

## ***Introducing Philippians*** *the backstory & the beautiful greeting*

As many of you are aware, today we are launching into a 10-week study in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

And this morning I have the incredible challenge (self-imposed) of trying to introduce the letter – the story behind the Philippian church, that reasons that inspired Paul to write this letter and why we need it...

As it says in the bulletin, this is a letter that speaks with striking relevance to our world and lives today. Within these 4 chapters (3.5 pages in my Bible), we will find Paul naming reality for us in so many ways – naming and exploring the challenge of following Jesus in the face of opposition; counseling us in the way of unity amidst diverse perspectives and agendas; inviting us to know the joy of Christ that no suffering can extinguish and no pleasure can surpass; and summoning us to the true freedom that comes from living as servants of Jesus.

In truth, this letter – as ancient as it is – feels like it could have been written yesterday – for all the ways it seems to be speaking directly to us.

Now, I'll be honest, Philippians is not a letter that I've spent much time in over the years. I'm sure, like many of you, I have portions of the Bible that I'm often drawn to and other parts that I

rarely get around to – *and Philippians fits in that latter category for me.*

Which isn't to say that I've never spent time in Philippians. I have. But I don't know if I've ever really dug deep into it as a **core and essential text** for my life – a "life-letter", you could say.

Which is interesting, because Philippians probably contains more "life-**verses**" than any other of Paul's letters. **Honestly**, if you were to read through Philippians this **afternoon** (during the Superbowl) with a **highlighter** in hand and half your brain engaged, **taking note** of all the verses that strike you as a **potential instagram** or Facebook post, you'd be **stunned**.

This letter is **filled** with "life-verses". Inspiring truths to live by.

Which is awesome. **And yet**, the downside of this is that potentially we've confused our familiarity with a few scattered verses for a real and fruitful understanding of the **letter**.

Cause Paul didn't just write a collection of awesome life-verses.

He **wrote a letter** – a letter that we need to hear, as much as the Philippians did.

*I truth, I'd love to see Philippians become a **life-letter** for all of us...* Over the last few years, it feels like it's become one for me – as I've found myself drawn to this letter and stunned with the piercing

relevance of its message for my life and our lives and our life as a church.

Truth is, one of the reasons that drew me to Philippians about two years ago was realizing that God was leading me **here** – to Lambrick – this church that **my family was a part** of in my childhood and that has lingered in the backdrop of my life through all the years.

Cause in **Paul's letter to the Philippians**, we hear this and more – this deep, historic personal affection in Paul for the Philippian church – a mutual affection actually – borne through their shared history.

This was what first pulled me into this letter.

But with that, I think the other draw for me has been the way Paul speaks in this letter about Christian community as **a deep partnership in Christ** – as **partners in grace**... Each time I come back to it something in my heart **perks up** – with a longing to pursue and cultivate this more deeply. For us to not just cheer one another other on as we seek to follow Jesus on our own, but for us to grow as true **partners, companions** in Christ – people whose lives are **bound together** in Christ and for the glory of Christ.

***We need this letter.***

So, I want to take this morning to help us understand some of the backstory of this letter – or rather of the church in Philippi and Paul's role in it all...

But let me start with a little insight into **Philippi** itself.

Obviously, there is a lot that could be said about any ancient city, but most significant for us is that, in Paul's day, in the first century AD, Philippi was a city of significance in Macedonia. Not as the capital city (that was Thessalonica), but as a city with the unique honor and status as a quote "**colony of Rome**".

And it was given this honor and status because it had been "the scene of the decisive battle in which armies loyal to the murdered Julius Caesar, fighting under the joint command of Octavian (later the Emperor Augustus) and Mark Antony, defeated the rebel forces of Brutus and Cassias" (Motyer, 15).

In honor of this historic victory, the dignity of '**colony**' was conferred on the city of Philippi.

Which means that Philippi was set apart as a little Rome – "**Rome in miniature**". Its' citizens were proud to be known as loyal servants of Rome and her rulers. And as a result, life in Philippi happened much like it did in Rome – in so many ways – in social practice and engagement, in economic exchange, and in regard to taxation and law and property ownership.

In Philippi, people dressed in Roman robes – just like you'd see on the streets of Rome. *You think you get the picture.*

It was a place where the **reign of Caesar** was uniquely experienced, evident, and celebrated.

We'll need to come back to this throughout our study of this letter.

**Philippi was a place where the reign of Caesar was uniquely experienced, evident, and celebrated.**

I love how one scholar summarized it. He said, "*Philippi was the kind of place where you'd often hear people say, 'This place feels like Rome.'*"

All that say, when we imagine the Philippians, we need to imagine a people seeking to follow Jesus in a city and culture shaped and defined profoundly by Rome and its values. Which obviously, at times, were very counter to the values of Jesus.

***A situation not that unfamiliar*** to us.

So, that's a little about Philippi itself.

It was a little Rome – where the reign of Caesar was uniquely experienced, evident and celebrated...

Ok, so what about this church? How did the church in **Philippi** get started?

Now obviously, when we ask this, we need to realize we're not talking simply about how **one** particular church in Philippi got started –

but how **the Church** – the body of Christ – how the gospel first took root in Philippi *which became the church...*

And it happened by the Spirit through the ministry of the Apostle Paul – on his **second missionary journey** as accounted for us in **Acts ch.16.**

It's really an amazing story (**Acts 16**, that is) – it's a quizzical story, almost comical in a way – chronicling Paul and his associates on their second missionary journey, somewhat stumbling across Europe, facing impasse after impasse, setting out somewhere only to be blocked, hindered, and explicitly restrained by God at times.

**Until one night** in a place called Troas, Paul receives a vision in a dream of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "**Come over to Macedonia and help us.**" (**Acts 16:9**)

And for the first time on a while, it feels like God is leading them somewhere – and so they go. Paul **and his associates immediately** sail from Troas to Samothrace, and then to Neapolis, and then inland to Philippi (in the region of Macedonia).

And finally, after being restrained by God at every turn in the previous leg of their journey, here in Philippi their message is received with power and their ministry bears much fruit.

And Acts 16 tells us the story of **three people** whose lives were transformed by the gospel through the ministry of Paul and his

associates and who came together to form the beginning of the church in Philippi.

First, an influential business-woman named **Lydia**. Picture a mover and shaker in Philippi. She is wealthy and well-known. Spiritually-engaged, a worshipper of God, longing for the kingdom of God, but knowing nothing of Jesus.

And Paul meets her and some of her friends at a place of prayer by the river – and shares the gospel – the good news – of Jesus with her... that in Jesus God had come to save and reconcile men and women to Himself.

And Lydia believes and is baptized – she and her whole household. Pledging their lives to serve and follow Jesus.

Her wealth, influence and privilege are nothing compared to the riches of knowing Christ and being found in Him.

At the close of the scene, we come across this simple verse – **Acts 16:15** – where Lydia, this new follower of Jesus, says to Paul and his companions, "*If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay in my house.*"

Already, Lydia knows that the gospel has brought her into a unique bond – fellowship – partnership – with all others in Christ.

And so they stayed in her home.

***Paul would never have forgotten Lydia, those early days in her home in Philippi, and their grace-given unity in Christ...***

Then we're told another story – a very different story – about a **slave girl** in Philippi, who is possessed by a demonic spirit that gives her the ability to predict the future, which her masters exploit to **their** great gain.

Clearly, this girl is oppressed in a deep and profound way – a horrific way. Captive to the forces of darkness; a slave tormented by oppressive masters – human and otherwise.

Until one day when Paul and his associates encounter her – and she ends up following them around Philippi, shouting, "**These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.**" (**Acts 16:17**).

Not what you'd expect from a demonic spirit – or something that you'd think Paul would be concerned about.

But after a few days of what was probably an incredible distraction, and also in great compassion for this young woman, Paul turns to her and addressing the spirit, says, "*In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!*"

And the spirit leaves... Powerless before the authority of a greater Master – Jesus.

***Like Lydia, Paul would never forget this young woman and what Jesus did for her...***

And not just because of the dramatic experience of this moment, but because it actually led to Paul and his associate, Silas, being ***thrown in prison*** – for, as the locals claimed, for “*throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.*” (**Acts 16:20-21**).

Which leads us to the third person Paul would never forget in Philippi – **the jailer** – the man responsible for watching and guarding Paul and Silas when they were arrested and thrown in prison... the man responsible for making sure they were locked in their cell, chained and going nowhere.

We don't have time for the whole story (and a great story it is), but in the night, something happens. Something ***unimaginable***.

And I'm not just talking about the earthquake that ultimately shakes off their chains. I'm talking about the example of Paul and Silas that night in the jail...

**Acts 16:25** tells us, “**About midnight Paul and Silas** were *praying and singing hymns to God...*” while chained in a cell, their feet fastened in stocks.

**Why? How?** Because they knew, that despite their chains, they were freer than anyone could know. Because Jesus Christ was and is Lord and so they had nothing and no one to fear.

And that night, as Paul and Silas worshipped, the jailer found himself face to face with **the freest people he'd ever met.**

And then the earth shook. We're told that "**there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken...**" (v.26). And when the dust settled, and the Philippian jailer realized that the prisoners had not escaped, but had in fact stay, he asked these free men how he too could be free – saved.

**(Acts 16:31)** *They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved..."*

And he did. He and all his household – and they were all baptized. Pledging their lives to serve and follow Jesus.

There's more to the story, but you'll need to read it yourself.

For now, I want us to simply take note that this is how the gospel came to Philippi (through word, deed and example), this is how the church in Philippi began, and **these were the people** who came together to form the church... This incredibly diverse mix of people – **Lydia** and her household, **the slave girl**, and **the jailer** and his household. A collection of people that would not have shared a table

in normal Philippian life, but who in Christ had become one – **partners in Christ.**

And not only that, but these were the folks – the faces – that Paul remembered and imagined in his heart when he thought of the Philippian church... and prayed for them... And wrote to them, years later...

What an incredible beginning...

**But now something like ten years has passed**, and the Philippian church is disheartened and confused.

And Paul gets word of it – through Epaphroditus, a mutual friend and partner in Christ. He gets word that they are discouraged... that they are facing opposition and attack... that they are experiencing some relational tensions, divisions even, among them...

And **Paul himself is in prison** again – in a more significant way than when they first had met him. And this is **all the more** disheartening and demoralizing to them. Unsettling for them. Like another earthquake – but not one that leads to worship and deliverance. At least not as far as they can see...

All that's gone on and **is** going on – for them and for Paul – is throwing them for a loop *and an illusive cloud of discouragement is settling in among them.*

*[I suspect we can all see ourselves in that description at some point in our journey – and maybe also our shared story as a church... or maybe in another church...]*

*Just like the church in Philippi, we are people and a church with a beautiful and complicated story we could tell...*

*Just like the church in Philippi, we are people and a church who find ourselves at odds at times with the values of our culture and world...*

*Just like the church in Philippi, we are people and a church that know what its like to experience relational tensions and divisions...*

*And just like the Christians in Philippi, we are people and a church that knows what it feels to be disheartened and discouraged by events that did not turn out the way we'd hoped and prayed for...*

*Truth is, we're not that different to the Philippians...]*

And into all this disheartened place, **a letter arrives from Paul** – their spiritual father – and Timothy – a letter **bursting** with hope and joy, with faith and encouragement and wise counsel – pouring forth from Paul's personal and deep love for the Philippians, and his deep joy in the liberating reign of Jesus...

***Exactly what they needed!***

*[Exactly what some of us need too...]*

And so, with all this in mind, hear Paul's simple greeting... to the  
Philippians – and to us... **Philippians 1:1-2**

***Paul and Timothy,  
servants of Christ Jesus,  
to all God's holy people  
in Christ Jesus  
at Philippi,  
together with the overseers and deacons:  
grace and peace to you  
from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ.***

As always, there is so much in just a few lines – but what I want  
to invite us to notice this morning are simply the two things that are  
**unusual** here – somewhat **unique** to this letter and instructive for  
where Paul is going in the whole letter.

First... notice how Paul introduces himself and Timothy.

As **what?**... As "**servants of Christ Jesus**".

If you've ever paid attention to how Paul refers to himself in his  
greetings, you'll know that most often Paul refers to himself as "*an  
apostle...*"

**1 Corinthians 1:1** – "**Paul, an apostle** of Christ Jesus by the will  
of God, and our brother Sosthenes...

**Colossians 1:1** – "**Paul, an apostle of** Christ Jesus by the will of  
God, and Timothy our brother...

**Galatians 1:1** – "**Paul, an apostle**—sent not from men nor by a  
man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the  
dead...

Almost **all** of Paul's letters bear some variation on this theme.

But here in his letter to the Philippians, Paul refers to Timothy and himself as **servants of Christ Jesus**.

In only one other letter (Romans) does Paul refer to himself fundamentally in this way – and here in Philippians, he states this not only of himself, but also of **Timothy**. Equally so. He places their names side by side. Not "*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, and Timothy*", but "***Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.***"

Which is a profoundly humble self-understanding, is it not?

**But remember** where Paul is as he writes this letter. ***He's in prison. He's writing from prison.*** He could be chained to a guard as he writes or dictates these very words...

In the light of this reality – that Paul writes this letter ***from prison*** – this statement, this self-understanding, is not just humble, **it is strikingly defiant, liberating and hopeful.**

Here is Paul, ***chained and in prison*** – as he was in a lesser way years ago when the Philippians first knew him – **and yet** he is joyfully convinced that he is a servant – a slave, even – of Jesus alone.

Not Rome. Not Caesar or anything or anyone else. ***Only Jesus...***

***And this***, for Paul and Timothy, meant and means freedom.

True freedom.

***Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus...***

And the more we dig into this letter, the more we'll realize that this isn't just how Paul understands himself (and Timothy), but this is in fact how Paul understands ***the heart of life in Christ... the life of grace and joy → a life lived in submission to Jesus and as a servant like Jesus...***

A life lived in the joy of knowing Jesus Christ as **Lord...** as **Master...** The only Master in whose service is true freedom.

Let me ask you: ***Do you know anyone whose freedom is destroying them and/or others?***

***Do you know anyone who needs today a new and better master?***

As Lydia, the slave girl and the Philippian jailer discovered years ago, **this is the gospel!** That true freedom does not come from the absence of shackles or authority, but in wholehearted submission to the Perfect Master – Jesus – who has laid down His life for us all...

So Paul opens his letter with these words,

***"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,  
to all God's holy people  
in Christ Jesus at Philippi,  
together with the overseers and deacons:***

That's the one other unique piece to Paul's greeting in this letter – this reference to the ***overseers and deacons.*** The leaders in the church...

Students and scholars of this letter don't have much to say about this, except that there is something significant to the way that Paul refers to the leaders as being **together with** the community, as opposed to **over** them. Again, just as Paul here places Timothy right alongside himself as a servant of Christ, Paul addresses his letter "to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, **together with** the overseers and deacons..."

While honoring the unique role of leaders, Paul doesn't stratify them, or set them apart. No, they are... **we are** all equal in Christ – all partners in grace – all servants of Jesus...

*Through the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ ...*

**Grace and peace to you  
from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."**

Right here – right from the get-go – Paul proclaims the gospel to us – the good news – that this life of true freedom as servants of Jesus – is something not simply that **we** long for and need, but something that **God** is actively pursuing... in Christ... Something that **God** is actively seeking to bring about in your life and in mine...

Something that God is actively offering to us **all into today**... in Christ...

invitation to the Lord's Table -----