

When the Gospel Comes to Philippi

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Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0 : 00] We're pleased to have a seat. Are we well this morning? Great. So good to see the children up here, wasn't it? There was me thinking I came dressed cool to church this morning, but then I saw Tiago, so I can't compete with that.

So here we are, as Tim said, we're starting a new series this morning in the letter that Paul wrote to the church in Philippi. I thought it'd be good for us this morning. As we get into this little series that will take us through the summer, to get to know some of the people who are in this church, and get to know their city of Philippi, where they live, where they witness, where they love Jesus.

So let me invite you to turn your Bibles back to that passage that we read, Acts chapter 16. And let's just spend some time this morning looking at what happened when the gospel came to Philippi. So let's pray as we come to God's word this morning, and let's ask that he would be at work and speak to us. So Father, help us this morning. As we turn to your word, we think of those lyrics that we sang, the song before last, that you would give us eyes to see.

Father, would you speak to us by your Spirit? Would you sink these truths deep into our hearts? Would you strengthen our faith? And would you equip us for service?

[1 : 20] And Father, would we just fall more in love with your Son, the Lord Jesus, this morning? And this is our prayer made through his name. Amen. So, alone with none but thee, my God, I journey on my way.

What need I fear when thou art near, O King of night and day? More safe am I within thy hand than if a host did round me stand.

It's the famous missionary prayer of St. Columba, the man who in 563 AD, he left Ireland with 12 companions, and he sailed for Scotland.

And he settled in this little island off the west coast called Iona. St. Columba, the man who is widely credited with being the first person to bring Christianity and to bring the message of Jesus to our country.

It's quite cool. It's a great missionary prayer. You can hear the zeal, can't you, in his voice? Well, here this morning, we're going to go from thinking about St. Columba, the man who brought the gospel to Scotland, and we're going to think about the man who first brought the gospel to Europe.

[2 : 36] The apostle Paul. Now think about this guy for a minute. He's a fascinating character. This man who used to be a terrorist.

He used to kill Christians for a living. This is what he did. This was his life's purpose. And gloriously earlier in the book of Acts, we learn that he encounters the risen Jesus, who flips his life upside down.

And if Paul's previous life mission was about snuffing Christ out, well, now his life's mission is about making Christ known the world over. So here he is this morning with his traveling companions, taking the message of Jesus to the city of Philippi.

And as he does that, he takes it into Europe. Now here's where we get into the narrative, verse 6 of Acts 16. We see that his trip to Philippi was, in fact, an unexpected journey.

What does Luke tell us at verse 6, if you've got it there? That Paul and his companions had planned on going to Asia. It's not the continent of Asia that we would know today.

[3 : 47] It's something akin to southwest Turkey. But God said, no, you're not going south to Asia. So what do they do next? Well, they try and go north to Bithynia.

But God says, no, you're not going north. So where does God want them to go? Well, while they're in Troas, on the coast, Paul sees a vision of this man from Macedonia, pleading with him to come east.

So they set sail from Troas, and you'll see the place names on the map there as we follow them on their journey. Samothrace, Neapolis, before finally making the journey inland to Philippi.

Now the eagle-eyed among you may have noticed at verse 11 that Luke goes from talking about them to talking about we. So our author gets involved in the mission at this point.

So Paul, Silas, Timothy, and now Luke enter this city of Philippi. What do we know about this city? Well, three things. They all begin with P.

[4 : 54] Philippi is a prestigious city. It's named after Philip of Macedonia, the father of the famous Alexander the Great. So these are the heroes. These are the homeboys that come from Philippi.

It's a prestigious city. And secondly, it's a proud city. You see it there, verse 12. What does Luke want us to know? That it's a leading city. And that it's a Roman colony.

In fact, some commentators view Philippi almost like being a mini-Rome. Roman law. People there adopting a Roman lifestyle. And in fact, Philippi is one of the places that you would go if you were a Roman soldier and you'd retired from duty.

You go and live in Philippi. So you can imagine that many people living in that city, fiercely loyal to the emperor, declare the name of Caesar, loyal to the things of Rome.

It's a proud city. And thirdly, it's a pagan city. Rife with pagan gods, full of worship to the emperor.

[6 : 03] So there's Philippi in a nutshell really quickly. Prestigious, proud, and pagan. And this is the place where Paul and his traveling companions go. Verse 13.

This is a quick narrative. We're going to get through it quickly this morning. When the Sabbath day comes, you see it there. There's no synagogue in Philippi. And they head straight outside the city to the gates.

Sorry, outside the city gates to the riverside. And Luke tells us about a pretty unspectacular conversion. Who's the lady that we meet?

What's her name? Lydia. A businesswoman. She's from up the road in Thyatira who trades. This is what she does for a living. She trades in expensive purple goods.

And she's presented to us at verse 14 as a God-fearer. Or NIV, she's a worshiper of God. This is the term that Luke uses to describe Gentiles who are attracted to the gods of the Jews.

[7 : 03] This is Lydia. Here she is. Paul and the gang are speaking to her about Jesus. And do you see it there? We read some of the most beautiful words I think we find anywhere in the book of Acts.

How does Luke describe what happened to Lydia? That the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

Now you can almost picture it, can't you? The risen Lord Jesus with key in hand puts it in the lock of Lydia's heart.

And he turns it. And all of a sudden the doors that were shut all of a sudden fly open. And this woman, this businesswoman who once was lost and blind, is now found and she sees.

Here is God at work in the quiet stillness of a woman's heart. I'm sure for many of us here, actually, if you had to describe your journey to faith, if you had to describe how you came to believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord, King, and Savior, to be honest, it would be a bit like Lydia's story, wouldn't it?

[8 : 22] I know it's true for me that no one's going to call me up and say, Graham, listen, you know that story about how you became a Christian? You know that story? You know that story about how for years and years your parents faithfully taught you the things of God, introduced you to Jesus?

You know that story about how for years and years of your friends witnessing to you, that story of years and years of God sovereignly and lovingly chipping away at your heart before you finally bowed the knee to his son, Jesus Christ?

You know that story? We'd love to make a film about that story. Here's what we need to see from Lydia's story, that not all conversions are spectacular, but praise God, all conversions are miraculous.

There is nothing ungrand about God taking a dead person and making them alive. Here is the kingdom of God breaking into Lydia's heart and life.

Why? Well, because as we used to sing when we were kids, the king is in residence there. To paraphrase Don Carson, he says, every single conversion is a result of God speaking into somebody's life and saying, let there be light.

[9 : 46] It's Lydia's story. She believes the news about Jesus, and you see, her household as well. And so this businesswoman, she becomes the first European convert.

Great story. Great story of Lydia. And you see how we move from the quiet and the peaceful to the noisy and the violent.

Paul and his team are, do you see it? They're walking back to that place of prayer, verse 16. And they get heckled by this female slave. Do you read about it there?

Luke lets us know that she's in double slavery. Firstly, to this demonic spirit that indwells her, that enables her to tell the future. And secondly, to her owners who are exploiting her for their financial gain.

You see how she heckles him at verse 17. Thankfully, no one's heckled me during a sermon. But imagine this in your head. What does she shout? It's surprising.

[10:52] Verse 17. These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved. And at one hand you read that and you think, is that not cracking?

I mean, who doesn't love a little bit of free advertising? Especially if you're Scottish, we love a freebie, don't we? Here is this girl proclaiming things that they're doing. But how does Paul view this?

Well, he discerns that everything might be right with this girl's words. But everything is wrong with the power that lies behind those words. And what does he do?

He orders that spirit out of her. And she's free from this double slavery that had dogged her life probably for many, many years. And while that's doubly good news for her, it's doubly bad news for her owners.

Money-making scheme. This little thing they've got going here. This little scheme. Abolished. And what do they do under the guise of Paul and Silas that are a threat to our values and our customs?

[11:58] And with the crowd joining in the attack, they're stripped and they're beaten and they're flogged. Don't miss that detail. And they're thrown in prison. And this jailer who will soon take center stage in the drama, he takes the necessary steps to see that these troublemakers, they have absolutely zero chance of escape.

And here's maybe where I want us just to slow down this morning. It's been quick up to this point, I know. Just to think for a minute. Here's the guys in jail.

Imagine you didn't know how the story ends. Imagine you're reading this for the first time. Imagine we hadn't read this out before. How are you feeling at this point? In prison. Tell you how I'm feeling. I'm feeling that the gospel has run out of gas. That Paul and Cole, bless their little hearts, they've given it a good shot. Maybe this was sports day, but give them the badge that said you tried your best.

But honestly, who are they? They're their little message. They go up against the might of Rome. In fact, that is like trying to take down a giant with a pea shooter. So I would feel, as I'm reading this for the first time, Paul and Silas are in the stocks.

[13:18] Now how do we think that they're feeling at this point? Come on, Lord. It wasn't our idea to come to Philippi. Do you remember? It was your idea. It was your idea.

Do you remember Jonah? The Old Testament prophet. You told him to go, and he ran away. Well, you told us to go, and here we are. We should be out there telling people about you.

You're not stuck in here. How can this be part of your plan? This is incredible. What does Luke tell us at verse 25?

Paul and Silas are in chains, and what are they doing? Are they complaining? No, they're singing praise to God. They're in chains. They're in the stocks, and they're praying.

I notice the detail that Luke gives us in the narrative here. What are their fellow inmates, their fellow prisoners doing? They're listening. Presumably because what they see and hear Paul and Silas doing has so captured their interest, because they've never seen anything like this before.

[14:27] Let me just ask you in passing as you think about your own life. What do you do day by day? Do those outside, as they look in at your life, are you a walking question mark?

The way that you behave and act and talk? So they think of Paul and Silas. They're in jail. They've never seen anything like this before.

And what happens next in this unfolding drama is truly remarkable. What happens? There's an earthquake. The foundations of the prison shake, and the prison doors fly open.

That's remarkable. But what happens next is even more remarkable. Here is the chance for freedom. I mean, they don't need to go Steve McQueen and the great escape.

They don't need to tunnel their way out. Freedom is looking at them in the face. This is freedom on a plate, with a knife and fork, with a serviette and the condiments.

[15:26] Here is an open goal, but with the doors wide open. Then you stay put. Why? Jailer, put away your sword.

Do not even think about taking your own life. And get the wonder of Paul's words at verse 28. Look at it there. We are all still here.

Not just Paul and Silas. All the prisoners have stayed. All of them. Philippi's most wanted. When given the choice between freedom, that moment that they dreamt about ever since they were put in the stocks, between that and sticking around, they choose sticking around.

Why? Presumably because these events have so fascinated them, that they want to see how this turns out. And you can see God's sovereign hand all over this, can't you?

That if Paul hadn't addressed this slave girl, he wouldn't have been set upon by the mob, he wouldn't have ended up in prison, he wouldn't have had the chance to witness to the prisoners, there wouldn't have been an earthquake, the jailer wouldn't have tried to take his life, and Paul wouldn't have got the chance to tell this jailer about Jesus.

[16:48] And Paul, so in tune with the purposes and the sovereignty of God at every single junction of his life, senses that God is doing something in this moment.

And what does he declare? We are all still here. Now I'll tell you how this has impacted me this week. So our little girl, Grace, she's been in hospital this week.

Sunday afternoon she went in. Wednesday evening she got out. Vast majority of that time, I'm sitting with her in that room. She's got a viral infection, she can't go outside the room.

I'm sitting there in that room with her. And I'm thinking to myself, God, have you not seen my to-do list here? I cannot move from this room. I've got people to visit.

I've got sermons to craft. I've got training to do. Surely it would be better for everyone if I was out there and not in here. And then it occurred to me, as I'm hanging out with Paul and Silas in prison here, that am I not asking the same questions that I think they would have been asking?

[17:57] And so I prayed, Father, help me see the world like they see the world. So my question is no longer in my head, Lord, what am I doing here?

The question in my head goes to, Lord, what are you doing here? Who is in this hospital? Who comes into this room that I can speak to about your son Jesus Christ?

Christ. So start trying to do it. Start trying to segue conversations to Christianity. Start trying to ask people's names. Start trying to ask about their job.

Start trying to ask about their journey. Now listen, there was no earthquakes and there was no mass conversions. But I did get to speak to Chris and I did get to speak to Natalie and I did get to speak to Zoe.

Learn their names. Trying to have my Bible open on the bed so they could see when they came in that this is what I was all about. And it struck me. How often is that just never on my radar?

[19:06] Let me ask you this morning, I wonder for some of us, do we need to recapture and reconnect with that radar? As God's people, are we aware of his sovereign purposes working out in our lives?

In our everyday circles, are we looking for opportunities whenever and wherever they come to speak of Jesus? Now just think about your circles for a minute. Think about your street.

Think about your stairwell. Think about your office. Think about your sports team. Think about your family. Think about your friends. Think about those who you have lunch with. Think about those in the coffee shop.

Who is God placing in our lives by no accident, by his sovereignty, that we can take an opportunity this week to speak of him?

How different would our lives look if we viewed life through that lens? So here is Paul. He seizes the moment.

[20:10] Tells this jailer about Jesus. And Paul, do you notice that? They tell his whole household about Jesus. They speak the word to them. And the joy of salvation, it comes to this family.

And their time in Philippi, do you notice it comes to an end there with the local magistrates realizing that they've just flogged two of their own, two Roman citizens, breaking their own law. They escort them from the city.

Where do they go? They go to Lydia's house. Do you see it there? Most likely the meeting place of this little church family in Philippi. Notice it, verse 40. Clearly quite a number of brothers and sisters who'd also come to faith that make up this church.

Because really the work in Philippi, in fact, the whole book of Acts, is not really the story about the persistent Paul. It's not really a story about his skill or anyone else's skill.

It's the story of an unstoppable God. Of an unstoppable gospel of the kingdom of God coming in power as the king takes up residence in people's hearts.

[21 : 18] A plan that God in eternity plastered, Godhead, hatched to save sinful men and women to himself whose son Jesus Christ died for people, meaning that that offer of forgiveness and newness of life is possible and whose spirit is applying that work to the life and to the hearts and to the minds of people the world over and this God will not be thwarted.

This God will not be overturned and so sovereign and in control is he that man's worst is actually all about his best. Try and sing with our girls every night.

Our God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing that he cannot do. This is the story of Acts. Here's this little church in Philippi living for Jesus in their city, this little outpost of heaven in this outpost of Rome.

Different people, do you notice it? Different people. Different sexes, different social backgrounds, doing different jobs with different life circumstances, but gloriously brought together by God through his son Jesus Christ to form one new family.

Here is their city, here is their church. These are the people that Paul is writing to in this letter and there's evidently a strong and affectionate relationship between Paul and this little church in Philippi.

[22 : 48] You see it throughout the letter. Paul calls them partners in the gospel. They're standing side by side with him striving for Jesus Christ. Paul loves these people.

They love Paul. In fact, this letter has been prompted by the fact that this little church have sent money to the apostle Paul to support him in his missionary endeavor because Paul is not in Philippi when he's writing this thing.

he's in prison in Rome and he gets the money and he sends this letter back almost like a thank you letter with this man called Epaphroditus back to this church in Philippi.

And that may be the occasion for the letter but the purpose of this letter is a lot deeper. Paul knows this little church.

He knows the pressures that they face. He knows the internal pressures facing this little church.

He's heard about the disputes and the rivalries going on. He's heard about the false teachers who would try and come in and say, no, it's not all about Jesus.

[23 : 54] Try and throw them off course. And he's heard, isn't he, and he's experienced for himself. We've seen it here. The external pressures facing this church. The world outside.

You can imagine, can't you, that as we've looked at it, this city with so many people fiercely loyal to the emperor. Caesar is Lord. That's the strapline.

Well, you can imagine to declare that no, no, no, no. Jesus is Lord. That's going to cause you some serious difficulties as you live your life for him. So what does he want for this church?

Well, let's just, as we come to a close this morning, let me take you to maybe chapter 1 and verse 9 of Paul's letter to the Philippians. And if you've not got it there, don't worry, I'll put it on the screen.

This is what he prays for this church. This is his unceasing prayer. And this is my prayer. This is how he opens this letter. This is my prayer that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and the praise of God.

[25 : 13] What does he want for this church? What does he pray? He prays that this church would grow. Grow in what? Firstly, just notice it in those verses there, in their knowing.

He wants them to grow. How does he put it? In their knowledge and their depth of insight. Now he's not talking about learning facts for mastermind. What he's talking about is a head and a heart relationship with Jesus Christ and to know the all-surpassing joy of knowing him.

Secondly, he wants them to grow and they're showing. He wants them together to put on display for the world to see the all-surpassing joy of knowing Jesus together.

What does he want for this church as they live their lives in this city of Philippi? He wants them to stand together, to stand firm for him. Together as one community, obey Jesus' words. Together as one community, hold fast to the truth. Together as one community, adopt a Christ-like style of humility.

[26 : 25] And as you do that, strive all the more for the glory that's ahead of us, the glory of being with Christ in heaven. And as they do all that, what does he want?

He wants them to shine like stars in the midst of their dark world, making Jesus look majestic. That's Paul's purpose in writing this letter to the Philippians.

He wants them to grow and he wants them to know and he wants them to show. And how does Paul see these people? And you see it there in the opening few verses of this letter.

How does he address them? How does he write to them as saints? As God's chosen ones. As he's set apart ones. Because these Christians may well be in Philippi, but Paul wants them to see their truer and deeper and more fundamental identity as a Christian.

They may be in Philippi, but more than that, their true identity is that they are in Christ. They are his. And so what does he write?

[27 : 36] Grace and peace to you, says Paul. From God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. See, the gospel has well and truly hit Europe and it's well and truly taken root in this little city of Philippi.

Alone with none but thee, my God, I journey on my way. What need I fear when thou art near, O King of night and day?

More safe am I within thy hand than if a host did round me stand. So we'll get into chapter one next week.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you so much for your word.

what a privilege and what a joy it is to have these events recorded for us that we can read in our own language and understand. And we thank you for the encouragement that this has brought to us this morning, that you are God on high and your purposes are unstoppable and the news of your Son is glorious.

[28 : 56] And so, Father, as we leave Philippi this morning, we pray for that same missionary spirit that you would help us in our city to be bold as we speak and as we live for the glory of Jesus Christ, we pray in his name.

Amen.