

The Fellowship of the Gospel

- Philippians 1:1
- As Shawn recited the first chapter of Philippians, you heard some very familiar verses, didn't you? I will say part of a verse, and you finish it... **"I thank my God... in all my remembrance of you." "He who began a good work in you... will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." "For me, to live is Christ... and to die is gain."** And there are many more, packed into this short letter of 4 chapters, and 104 verses. Three of the most familiar from chapter 4: **"Rejoice in the Lord always... again, I will say, rejoice!" "So that at the name of Jesus every ...knee will bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord..." "I can do all things... through Christ who strengthens me."** Some people call these coffee mug verses, because you find them there, and many other places. We will look at each one in its context, and squeeze as much richness out of this whole book as the Lord will allow, given the limitations of your teacher.
- I will confess that Philippians is one of my favorite books in the Bible, and today we start a journey with the Apostle Paul as he writes from a Roman prison cell to what many believe was... his favorite church. The church at Philippi. Let's go back to the beginning and see how this church was planted. I think that will help in our appreciation of what God did in Philippi and in our understanding of this letter. **Turn to Acts 16.** Your homework is to take some time to read through Acts 16 carefully this week, but for now, I will walk you through some of the main points.
- **Acts 16.** Paul and Silas were re-tracing Paul's steps from his first missionary journey and they picked up Timothy along the way. They began to go through the cities, encouraging each one, and then we see in verse 6 that they were blocked from going into Asia. Then in verse 7, they were told by the Spirit not to go to Bithynia, which was also part of Asia Minor. George Mueller said years ago that God not only orders our steps; He also order our stops. He said no to Paul and Silas when they wanted to go into the Roman province of Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. That would come later, but God had other plans for them now. In verse 9 we see that Paul had a vision of a man in Macedonia, which is part of modern day Greece, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Why didn't God want them to go to Asia Minor at that time? Because He wanted them in Europe!
- Does that ever happen to you? You thought God wanted you to go to one place but then the job fell through or the house didn't sell or you get another offer somewhere else. When Cindy and I led the New Directions team in 1986, we took the team on the tour for the summer, and the elders at the church where I also served as an elder told me, "When you come back from Haiti at the end of the summer, we are going to make you the Associate Pastor of the church." That was exciting news and I went off to Haiti knowing that God was opening a new door of ministry for me. I felt like this was the door because as we had been traveling and I had been preaching in other churches for three years, God had given me a strong desire to be in one place, with one congregation. He was giving me a desire to pastor. This had to be the door He was opening! But when we got back from Haiti, the door had closed. The pastor told me, "We decided that we need to build a new church building. We can't hire you right now." Was I disappointed? Oh, yeah! I would guess Paul was disappointed when he couldn't go into Asia when he wanted to. I didn't know then what I know now: God closed that door because the next year He was going to open this one, and Antioch would be born.
- Paul walked into Philippi for the first time, and had he ever been to Rome, he might have said, "This looks like Little Rome!" Philippi was a Roman colony that was built to look like a miniature version of mighty Rome. And though it was a small city of around 10,000 people, it had a big history. It was founded in the 4th century BC by Philip of Macedonia. You may know his famous son, Alexander the Great. Philip named the city after himself. Then Philippi was really put on the map in 42 BC when a famous battle took place there. Remember Julius Caesar? He was assassinated by Brutus (et tu, Brute?) and Cassius. Two famous men you have heard of, Mark

Anthony and Octavian, avenged Julius Caesar's death and attacked Brutus and Cassia and their armies at Philippi. Octavian is also known as Augustus. Caesar Augustus: this nephew to Julius Caesar ruled the Roman Empire until AD 14. Philippi became a Roman colony in 42BC after the battle, and was ruled by Roman law. Latin became the official language, and those who spoke only Greek were considered the underclass. They were the construction workers, the tradesmen, the merchants. Those are the people to whom Paul came when he first walked into Philippi somewhere around 50 or 51A.D.

- **The First Three**

- We talk about the importance of a solid core group in a church plant. Well, check out the first members of the church at Philippi. Paul went looking for a synagogue on the Sabbath and couldn't find one. There wasn't a Jewish gathering anywhere, probably because there weren't enough for a quorum: you had to have ten Jewish men to have a synagogue. So Paul wanders down by the river, outside the city wall; maybe he had heard there was a Bible study going on down there; maybe he and his team were just looking for a quiet place to pray. And there they stumble on a group of women who had come together, presumably to pray and seek after the God they had heard about. Lydia was there and we are told she was a worshiper of God. Most believe she was a Jewish convert, but we know she wasn't a Christian. Not until that day when she heard the Gospel from Paul and, verse 14 says, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said." That's how a healthy church gets started. The Word is preached and God opens people's hearts. After Lydia believed, and her whole household, they were baptized. Then she opened her house to Paul and his team. Did the church in Philippi start in Lydia's house? Maybe so; Paul never says. But it definitely started in Lydia's heart, which might mean that the man in Macedonia, the one in the vision who was saying, "Come over and help us," was really a woman! Most importantly, though, the flag of the Gospel was now flying on a new continent!
- The next day or a few days later, Paul and his team are headed down to the river, to the place of prayer, and they meet the next future member of the church in Philippi. If he was surprised by the seller of purple, Lydia, and her conversion, he might have been even more so by the conversion that takes place in a demoniac, a slave girl who made money for her masters as a fortune-teller. Paul got tired of hearing the demon in her cry out, "These men are servants of the Most High God," so one day he commanded the spirit to come out. We don't see the slave girl again, and some say there's no way of knowing that she was a convert, much less a member of the church at Philippi, but it stands to reason, doesn't it? Would Paul have brought her freedom from the demon without also offering her freedom from sin, which is an even greater tormenter?
- Well, that's two of the three and now we come to what might be the most unusual of all. Paul and Silas are arrested when the owner of the slave girl complains to the magistrates that they had taken away his livelihood by delivering the slave girl from demons. You can't make this stuff up. So Paul and Silas are beaten, thrown bloody and bruised into the inner prison, and put in leg irons. That's when we meet the final convert in this most unlikely church plant. The Philippian jailer is most likely a retired Roman soldier: being a prison guard was the final resting place for soldiers who couldn't keep up on the battlefield any more. And after he had secured the prisoners in leg irons, and finally settles down for what he hopes is a quiet night in a dark place, the two new prisoners... break into song. When the music starts, the prisoners are listening in amazement. Then the fireworks really start as an earthquake shakes the prison to pieces, and the prisoners' chains are pulled out of the wall. Paul looks over at the jailer who has drawn his sword and is prepared to fall on it when Paul yells, "Don't do it. We are all here." The jailer ran over, fell down before the two bloody preachers and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" We who love the cross and Jesus Christ who gave His life for us on it long to hear those words, don't we? When's the last time someone said to you anything like, "What must I do to be saved?" You want to increase the likelihood you will hear those words, maybe even increase the likelihood exponentially? It

occurs to me that when people see us suffer with joy for the cause of Christ, there is a much greater likelihood that people will ask us about the hope that they see within us. But let me lower the bar a little and say that when people see us LIVE with joy for the cause of Christ, whether we are suffering or not, when they see true joy in our lives for the sake of Christ, that also increases the likelihood that they will ask us about the hope that they see within us.

- Well, now you have the core group of Paul's favorite church: a businesswoman and her family; a slave girl who used to be possessed by a demon and worked as a fortune-teller; and an ex-soldier turned jailer, and his family. It started when Paul stumbled onto a women's prayer meeting, if you will, and he said, "Hey! Let me tell you about the One you're seeking, and the One who seeks after you because He loves you."
- **The Fellowship**
- We can tell from the first few verses that Paul has a unique closeness to the church in Philippi. He says, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always and in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy." His heart is overflowing with love for this church, and when he prays for them he can't help but smile. Why? What is the source of that joy? Verse 5: "because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now." From the very first time he met with this church and began to introduce them to the Lord, there was a partnership in the Gospel. If there is one BIG IDEA to this whole book, I believe it is this: We are part of the Fellowship of the Gospel. We will see the word fellowship or partnership, *koinonia*, used several times throughout the letter. It speaks to the bond we have in Christ, the unity we are to strive for, the love we are to serve one another with. And our fellowship is because of Christ, because of the Gospel. The letter Paul writes comes from the depth of that fellowship he shares in the Gospel ministry with this church. He loves them. He loves Christ in them. He loves the work they are doing. In fact, this is the only letter Paul wrote that was not prompted by a problem in the church. Why did he write?
- **The Gift**
- This letter was written somewhere around 62AD, 10-12 years after Paul planted the church. It was prompted by his gratitude for the church when they sent him a gift by Epaphroditus, who nearly died in the delivery of that gift, as you will see later in the book. Paul sent back his gift with a healthy Epaphroditus: this letter of gratitude and encouragement.
- In the days ahead, we will unwrap this gift and grow in our fellowship, the fellowship we have because of the Gospel!