own unconditional promise to be “God to his people” and as such to consecrate this people unto himself. In any case, the Jailer has embraced the Savior and he and his family now rejoice with Paul and Silas. Salvation has come to him and to his whole household. YHWH’s servant is blessing the nations.

Paul’s exit from Philippi set the stage for further missionary efforts in Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth. “*But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, ‘Let those men go.’ And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, ‘The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace.’ But Paul said to them, ‘They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.’ The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.*”

Before Paul left Philippi he was going to make sure that an such injustice as the beating he had received was made right. Paul was a Roman citizen, legally exempt from such treatment. Paul was not going to leave until the magistrates themselves escorted him outside the city because they feared that this could be

⁶ Cited in Bruce, Acts, 318.

appealed to the provincial governor, who would likely order done to them what they had done to these two undeserving Roman citizens (Paul and Silas). Agreeing to leave the city, the episode ends where it began, with Paul and company staying at Lydia's home.

But Paul leaves behind a newly-founded church in Philippi—which initially included Lydia and her family, the jailer and his family, and no doubt others. It is Paul's letter to this same church (Philippians) to which we will turn in the weeks ahead.

Remarkably, when writing to the Philippians some years later, Paul mentions that Christians in the city were still being persecuted, as he reminds them, it had not only been granted to them to believe in Jesus Christ but it had also been granted to them to suffer for his sake (Philippians 1:27-30). In Philippians 4:10-16, Paul will commend the Philippian Christians for their hospitality to him in support of further missionary endeavors.

Here, in the Roman city of Philippi, the God Most High has revealed the way of salvation, and is calling his people to faith in his Son Jesus. In doing so he is confirming his gracious covenant promise to be our God, and we his people. As we saw in our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah foretold of a time when YHWH's Servant would bless the Gentile nations. This promise is being fulfilled, in part, in Acts 16 and in Macedonia through the preaching of the gospel. The response to this gospel is faith in the mediator of the covenant of grace—Jesus Christ. The gospel promises are ratified in the waters of baptism, through which believers in Jesus Christ and our households are consecrated unto God.

Salvation came to the households of Lydia and the Philippian jailer. But that same covenant promise and the salvation it brings has come to the households present here this morning. Even the demons recognized that this is the work of the God Most High, whose way of salvation was being proclaimed in Philippi—a salvation which takes away the guilt of sin and gives to us the hope of heaven. Through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ—God's way of salvation—we too, are heirs to these same promises, as are all the children whom God has graciously given unto us. Through faith in Jesus Christ—the God Most High and through the way of salvation he has established, God will save you and your household. The gospel has gone “from there (Asia Minor) to Philippi.” And now it has gone from Philippi to Anaheim. And the gospel imperative has come with it. “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.*” Amen.