

Introduction to Philippians  
Philippians 1:1-2, Acts 16:11-40  
January 1, 2023  
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Read Philippians 1:1-2

*"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)*

## **Introduction**

in 356 BC Alexander the Great's father, Philip of Macedonia, conquered a town in northern Greece called Krenides and named it after himself, Philippi. The Romans conquered it from the Greeks in 168 BC, and it witnessed one of the most important battles between Roman forces vying for power. If you remember your history or your Shakespeare, you'll remember the names Mark Antony, Octavian, Brutus, Cassius, and Julius Caesar. The quick story is that Brutus and Cassius joined with the other Roman senators to assassinate Julius Caesar in 44 BC because he was becoming too powerful ("Beware the Ides of March" and "Et Tu, Brute"). Following the assassination, Mark Antony and Octavian formed an army who challenged them, and Philippi is the city where they defeated Brutus and Cassius' army in 42 BC. Octavian became the Caesar Augustus who was referred to in Luke 2 who initiated the census that sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. By Paul's day, Philippi was a Roman military outpost where many ex-soldiers lived in retirement, even though it was 700 miles from Rome. The citizens of Philippi could be Roman citizens, and the city was so similar to the capital city that it was called "little Rome."<sup>1</sup>

Paul, Timothy, Luke, and Silas, what I would call the Fab Four of early Christian missionaries, first came to the city of Philippi around 51 AD, about a decade before Paul wrote this letter. It is the first congregation that Paul established on the continent of Europe in the middle of his second (of three) missionary journeys. Before we deal with the text of Philippians, let's turn to Acts 16 to hear of Paul and his companion's adventures; we'll spend most of our time there. Starting at verse 11 we'll meet

### **I. The First Church Member Who Got Saved (Acts 16:11-15)**

*<sup>11</sup> So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. <sup>15</sup> 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.*

Normally when Paul and his companions would first come to a city, they would visit the local synagogue and look to connect and witness to those who might be open to hearing about Jesus being the promised Messiah. To form a synagogue, however, there needed to be at least 10 Jewish men and their households in an area to support it, and apparently Philippi did not have that minimum number; only some women who had come to the riverside to pray. So Paul and his team started a conversation with them, and the main one who responded to their teaching and had her heart opened to the gospel by God was a merchant named Lydia.

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<sup>1</sup> Background info from Steven J. Lawson, *Philippians For You* (India: The Good Book Company, 2017), p. 20; and Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians* (Louisville: John Knox, 2012), p. 12.

Now, at that point, if you were part of the missionary/church-planting group, you might have been severely disappointed and started grumbling: “God brought us all the way here and we only have one person out of this big city who has listened and responded to us.” But God had lit a spark that would grow into a bonfire. The kingdom grows from humble beginnings, from tiny seeds of faith. Lydia became their host as they stayed and ministered in the city. It’s beautiful that as God opened her heart and mind to believe the gospel, she then opened her home.<sup>2</sup> This is a reminder that when we share Christ with people, God works in their hearts to bring them to faith. That should be amazingly encouraging that it’s not all up to us and our skill level in convincing people of the gospel, it’s about our being faithful and available; God will use our efforts to bring people to faith, as He did Lydia, this first believer in Philippi.

Things got worse in their visit to the city before they got better:

## **II. The Fortune-Teller Who Got Paul & Silas Arrested (Acts 16:16-24)**

*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. 17 She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” 18 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. 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. 20 And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. 21 They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” 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. 24 Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

This slave girl was a fortune teller who made her owners money with her predictions. Luke says that she had a “spirit of divination,” which meant a literal spirit inside of her, not just that she had a gift or ability to tell the future. This is confirmed later when Paul cast a demon out of her after he became so exasperated by her following them around yelling out their identity and mission. She was relieved of two bondages that day, as not only did her demon master get cast out, but she was now useless to her human masters as well. The men who owned her were furious that she couldn’t tell fortunes anymore, so they made up charges against Paul and Silas that were bigger than just “they’re bad for our business” to make it sound like they were political revolutionaries. The crowd joined in and the authorities had them beaten and thrown in jail without a trial or any kind of due process, assuming that these Jews were not Roman citizens as well.

The Spirit of God will bring people to salvation as we saw in Lydia’s story, but we also see that God can tear down all spiritual strongholds. This is encouraging for any believers who engage in mission work, evangelism, or really any ministry. Pray hard for God to work through your efforts and tear down the dark forces that resist the gospel, whether that’s demonic forces or unbelieving hearts. But keep in mind that the dark forces in this world won’t just roll over in defeat, they will strike back as Paul and Silas knew and experienced. This is probably one of the times that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians: “*three times I was beaten with rods*” (2 Cor. 11:24). If nothing else, we see that church planting and spiritual warfare isn’t for wimps. Satan will attack those who are spreading the kingdom, but always remember that “*greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world*” (1 John 4:4).

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Merida and Francis Chan, *Exalting Jesus in Philippians* (Nashville: Holman, 2016), p. 8.

And then one of the great conversion stories in the book of Acts followed:

### **III. The Jailer Who Got Baptized (Acts 16:25-40)**

*<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." <sup>29</sup> And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup> And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup> And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." <sup>36</sup> 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." <sup>37</sup> 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." <sup>38</sup> The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. <sup>39</sup> So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. <sup>40</sup> So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.*

If I was beaten with sticks, thrown in jail unjustly, and had my feet put in stocks, and then God caused an earthquake to destroy the prison and my bonds, I think I would say, "It's been real, it's been fun, it hasn't been real fun; I'm out of here." Like in Acts 12 when Peter was imprisoned until an angel showed up, the chains fell off of his hands, and he walked right out past the squad of soldiers guarding him; I would assume that was God's will for me too. But apparently Paul and Silas felt that God wanted them to stay there. If they had left, the jailer would have been killed, that was the punishment for a Roman official who let prisoners escape on his watch. That explains why he was about to end his life with a sword in verse 27. But Paul cried out, "Don't hurt yourself, we're all still here."

And instead of ending his life, the jailer found new life. He knew that they were men of God, so he asked the most important question that anyone can ever ask: "*What must I do to be saved?*" And the summary answer was "*believe in the Lord Jesus.*" You'll notice that verse 32 says that they spoke the word of the Lord to him and his household, which surely means that they went into a lot more depth and explanation of what the Gospel is, even as the simplest and most profound summary is belief in Jesus. What a beautiful scene when the jailer washed their wounds and fed them in his house, then he and his whole family were baptized. That all happened late in the night, and then they returned to the jail in the morning, where they found out that they were released. Paul doesn't let the magistrates off easy, telling them that he was a Roman citizen and they had mistreated him. I think he was doing that the sake of the church there and to establish a precedent where the civil authorities would think twice before harassing people who were sharing their faith.

We all want people to walk up to us and say what the Philippian jailer said to them: "*What must I do to be saved?*" Wouldn't that be great if that happened often? We wouldn't have to start these conversations with people and try to steer them around to spiritual things and find a non-awkward way of asking, "So, what do you think about Jesus?" It would be so cool to just have them ask us

straight up. But how many of us would be willing to endure the kind of pain that Paul and Silas did to get to that point? Not that this is a formula: get thrown in jail and someone will automatically get saved. But Paul and Silas not only had courage to be proclaiming the gospel in the city that got them thrown in jail, but then they prayed and sang in the midst of their suffering, and finally, they showed integrity and mercy by not escaping when they could have.

The chapter ends with them stopping by Lydia's house on the way out of town and verse 40 says that "*when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.*" You know what that means, right? There was now a church meeting at Lydia's house, the church that Paul was writing to that would grow and become a great blessing to its founder and to the cause of the spread of the gospel. Church planting is vital in our missionary and evangelistic efforts. God used Paul and his companions to plant churches in the first century and He has been using church planters ever since to establish houses of Christian worship in cities and towns all over the world. If you haven't heard yet, the Presbytery that our church is a part of, the Heritage Presbytery, has targeted the town of Milford, DE for a church plant. I am part of the church planting committee that has interviewed a man who is feeling called to plant the church there. I don't know what it's going to look like, I don't know how he's going to approach things, I hope that it doesn't involve the church planter being thrown in jail! But we need to be praying that the Lord moves mightily to tear down strongholds and open hearts to receive the gospel and be a part of this new church.

So now we turn our attention to the letter that Paul wrote ten years after these events. He was back in Roman chains when he wrote, just like he was at the end of his time in the city. We'll find out later that the church had sent a man named Epaphroditus to Paul with a monetary gift and that Paul sent him back to Philippi with this letter in hand. You could think of it as the greatest thank-you note ever written, though obviously it's much more than that. I like to think that either Lydia or the jailer read the letter to the congregation when it came! In the first two verses we see

#### **IV. The Servants Who Greeted the Saints (Philippians 1:1-2)**

*<sup>1</sup> Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: <sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

The last time you wrote a letter, most likely an email (does anyone still write hand-written letters?), you probably signed it at the end. The convention back then was to announce your name at the beginning, however, so Paul began this epistle with his name and that of his companion as he was writing, Timothy. Timothy was one of Paul's most trusted partners in his missionary and church-planting work, and the Philippians knew him personally. Timothy was much younger than Paul, and we know much more about him from the two letters Paul wrote that have become 1 and 2 Timothy. Paul is one of those men of whom we say, "this man needs no introduction," but it's never bad to remind ourselves of who Paul was. He had been trained as an expert in Jewish law, "a Pharisee of Pharisees" who hated Christians and worked to have them killed. But Jesus appeared to him and changed his whole life, appointing him to take the gospel message everywhere he went (read about that in Acts 9). Steven Lawson says that "the apostle Paul... was so active for the Lord that it could well be said that he lived the life of nine men. He was a dynamic missionary, church planter, powerful preacher, caring pastor, gifted evangelist, astute theologian, brilliant teacher, itinerant speaker, and prolific author – all merged into one extraordinary person."<sup>3</sup>

Paul called himself and Timothy "servants" and the people he was writing to he called "saints." In our modern minds, these are very different nouns. A servant is a lowly person (in fact the Greek

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<sup>3</sup> Steven J. Lawson, *Philippians For You* (India: The Good Book Company, 2017), p. 16.

word Paul used is closer to our idea of a slave) while a saint is an exalted, extra-holy person. Did Paul really think that these Philippians were way better than he and Timothy? Or was he being falsely modest or possibly sarcastic? (Don't rule that last one out, he is very sarcastic in 2 Corinthians.) I don't think any of those things here, though; I think that every Christian is both a saint and a slave of Christ. Who else had been called a servant or slave of God in the Bible? Moses, Joshua, David, Jesus. Paul and Timothy were in good company in identifying themselves as slaves. Paul was saying that they were willing to serve Jesus in any capacity that He asked; that their lives and bodies were completely at the Lord's disposal.

One definition for a saint in the Catholic Church's book *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* is: '...a member of the Church [who] has been assumed into eternal bliss and may be the object of general veneration.' A saint is also a person of remarkable holiness who lived a life of heroic virtue, assisted by the Church, during their pilgrimage on earth."<sup>4</sup> So, first a saint is a dead person, and second they are super-spiritual, extra-holy because of what they accomplished on earth. So, is this who Paul was talking to – dead super-Christians? No, Paul was writing to the ordinary believers who had been given new life in Christ. The Greek word for saints, *hagioi*, does mean 'holy ones,' but more in the sense of being set apart or consecrated. They were people who came from all different backgrounds, who were still learning what it meant to follow Jesus, and struggling with all kinds of sins. But they had been redeemed and transformed by Jesus, so they were saints. Paul would use that same word to describe us: "*the saints in Christ Jesus who are in central Delaware.*" You may not think of yourself as a saint, but if you have been redeemed by Jesus, that is exactly what you are, and this is a gathering of the "communion of the saints." We all struggle with being rotten sinners who don't feel particularly holy most days, but God has declared us righteous in His sight because of Jesus' work on our behalf.

At the end of verse 1, Paul gives us a sense of the church leadership at the time: "*the overseers and deacons.*" He didn't have to single them out because they were included in the greeting to the saints, right? But I think that he was endorsing their leadership in the church that he originally planted. To single them out was to say in a sense, "You have great leaders, praise God for them." It's also significant that Paul didn't write this letter just to the leaders, he wrote it "*all the saints.*" They all needed to hear his encouragement, advice, and theology, not just the leaders. That's still the leadership that we have today in the PCA and many other churches, as overseers is another word for elders in our understanding. Some people would not agree, as the Greek word used here is *episkopos* which means bishops, not *presbyteros* the word for elders. But we see them as interchangeable: an elder is an overseer of the church and people's spiritual lives, and the deacons care for people's physical needs.

Then Paul greets the Philippians with grace and peace, a phrase that he used in six of his other letters. This greeting spoke to both the Jewish and Gentile believers. Grace was the Gentile/Greek greeting, while "Shalom" peace was the Jewish greeting. Paul will bookend the letter by ending it with "*the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit*" (4:23).

## **Conclusion**

This letter was written directly to the church at Philippi, but that does not mean it was only meant for them. This letter was written to you and me, and to every believer that has been fortunate enough to have a copy of the New Testament translated in their language. God inspired the writing

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.roman-catholic-saints.com>

of this letter in a way that it is as inerrant, authoritative, and infallible as any of the rest of Scripture, and it speaks to all people in every culture in every age of history.

Do you need deep and encouraging friendships?

Do you struggle with anxiety and worry?

Does this church need to grow in unity and love?

Do you struggle with pride and petty grudges?

Is your prayer life anemic or robust?

Where will you find meaning and purpose in life?

Are you worried about what is waiting for you when you die?

For these and many other questions, Philippians has a deep well of answers and encouragement to be *“filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ”* (1:11). It is an amazing book that deserves coming back to over and over. What’s the starting point? *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”* That’s absolutely the foundation to being a servant and a saint, to having experienced God’s grace and found peace through Jesus.

→ Communion

Benediction

Ephesians 6:23-24 - *“Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.”*