



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## A Strong Church from Unlikely Beginnings

Acts 16.6–40

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### Introduction

We learn some things about relationships from Scripture, the value of which is confirmed by our experience. These include the teaching that we are to love one another (John 13.34–35); we are to “love the brotherhood” (1 Pet 2.17); we are to love all people (1 Thess 3.12). From both Scripture and experience, we also learn that we develop special bonds with some people and churches.<sup>1</sup>

Philippi was special to Paul. After founding and leaving it at the end of Acts 16, Paul kept in touch through Timothy (Acts 19.21–23; Phil 2.19–20). He visited at least two more times before his final journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20.1–6). The church, located in Macedonia, was a source of comfort, encouragement, and example for Paul during his difficulties with the Corinthians (2 Cor 2.13; 7.5; 8.1; 9.2). They provided support and comfort as he faced other trials (2 Cor 11.9; Phil 2.25–30; 4.10–20) (O’Brien 1991, 8).

We understand, then, why Philippians would be called “the most personal of all of [Paul’s] letters” (Hawthorne 1993, 707), is generally seen as being positive, and is held up as evidence of Paul’s “special affection for the Philippian church” (Holladay 2005, 379). It’s because of this history that we think of the church in Philippi as one of the strongest churches in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> So, it’s no surprise that Philippians is a letter many of us enjoy studying. And that study is important, for the Philippian church has some important lessons to teach us about strong churches. Our purpose here will be to set the stage by reviewing the church’s beginning.

### The City of Philippi

Because of its location and makeup, Philippi, the first place Paul preached in Europe, was an important location for the gospel to be proclaimed. Located in northeastern Greece, it was a Roman colony with a substantial population of Roman military veterans. Although it was not the provincial capital, it was the leading city of the area, located on the Via Egnatia, the road that linked Byzantium with the Adriatic ports leading to Italy. It also had been granted the highest privilege for a Roman municipality, the *ius Italicum*, which, according to O’Brien,

meant that it was governed by Roman law. The rights of purchases, ownership, and transference of property, together with the right to civil lawsuits, were privileges included in the *ius Italicum*. The citizens of this city were Roman citizens, while the constitution was modelled on that of Rome itself.... Philippi itself was modelled on the mother city, Rome; it was laid out in similar patterns, the style and architecture were copied extensively, and the coins produced in the city bore Roman inscriptions. The Latin language was used, and its citizens wore Roman dress (O'Brien 1991, 4).

It's not hard to understand, then, why Paul "neglected the port city of Neapolis to begin preaching the gospel in the small but more important city of Philippi ... (Acts 16:12)" (Hawthorne 1993, 707).

With regard to its religious culture, the city was syncretistic. Its citizens "were quite mixed in their backgrounds ... [with] a remarkable variety of divinities and cults." Monuments devoted to the imperial cult were conspicuous. There were temples of Greek gods, known by their Latin names. Many engaged in the fertility rites associated with the goddess Artemis. There were sanctuaries devoted to Egyptian gods, notably Isis and Serapis. The Phrygian Cybele, known as the great Mother-goddess, also had a presence. "The Jewish community in the city does not seem to have been large ... since there was apparently no regular synagogue congregation (for which ten men were required)." (O'Brien 1991, 4–5).

### The Philippian Church Begins

As reported in Acts 16.6–10, Paul went to Philippi because the Spirit forbade him from going to his intended destination in Asia. When compared to reports of the beginning of other churches, this unique call to go to a particular place is just one of the differences in the story of this church's beginning. As was his custom, he went first to the Jews (cf. Acts 13.46), but he did not go to a synagogue. Instead, he went to a place of prayer which was located outside the city by the river (Acts 16.11–13). Women dominated his first audience; since ten men were required to establish a synagogue, the prominence of women in the account probably indicates why he did not first go to a synagogue.

The first named believer in Philippi is Lydia, "a worshiper of God" (σεβομένη τὸν θεόν, *sebomenē ton theon*). Originally from the Asia Minor city of Thyatira, she was an apparently successful businesswoman, "a seller of purple goods" (v. 14). Luke emphasizes that her response to Paul's preaching was attributable to the fact that "the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (v. 14). She and her household formed the nucleus of the Philippian church (v. 15).

Paul soon encountered a problem. A fortune-telling slave girl persisted to the point of annoyance in following Paul and "crying out, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation'" (v. 17). Specifically, she was possessed by "a spirit of Python" (πύθων, *pythōn*). This was

a spirit which possessed people for the purpose of uttering inspired predictions for the future. The term comes from the 'serpent that guarded the Delphic oracle' where Apollo was worshiped. The word came to denote a "spirit of divination, then also a ventriloquist, who was believed to have such a spirit dwelling in his belly" (Gaertner 1993, 255).<sup>3</sup>

After enduring her disturbances for several days, Paul exorcised the spirit from her, an action that cost her owners the profits they were getting from her divinations.<sup>4</sup> Hiding their real motive (loss of income) behind nationalistic concerns (they did not know Paul and Silas were Romans and so perceived them as a threat), religious worries (Paul and Silas were Jews), the possibility of subversive ideas and behaviors (they advocated new ideas), and the lawfulness of what Romans could do (patriotism, but probably also the imperial cult),<sup>5</sup> the girl's owners stirred the people and the magistrates to beat and imprison Paul and Silas (vv. 19–24). An earthquake, an intervention by God, brought about the temporary release of Paul and Silas from prison and created the opportunity for them to teach and baptize their jailer (vv. 25–34). The next day, the magistrates would have released and sent them on their way, but Paul surprised them with the revelation that he and Silas were Roman citizens (vv. 35–39).<sup>6</sup>

After receiving an apology from the magistrates, they were released from prison, visited Lydia and the other believers, and departed for Thessalonica (Acts 16.39 – 17.1). They left behind a group that had begun to grow, though it is impossible to know the extent of their growth. We do know they persevered (Phil 1.27–28) and never waned in their encouragement of Paul (Phil 1.6–7, 24–25; 4.14–19).

### Strength Came from Weakness

In light of the cultural situation and obstacles the Philippian church faced, the record of its origin story and subsequent ministry strength is noteworthy.<sup>7</sup> In the interest of encouraging the work we aim to do, their example is worth a closer examination.

First, do not minimize the barriers and opposition they faced. The likelihood that there was no synagogue (see above) means that there were few men who were familiar with the background in the law and the prophets that was foundational in most of the mission churches established in Acts. Business interests, represented by the slave owners, and the government officials they influenced, opposed, beat, and imprisoned them. They suffered the miseries of imprisonment<sup>8</sup> where only their trust in God could sustain them.<sup>9</sup> Even after they were delivered from prison and then released with an apology from the magistrates, those leaders hurried them out of town and conceivably could have made life difficult for the disciples who remained (cf. Phil 1.27–28).

Second, while facing these challenges, they persisted in the work of the Lord. They continued to preach, a point of emphasis in the text (Acts 16.10, 17, 31). As noted by Charles Talbert, their preaching pressed toward a universal outreach and produced certain fruits in those who responded to it positively (Talbert 1984, 72).

Third, they demonstrated the willingness to sacrifice. The emphasis on their mission was urgent, not casual. More importantly, it set the tone for how the Philippian church would live. As Paul would later teach the Philippians how to deal with troubles they were experiencing, he would refer them to both the sacrificial model of Jesus and that of himself (Phil 2:5-11; 3:7-11) (Hawthorne 1993, 707). In fact, Paul modeled what someone has called his motto for life: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1.21) (Hawthorne 1993, 712).

Fourth, ultimately it was not about Paul or the Philippian church: it was about God; if there is any text that demonstrates that “God gave the growth” (1 Cor 3.6), it is Acts 16. As noted, he was with them in their trials. Remember also that he was the one who chose that mission destination, opened Lydia's heart, and sent the liberating earthquake.

## Conclusion

In *The Discoverers*, Daniel Boorstin tells of Cape Bojador, a small piece of land jutting out into the Atlantic from the coast of Africa. In the fifteenth century, no ship dared sail past it. It was no more dangerous than any other cape, but terrible rumors had circulated about what lay beyond it—perhaps even the end of the world. For the navigators of the day, it was a “barrier in the mind” (Boorstin 1985, 165–167; in Durham 1989, 192).

In a sense, whether we are a strong church that makes a difference comes down to that. We may have created “barriers in our minds” that we enable by too much fear of opposition and challenge, too little commitment to the message and what must be done to share it, and too little faith in God to use our surrendered selves just as we are.

We need to think about the church in Philippi and remember that Paul told them, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil 4.13). We need to live like we believe that!

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The idea of having closer relationships with some is evident in the New Testament. For example, Jesus loved all people, but there were twelve who were closer to him. Three of them were closer still. And one of those three, John, is traditionally identified as “one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved” (John 13.23).

<sup>2</sup> O’Brien notes that “fifty years later the Philippian church showed the same character in its care for Ignatius, bishop of Antioch [as it had for Paul] while he was on his way to Rome under military guard (Ign. *Pol.*)” (O’Brien 1991, 8).

<sup>3</sup> Gaertner elaborates: “Because the Roman world was very much influenced by magic and divination, many people relied on consulting those who had power to discern the future. Even political

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and military leaders refused to make major decisions without consulting a diviner. The girl in Philippi was thus a valuable commodity to her owners” (Gaertner 1993, 255).

<sup>4</sup> In a play on words, Luke used the same verb (ἐξῆλθεν, *exēlthen*) to describe the exit of the spirit from the girl and the loss of income for her owners. The spirit “went out” and the owners’ hope of gain “went out.”

<sup>5</sup> “The charges the owners brought did not mention money. They focused on arguments which would influence the case. Identifying the men as Jews would prejudice the case immediately in the minds of many Romans. That they were throwing the city ‘into an uproar’ would concern any Roman magistrate charged with keeping the peace. Their advocating of ‘customs unlawful’ for Romans may be a reference to attempts by Paul to win converts, since proselyting among Roman citizens met with much disapproval in the Roman world” (Gaertner 1993, 256).

<sup>6</sup> “Taking such measures against Roman citizens, and without a trial, was a serious infraction of Roman policy. Philippi could have lost its status as a Roman colony. Roman citizenship was a rare privilege which guaranteed particular rights. Since the early second century BC, Roman citizens had been exempted from humiliating forms of punishment. Although the protection of these rights often depended on the whim of the local magistrate, Rome frequently investigated officials accused of departing from accepted customs of law enforcement” (Gaertner 1993, 260).

<sup>7</sup> Relative to this point, Ken Durham commented, “From a tumultuous and unlikely series of events—a riverside women’s Bible study, then an exorcism, which triggers a near riot, resulting in beating and imprisonment, followed by an earthquake, almost prompting a suicide but instead several baptisms—comes one of the noblest of the early congregations, the Philippian church of Christ” (Durham 1989, 191).

<sup>8</sup> Gaertner (1993, 257) writes, “The Roman stocks which held their feet had several holes which allowed the jailer to force their legs into a painful position, resulting in the stretching and cramping of muscles.”

<sup>9</sup> Evidence of this trust is seen in their praying and singing of hymns (Acts 16.25). Typically, this has been taken as a demonstration of joy in the midst of their plight. That’s possible, but that may be an assumption based on a transfer of the idea from Acts 5.41 to 16.25, not to mention the references to joy in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. In fact, Acts 16.25 does not explicitly mention joy. As Durham observes, “Maybe their songs are merry, relaxed, and confident. But maybe they are trembling in their stocks—scared, hurt, exhausted. And all they know to do in a moment like this is to affirm the only truth they can: God” (Durham 1989, 190). Talbert said it well: “Here is depicted Christian fearlessness in the face of unjust and threatening pagan actions (see Phil 1:28–30; 1 Pet 3:14b)” (Talbert 1984, 70).