Philippians – Cultivating a joyful heart

1. Introduction

a. The letters of Paul in the New Testament reveal many different facets of the apostle:

i Theologian (Romans)

ii Trouble-shooter (Corinthians)

iii Fatherly heart (Timothy/Titus)

iv Urgency regarding end-times (Thessalonians)

v Correcting error (Galatians)

b. In Philippians we see a gentler more uplifting approach focusing on joy. He is writing as a wise pastor lovingly countering some false teaching, yet also commending them for their concern and generosity.

c. Today we are going on a journey that is both gripping and full of fascinating twists and turns, peppered with divine interventions and godly insights that will leave us in awe of the God we worship. We will trace the events leading up to Paul coming to in Philippi, and the birth of the church there. There is much we can learn from what happened on the way.

d. So today I want to look at the events leading up to Paul coming to in Philippi, and how the church in the city came into being. It's a fascinating story and there is much that we can learn on the way. So, first of all, let's begin with a little bit of history which will set the context for the rest of this morning. The value of history is that it informs us about who we are and where we are going. Much of the bible is history, giving us both context and revelation on God's dealings with man.

2. Background and history of Philippi

a. Philippi was a town in Macedonia, which was a part of northern Greece. It was named after Philip II of Macedon, who was the father of Alexander the Great. In the 2nd century BC, it was part of the Roman province of Macedonia, and in the 1st century BC it became a Roman colony, becoming very Romanised, adopting Roman law and government, and adopting Latin as its official language.

b. To gain an understanding of the context of Philippians, and how Paul eventually ended there, we have to turn to the book of Acts, when Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch.

Acts 15:36-41 *And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." 37 Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*

c. By starting with the events leading up to the birth of the church in Philippi we see things from a different perspective; we see the wisdom of God being worked out, and learn some lessons that we may not have seen otherwise. It appears that the church in Philippi began as a result of a heated argument.

i Paul and Barnabas had completed a successful missionary journey some time before, and Paul was keen for them to make a return visit to the churches that they had established. They were both in agreement, however Barnabas felt it was right to take John Mark along with them. Paul disagreed because on that previous missionary journey John Mark had gone with them, but deserted them part way through. He didn't want to expose them and Mark to another possible failure so refused to allow him to go with them. Because of this disagreement, Paul and Barnabas made plans to part company, Barnabas taking John Mark with him to Cyprus, while Paul, accompanied by Silas, headed north out of Antioch, through Syria and Cilicia, which is eastern Turkey today.

d. Although they went their separate ways, this was not the end of their friendship as we see later on in the book of Acts. So it's not the disaster it appears to be, and we see the wisdom of God being worked out as a consequence. So although they couldn't come to an agreement they were to go their separate ways with no bad feelings, and the end result was that there were now two missionary teams going out.

i One of the biggest lessons we have still yet to learn is how we can have disagreement and yet still honour one another. It's so easy to be right and wrong at the same time.

e. God uses this disagreement between Paul and Barnabas to prepare the way for a completely new and unexpected thrust of missionary activity. While Paul and Barnabas had merely expected to return to those churches that they had already established, God had much bigger things in mind.

i This second missionary journey that Paul was about to undertake would involve danger. Paul knew that Barnabas was capable of looking after John Mark and it meant he didn't need to visit Cyprus. So this division of labour worked out well for everyone, enabling the gospel to go beyond where they originally intended.

3. To boldly go…where the Spirit leads

Acts 16:1-5 *Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. [2] He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. [3] Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. [4] As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. [5] So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.*

a. So heading north out of Antioch and then turning west they came to first Derbe and then Lystra, which is in central Turkey. While in Lystra Paul encounters Timothy for the first time. Timothy was a young man with a Jewish mother and a Gentile father, and had grown up in the church there. He had a good reputation and was well thought of by those who knew him, and on the strength of that Paul invited him to accompany them.

Acts 16:6-10 *And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. [7] And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. [8] So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. [9] And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and*

saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." [10] And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

b. Paul, Silas and Timothy continue on through Phrygia and Galatia, intending to visit the churches in Asia Minor, such as Ephesus, but every time they tried to head east, they were prevented from doing so by the Holy Spirit. We're not told why or how the Holy Spirit forbade them to visit the churches in Asia Minor, but Paul and Silas and Timothy knew better than to try and override him.

c. The Holy Spirit continued to hem them in; he wouldn't allow them to go west or north-east into Bithynia, so they found themselves going round the top of Mysia and along the south of the Sea of Marmia until they reached the port of Troas on the eastern Aegean coast.

d. While they are in Troas and considering their options, during the night Paul is given a vision, and it is so clear and so obvious that he could not miss it. He sees a man from Macedonia, which is in Northern Greece, and he is saying "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

e. There's something we should take note of in the narrative. In verse 8 it says "…they went down to Troas," but in verse 10 it says "…immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia." The narrative has changed from third person to first person, which means that Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, has now joined them and is going with them into Macedonia.

f. Paul's vision is important because it was instrumental in the gospel eventually coming to us in Britain. The spread of the gospel was being orchestrated and driven by the Holy Spirit, opening the way for the gospel to spread to Europe. This was a strategic time in history with the cultural influence of Greece and Rome spreading throughout the known world in a westerly direction. So from Philippi in Macedonia, the gospel continued to spread westwards on the currents of the world expansionist programme of the Roman Empire into Italy and Spain and then northwards and eventually across the channel into these islands that we call home.

4. Philippi

Acts 16:11-12 *So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, [12] 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.*

a. Prompted by the Holy Spirit they embark on the journey to Macedonia, sailing from Troas to Samothrace, a journey of 60 miles. From there they sail on to the port of Neapolis, then head 10 miles inland to Philippi, a small city with a population of around 10-15,000, made up of slaves, service providers, peasant farmers and military veterans.

   i Philippi was intended to be a miniature version of Rome, and although it retained some of it previous Greek culture, Roman influence was in the ascendency. Both Latin and Greek were spoken, and Philippi was a strategic city for trade.

   ii Paul faces a new challenge in Philippi, encountering a city that is predominantly Roman. In Philippi he will come face to face with Roman power and empire in a new sense. He is coming from Asia to conquer Europe for Christ, a conqueror coming to establish and build the counter-culture of the Kingdom of God. This will be a clash of two kingdoms.

b. When Paul came to a new city his first priority was to head to the local synagogue. But there was no synagogue in Philippi because there were very few Jews living in the city. So Paul, very wisely, took time to acclimatise and gauge the spiritual atmosphere of the place.

   i If there were believers in the city Paul knew where he was likely to find them. He thought it likely that there may be a "proseucha," or a praying-place. This was a minimal structure, often open to the sky, and it would be near a stream or river because of the ritual washings connected to worship. And so on the Sabbath they went out of the city and down to the river, and they found a group of women gathered to pray.

Acts 16:13-15 *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. [14] 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. [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.*

a. Paul may have been a little puzzled having seen a man in his vision, but having come to Macedonia there seem to be only women. But Paul is not to be deflected from his task and so he begins to speak and share the gospel with them. And as he speaks, God singles out one of the women, and begins to make her heart come alive as a result of what she's hearing. Luke simply tells us that the Lord opened her heart.

   i In the natural, man's heart is locked up and barricaded against God. The word "opened" (v14) means the removal of an obstruction. The gospel of the kingdom can only be understood by divine revelation, not by human discovery. So it is God who opened her heart and enabled her to respond. Paul is not preaching to these women, but sharing his own personal testimony.

   ii Lydia was a trader, a dealer in purple, and she came from Thyatira. She is likely ethnically Asian, but has a house in Philippi. So it seems she's very wealthy. This is a woman who has done very well for herself. But she's also God-fearing, which means that she has rejected paganism and polytheism, and has come to believe that there is only one God.

   iii However limited her knowledge of God had been, today God opened the floodgates and light flooded in! Paul's testimony of Jesus was the key that unlocked the door to her heart. God opened her eyes and opened her heart. Lydia chose to seal her new-found faith by being obedient in baptism as a testimony to her new birth.

5. Confrontation

a. Wherever the gospel prospers, Paul also knew to expect opposition. It came in the form of a slave girl who was demonised with a spirit of Python, which is a form of divination (fortune-telling). During their stay at Lydia's house they would all go down to the place of prayer by the river. As they make their daily visit to the place of prayer, they are followed by this slave girl who cries out "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."

b. But instead of endorsing the mission of Paul and Silas, the demonic spirit was mocking God, and the continuous repetition was designed to produce ridicule and resentment towards them. Paul

could see through the enemy's plan to disrupt them. He knew this slave girl was out of control, probably not even aware of what she was saying – the spirit of Python is a spirit of ventriloquism, so her utterances were coming from the spirit that possessed her. Paul tolerated this for a few days, but eventually he knew he must put a stop to it, so he rebukes the spirit that enslaved her and commands it to leave, and in an instant it is gone.

c. This young slave girl was the property of her owners. The demonic spirit gave her power and she provided a good income for her owners. Now their whole business had just collapsed before their very eyes. They had lost their steady income, they had lost their considerable wealth, and they were angry. They cared nothing for their slave, but only about their profits. Now, their business was gone, and they intended to make Paul pay for it.

d. Paul and Silas were identified as the leaders, and so the owners of the slave girl stirred up the crowd and started an uproar; seizing Paul and Silas they dragged them to the marketplace to face the magistrates. There was very little sympathy for Jews in Philippi, especially those who spoke openly of the way of salvation being through Jesus alone. Christianity was still regarded as a cult of Judaism at this time, so they also accused Paul and Silas of proclaiming customs that were contrary to the law of Rome.

e. There is no opportunity given to Paul or Silas to speak in their own defence. The magistrates as well as the crowds were willing to believe the worst. Paul and Silas were pronounced guilty, beaten severely and cast into prison. They were in maximum security in the deepest part of the prison, with their feet in stocks.

Acts 16:25-26 *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, [26] 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.*

f. What was the theme of Paul and Silas' worship and prayer? I think they were seeking God to bring great glory to his name in the midst of their affliction. Their songs and prayers were such that they piqued the interest of the other prisoners who were straining to hear more.

6. A whole lotta shakin' going on…

a. Suddenly God interrupts the prayer meeting with an earthquake. But this was no ordinary earthquake! Normal earthquakes destroy everything, but this one left all the walls intact, but opened all the doors and broke the prisoners' fetters. But the purpose of the earthquake wasn't to allow Paul and Silas to escape – it was about salvation coming to the jailer and his household. The release of Paul and Silas would be a legal matter involving the very same magistrates who had illegally imprisoned them.

Acts 16:27-34 *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. [28] But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." [29] And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. [30] Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" [31] And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." [32] And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. [33] 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. [34]*

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.

b. The jailer's quarters would be within the prison building. When awakened by the earthquake he rushed into the prison and seeing what had happened assumed that everyone had escaped. It was Paul who first broke the silence, calling out to the jailer urging him not to harm himself. The jailer responded by asking Paul what he must do to be saved. All it took was "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." Not complicated, just a straight and to the point, and so the jailer and his whole household heard the good news of the gospel and came to faith in Jesus.

c. The very next day police officers arrived, sent by the magistrates who had illegally sentenced Paul and Silas, giving the jailer orders to release them. But Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. Their rights as Roman citizens had been violated, and these magistrates were not going to be let off easily. So Paul insisted that the magistrates themselves should come and apologise for what they had done.

d. This wasn't Paul asserting his rights, but for a more important goal – protecting the church that was in the process of being birthed. He didn't want the church to be ridiculed and maybe persecuted as having been started by some so-called Jewish rabble-rouser. The magistrates' retraction and apology gave credibility to the church because it was founded by a Roman citizen. So Paul, Silas and Timothy departed for Thessalonika, leaving Luke in Philippi for a while to oversee the new church.

7. Conclusion

a. That was how the church at Philippi came into being. Like many churches it brought people together who in any other circumstances would probably have nothing in common. Lydia was a sophisticated and probably well-educated woman who was both resourceful and influential. The jailer came from the other end of the social spectrum, dealing with the rougher element of society, used to seeing life in the raw.

   i That was the raw material that the Holy Spirit was given to forge into a vibrant and successful church. The unity that we will see in the church at Philippi as we unpack this letter is not the result of uniformity, but is the result of becoming one in Christ. That is the kind of unity that manifests the love and power of Jesus to a lost world.

b. The birth of the church at Philippi is a lesson to us concerning divine guidance. God was divinely directing Paul and Silas all the way. God directed them to the riverside and to Lydia. God directed them to the jail and ultimately to the jailer. He directed through Paul's desire to re-visit the original churches, through the prohibition of the Holy Spirit and through the vision in Troas. He directed through the unrighteousness of the slave girl's owners and the unjust magistrates. God saw to it that there was a church planted in Philippi.

c. Luke's account of the birth of the church at Philippi is one of the most extensive accounts of the planting of a church in all of the New Testament. It prepares us for what we are about to read and study in the Book of Philippians. As we prepare to commence this study of Philippians, my prayer is that God will use this great book to transform your perspective, and be instrumental in leading you to cultivate a joyful heart.