

THE ROAD TO PHILIPPI
Review of Philippians-Part One
The Book of Philippians #38

As I stated last week we have come to the end of our study of the book of Philippians. And since it has been 71 weeks from the time we started to the end of this study I feel it only appropriate to refresh our memories and review the main lessons we have learned over the course of our study.

As Part One of our review we are going to start where we started 71 weeks ago. I call this “The Road To Philippi” because it is the story of how Paul made his way to Philippi from the moment he had the initial idea to the time he actually visited Philippi and what happened to him there. All of this is recorded in Acts chapters 15 and 16 and includes all the twists and turns of how Paul figured out the will of God in the midst of disappointment, frustration and opposition.

You may remember that Paul and Barnabas had been set apart by the Holy Spirit about 12 years earlier to go and preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2). Their journey led them to the island of Cyprus and then into Asia Minor which is now modern day Turkey. Concerned about the welfare of those who came to Christ as a result of their preaching and teaching, Paul suggested to Barnabas in Acts 15 that they return and visit the brethren in every city in which they proclaimed the word of the Lord. Here is how Scripture records it.

ACTS 15:37-41

“After some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.’ Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

“And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

Have you ever been sure of the Holy Spirit’s prompting in your life only to have the whole thing seemingly fall apart right before your eyes? Paul and Barnabas had been united in purpose for 12 years. Suddenly they could not agree on one simple thing – whether or not to take Barnabas’s cousin along with them on their next journey. They so sharply disagreed that they separated.

As some of you know from personal experience, it’s a heartbreaking thing when friendships and ministries divide. But what the enemy planned for evil, God used for good. Silas, a willing servant of God, had been sent from Jerusalem along with Paul and Barnabas to deliver a letter to the Gentile believers (Acts 15:22, 34) and was present with Paul when Barnabas left and took Mark with him; A coincidence? No. God knows the future. He knows our heart. God had Silas waiting in the wings and brought him forward when the time was right.

The lesson we learned from this is that if we have been in disagreement with someone and can’t seem to resolve the issue,

We cannot let discouragement pull us away from the work God has called us to do.

We can't let the enemy steal away the gift of friendship God has given us or the ministry to which He has called us (John 10:10). We are called to seek restoration (Romans 12:18), but if a separation should occur, God will bring forth what we need when we need it. There will be a Silas waiting in the wings. We can trust our future to the One who holds it in His hands. He will not forsake us.

Having just suffered such disappointment from Barnabas, Paul was soon to experience true faithfulness from Silas. But God was not through making up for the loss of Barnabas. As a direct result of their separation Barnabas went west while Paul and Silas went east heading into what is now modern day Turkey and an encounter that would strengthen Paul in his ministry.

On their journey through the region Galatia, Paul met a disciple of Christ named Timothy, the son of a Jewish believer and a Gentile father, who was well spoken of by the believers in that area. Paul had no idea that God had a "son in the faith" waiting to accompany him and Silas on their journey. But God had him waiting in the wings just as he had Silas. So as a result of his faithfulness to God's call Paul gained a life-long companion and friend in Timothy whom he trusted with the gospel and to whom he trusted his churches later in life. So though the loss of Barnabas was painful, God replaced Barnabas with not just one, but two faithful companions who would be with him till the end of his life.

If Paul had not remained obedient to the call of the Holy Spirit, in spite of the opposition he experienced with Barnabas, he would have stayed in Antioch nursing his wounds. But he stayed faithful to his call. He did not let his negative experience with Mark or his disagreement with Barnabas prevent him from seeing the potential of service in others. And so his heart remained open to the potential of another to help him in his work of spreading the gospel.

What we learned from this is,

Though the first step of a journey may be painful and confusing, God has a blessing waiting for us along the way if we continue to follow His lead with open hearts.

We may feel abandoned by those we trusted but God has not abandoned us and He will continue to provide the people and resources we need to do the work He has called us to do.

Losing a companion was only the first frustrating and disappointing thing that happened to Paul on his journey to Philippi. The next thing he was to confront was confusion. God had called Paul and Silas to visit the churches in Galatia, the central portion of modern day Turkey. Leaving those areas they made their way through the western portion called Asia or Asia Minor in ancient times. They did not preach the gospel in this area but simply passed through this region because the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them to preach in there.

When they got through Asia they desired to go into Bithynia as well but the Spirit of Jesus would not permit them to go there either. Bithynia was located in the far north-central region and not far from the top of Asia Minor where Paul and Silas ended up. To Paul it did not seem unreasonable to preach the gospel in an area so close to where they were currently preaching. Yet God did not have the same view as Paul.

Have you ever been confused in the midst of following God's direction for your life? Where there seems to be a lack of progress, a roadblock, or diminished returns for your efforts? Paul experienced this; doing what God told him to do he found opposition from the Spirit of Jesus Himself. How frustrating and confusing to be doing what God has called you to do and find God Himself opposing you.

We are not told know why the Spirit would not permit Paul to go into these areas. But we do know God was not opposed to the gospel being preached there because Peter later sends his greeting to the chosen who are scattered throughout Asia and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1). In fact Paul himself found believers in Asia when he visited Ephesus on his third missionary journey, spending two years there teaching them the word of the Lord (Acts 19:1-10). Not allowing Paul to go into Asia and Bithynia was not a sign that God was through using Paul. God simply had a different time for Paul to preach in Asia and He had a specific place where He wanted him to preach now.

While staying in the city of Troas on the edge of the Aegean Sea, Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia appealing for him to come and help him. Concluding that God had called them to preach the gospel to those in Macedonia they put out to sea. Landing in Neapolis they set a straight course to Philippi where the Scripture says they “stayed for some days” (Acts 16:12). In spite of how it appeared, God was not preventing Paul and Silas from continuing to minister, He was simply preventing them from ministering in Asia and Bithynia.

Like Paul we should not be confused when God says no to us. No does not mean the end of our ministry, it only means a change of direction for our ministry. Scripture says the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable (Romans 11:29); Paul was still fully equipped to spread the gospel of Christ to the Gentile world. He was still following and hearing the voice of the Lord correctly. His opportunities may have been diminishing but his gifts and calling were not.

Here is what Paul understood that most of us don't. He didn't get frustrated because his personal plans were being thwarted. He understood the call was still in effect. He just needed a little redirecting to get back into the lane which God had created for him. So he kept seeking and trying to do what God had called him to do.

And when he was thwarted time and again in his efforts to preach the gospel in Asia and Bithynia he understood that it was the Spirit of God that was preventing him from doing so. He did not give up because he was thwarted. Instead he kept seeking a new direction. He never doubted the call. He simply misunderstood the direction. Once his compass was aligned with God's, he took off in a flash to continue doing what God had called him to do.

Life is full of disappointments. If we were to stop any forward momentum and question our purpose in life because we experienced disappointment we would succumb to the ploys of the enemy and be useless to the Master.

Just because a door of opportunity stands before us does not mean God will open it. God knows which doors need to remain closed and which doors will be open to us. If God withholds something it's only because He has something better to give.

When Paul got a “No” about going to Asia he kept looking for the “Yes”; If not Asia, then where? If not Bithynia, then where? He did not question his purpose, only his destination. He was not rearranging his priorities, only his travel plans. He did not harden his heart because he couldn't go where he wanted to go. He did not quench or resist the Spirit because he wanted something the Spirit did not want him to have. He listened and heeded the voice of the Spirit.

After so many “No's” Paul finally received his “Yes.” If he went to Macedonia to do that which God had called him to do then the Spirit would no longer resist his efforts to preach the gospel. Did it matter to

Paul why he could not preach in Asia? No. What mattered to him was that he was able to fulfill God's call on his life to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. If God said that would be Macedonia and not Asia, so be it. He didn't waste any time lamenting over Asia. He had work to do in Macedonia and he set sail immediately in order to do so.

In the midst of the "No" God was still intent on using Paul. He had places where Paul was needed but Asia was not one of them. Paul understood this and obeyed the Spirit's leading. As we seek to follow God's leading we will also be told "No" in our lives and it will come directly from the Spirit of the Lord. But as we seek His direction His "No" should not be misinterpreted as His sign of disapproval or that we are to stop our ministry. God's call on our life remains, it simply needs to be redirected to the new path that God has already prepared for us.

This path may not be what we expect or desire it to be. But it will be the path that leads to success and blessing for us and for others. This path will allow us to fulfill our call. No other path will allow success because the Lord is not on that path with us.

If we truly desire to serve God it will not matter where or how we do it. It only matters that God is in it. So pay attention to the "No's" in your life because the "Yes" will not be far behind if you will continue to seek after it. When God says, "No", continue to seek after His "Yes".

Have you ever been prompted by God to do something or go somewhere but when you got there you did not know how or where to start? Paul, Silas and Timothy were used to going directly to the Jewish Synagogue in every new city they visited. But Philippi did not have enough Jewish men to have a synagogue. So Paul went to the alternate place where the Jews would be meeting – somewhere near a river where the water needed for the Jewish purification rites was available. A location perhaps not as best suited for preaching as was the synagogue but a place of prayer nonetheless.

Sometimes we hesitate to do what God has called us to do because the situations we find ourselves in are not ideal. We timidly hold back our gift because we don't feel as comfortable as we would like. But by withholding the gift we are withholding the blessing. Paul went in search of the place of prayer near the river because he knew that without a synagogue the Jews would be meeting near a river. So he casually sat down and talked to the women who were gathered there, explaining the gospel to them.

Paul opened his mouth to speak but it was the Lord who opened the heart of Lydia, one of the women who was listening to him preach. As a result of Paul's willingness to be used in unusual circumstances Lydia came to Christ and was baptized along with her whole household.

God's method of bringing about salvation is the gospel of Christ and we are the instruments through whom He has chosen to speak this gospel. According to Scripture if we remain silent the gospel is not heard, and if they do not hear they cannot have faith. For how will they hear if those who know the truth do not speak? And how will the unbelievers come to faith if the word of God is not preached to them (Romans 10:14-17)?

God provides many opportunities for people to come to Christ and sets up many situations for us in which we can speak the truth. But if we wait for the ideal conditions they may never come. *"In season and out of season"* is what Paul tells us are the ideal conditions for telling others about Christ because *"the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine"* (2 Timothy 4:2-3). It seems that time in America is quickly approaching.

We must take advantage of what little openings are presented to us so we do not miss the opportunity to change the course of someone's eternal destiny.

It is the responsibility of God to open hearts. It is the responsibility of God to change lives. But God uses the foolishness of preaching to bring others to faith in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:21). We are His preachers, all of us. We are the bearers of His Good News. It is up to God to save but it is up to us to speak for that is the method God uses to bring eternal life.

So let us not shy away from less than ideal circumstances. If there is no synagogue let us seek out a place by the river. If there is no opportunity to be alone let us, while in the midst of a crowd, find a quiet place to talk. A moment of feeling uncomfortable ourselves may prevent someone from being uncomfortable for eternity. It's worth the risk and it's what God is calling us to do. God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline (2 Timothy 1:7). Let us use this spirit to speak both in and out of season that we might reap, as Paul did, an eternal harvest of souls for the Kingdom of God.

If Paul's preaching is any example of how people respond to the gospel then they respond in both positive and negative ways. For Paul did not simply use his gift to preach to those in Philippi but also to rebuke evil spirits from slave girls. This latter use of his gift got him and Silas in big trouble (Acts 16:16-24). Though Paul was able to set the slave girl free from demonic possession, this one act caused Paul and Silas to have their own freedom taken away from them.

It is a risk even today to preach the gospel of Christ publicly. Thankfully in America we are not usually beaten with rods when we are arrested, but we still may suffer because we are faithful to God's call on our lives. Speaking the truth can have consequences – some good and some not so good. But we must be willing to take that risk lest we disqualify ourselves from the race (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Paul dismissed the attentions of the demon-possessed slave girl for a period of time but when Paul realized that she was speaking the truth about them through the power of the father of lies he could no longer stand by and allow it to occur. Truth and evil cannot be allowed to stand together. As Edmund Burke is quoted as saying, *"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."* So Paul took authority over the evil spirit and cast it out.

Sometimes in our preaching we too have mixed messages told about us. Truths spoken about Christianity can be mixed with the lies of the world. Confronting evil may be necessary because truth cannot allow evil to stand. When the purity of the gospel is at stake it becomes necessary to confront evil.

The world will continue to follow the wide road to destruction unless someone comes along and proclaims that there is a different road that leads to eternal life. The proclamation of where that road is located and how we get there is the job of all who confess the name of Christ. There can be no mixed message about the way, no watered down message about the truth, and no compromise with the life that is offered in Christ.

Whenever we encounter light and darkness we must separate the light of the gospel from the darkness of deceit. We must confront it whenever it appears. Truth and evil cannot be allowed to stand together.

The message of the gospel is a disturbing message. It will either awaken someone to embrace the truth or it will agitate them to resist it. It is a disturbing message because it demands a response which

does not allow anyone to remain neutral. It's a message of choice and this choice had eternal consequences.

It's a disturbing message because it declares truth to those who are deceived. When the gospel is proclaimed the snares of the evil one are exposed and the thoughts of our hearts are revealed. Some will do anything to prevent having their innermost thoughts measured against a standard of righteousness and truth.

It's a disturbing message because the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is a gospel of the Kingdom. And the kingdom of God is in conflict with the kingdom of this world. Light and darkness do not mix. One will always try and push the other back.

The gospel is a disturbing message because it kicks our security right out from under us. The gospel has the potential to crumble whatever foundation we have built our lives upon whenever it is proclaimed. The gospel cuts to the heart and penetrates the walls we have built to protect us. Whatever we have clung to for security is exposed as a fraud whenever the truth of God's word is proclaimed.

Some people are so desperate for the truth they welcome this exposure and respond positively to the gospel of Christ. Others resist because they do not wish to be denied their personal pleasures and are fearful of losing the temporary false securities they have taken a lifetime to shore up. The very thought of these walls coming down is enough for them to resist.

Fear is a powerful thing and is often used by the enemy against both those who proclaim the gospel and those who hear it. Fear causes some to simply resist the gospel. Fear causes others to vehemently oppose it by silencing, imprisoning, and at times, torturing and killing those who proclaim it.

What we can learn from Paul's initial thought to return to the brethren in every city in which he proclaimed the word of the Lord to his imprisonment in Philippi for freeing a slave girl from demonic possession is this:

Following the call of God for your life is not without its difficulties.

These difficulties may include the severing of a ministry partnership, the opposition of God himself to your plans, and the opposition to the very gospel you have been commanded to preach.

But opposition does not mean God's displeasure has fallen upon us. What it does mean is that perseverance is needed in ministry because opposition will always be present whenever the gospel is preached or lived out in truth. Paul knew that opposition and persecution was part of the life of ministry to which he was called. He understood it and lived it. And it is something that we need to understand and incorporate as part of our own ministry life as well.

The enemy will always resist the gospel and those who proclaim it. Opposition to the gospel of Christ will never cease until the one who opposes us is thrown in to the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10). So opposition, difficulties, strained relationships, and misunderstandings will continue to occur as we follow the lead of the Lord. As difficult, confusing, and painful as these events can be we cannot let these temporary conditions stand in the way of fulfilling the ministry to which God has called each of us.

But opposition is not the only result of proclaiming the gospel. People also respond positively to the

gospel of Christ like Lydia responded to Paul's message at the river; and by following the path of ministry we may discover lifelong companions like Timothy to replace those who earlier deserted us.

Even in prison the gospel is not silenced. Remember the beating and imprisonment which Paul and Silas both suffered as a result of freeing the slave-girl? While Paul and Silas were singing hymns of praise in the Philippian jail, God sent an earthquake which opened all the doors and caused everyone's chains to be unfastened. And what was the result? The jailer and his household came to faith in Christ. Even in the midst of imprisonment God will provide an opportunity to draw people to Himself through our witness and how we live out the gospel when suffering comes our way.

The road to Philippi was filled with drama. What started out as an innocent request from Paul to Barnabas to visit their fellow believers turned into a sharp disagreement over who to take with them on their journey. This disagreement ultimately led to Barnabas separating from Paul. Then a simple act of compassion for a demon-possessed slave girl turned into a beating and imprisonment for both Paul and Silas.

But it was not without its positive side. A loss of one companion brought a gain of two more who would remain faithful to Paul throughout his life and to the churches he established after his passing. And one act of confinement brought a lifetime of freedom for a jailer who happened to be in the right place at the right time.

We don't know what the future holds, but we can be sure there is One who holds our future in His hands. We can, like Paul, learn to trust and lean on Him in times of confusion and disappointment. Though the road may seem confusing at times and relationships strained, God will never leave us or forsake us but rather direct us when, where, and how we should go; And no amount of worldly opposition or relational disappointment will be able to thwart the plan of God for our lives if we will stay true to His call.

These are the lessons we learned from studying Paul on his road to Philippi. Next week we will look at the lessons Paul is attempting to teach the Philippians themselves when he writes his first and only letter to them. To help prepare for next week I would like each of you to look at the book of Philippians and choose one or two verses that stand out to you.

There are at least 13 verses that are not exclusive to the Philippian church but are universal truths applicable to all believers at all times. I'm interested in which one of these you found the most inspiring or helpful to you.

I also don't want to be restricted to what I bring out as my overview of what was important. To do that I will provide some time for you to comment on what you learned from our study of Philippians. Sharing together what we have learned from God's word will hopefully be more rewarding to you than simply listening to my opinion of what was important.

So here's the assignment I'm giving to you in preparation for next week. Pick out one or two verses that have stood out to you in the book of Philippians and explain why they are important to you. Then share what you learned from our study of Philippians over the past 71 weeks. I will try and send out a reminder to do this sometime during the week.

But to help you today I have a half-sheet of paper for you to take home and write down the things I

have asked you to do. This should help to jog your memory during the week and you can then bring this with you next Sunday to refer to when I ask for your feedback. Together let's share the impact that God's message to the Philippians has had on our lives.

REVIEW OF PHILIPPIANS

MY FAVORITE VERSE(S)

WHAT I LEARNED FROM OUR STUDY OF PHILIPPIANS

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