

## **OPPORTUNITIES & METHODS**

### **Paul's Philippian Experience #2**

#### **A Brief History of Paul's Time At Philippi**

Last week I gave you some background on the events that transpired in Paul's life as he made his way to the city of Philippi. We looked at the four things that Paul experienced as he made his way to there and the lessons we learned from them. We saw how:

The first thing Paul experienced was **DIVISION**. This happened even before he set out on the journey. He separated from Barnabas, his companion of 15 years, over a dispute concerning taking John Mark on the journey with them. But God did not leave Paul companionless. He had already provided Silas to take the place of Barnabas.

What we learned from this is that God will not allow the enemy to win. Nor will he allow the enemy to thwart His plans. Whatever we lack God will provide. And no amount of disagreement or separation will stop the work of God. If there is a need God will supply the need. Our part is to remain faithful to His call.

The second thing Paul experienced was a **DISCOVERY**. After he set out on his journey Paul discovered a new disciple (Timothy, his "son in the faith" and "close companion")

What we learned from this is that You never know what God has in store for you unless you start the journey. Paul did not let negative experiences keep him from being obedient. And neither should we. We need to travel the road God has set before us even if we have a rocky start. We won't find the treasure unless we travel the road.

The third thing Paul experienced was grappling with **DISAPPOINTMENT**. As he tried to take the gospel into Asia and Bithynia the Spirit of Jesus kept forbidding him to go there. So he made his way to the coast being unable to go further inland.

The fourth thing Paul experienced was Divine **DIRECTION**. Paul had a vision in which he saw a man from Macedonia tell him to come over to Macedonia and help them. He took immediate steps to go to Macedonia and within two days set foot in Philippi.

What we learned from these two events is that when God says, "No", we need to seek after the "Yes." Because when God withholds something it's only because He has something better to give. 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. When God says, "No", we should seek after the "Yes".

Paul is now in Philippi. While he is there he has seven recorded encounters that are both blessings and trials. We're going to take a look at the first two today. We'll pick up on the last five after Preparation Sunday. So let's take a look at the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts starting with verse 12 to see what happened to him.

#### **ACTS 16:12-13**

*"On the Sabbath day we (Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke) went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled."*

This is the first thing we are told Paul encountered had after he entered Philippi. I call this: AN OPPORTUNITY

This was one which Paul himself initiated. Because of his education and experience Paul could create an opportunity out of what he knew about Sabbath worship.

This scripture says that “*on the Sabbath day*” Paul and his companions “*were supposing there would be a place of prayer*” and that they “*went outside the gate to a riverside*” to find it. Why would he make this supposition and why would he think a place of prayer would be located outside the city by the side of a river?

### SYNAGOGUES AND PLACES OF PRAYER

This may seem odd to us but it was not uncommon for the Jews to have places of prayer and to locate them near a river.

According to The Expositor’s Bible Commentary a typical Jewish congregation was made up of ten men who were heads of their households. Wherever there were ten male heads of households who could be in regular attendance, a synagogue was to be formed. Failing this, a place of prayer under the open sky and near a river or the sea was to be arranged, because water was needed for the Jewish purification rites. Since Philippi apparently did not have such a male quorum it was without a synagogue. Therefore Paul knew a place of prayer would be set up outside the city near a river.

On the Sabbath, therefore, Paul and his associates walked outside the city in search of a Jewish place of prayer; they probably headed toward the Gangites River about a mile and a half west of the city. There they found some women gathered to recite the Shema, pray the Shemoneh Esreh, read from the Law and the Prophets, and discuss what they had read.

### THE SHEMA and THE SHEMONEH ESREH

The SHEMA refers to a section of the Jewish service that consists of The Call To Worship, The Creator of Light blessing The Great Love Blessing, The core words of Deuteronomy 6:4 (“*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*”), the words of Deuteronomy 6:5-9 (“*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates*”), and the Thanking of God for His redemption.

The SHEMONEH ESREH is perhaps the most important prayer of the synagogue. The prayer is also sometimes called AMIDAH (which means “standing”), because it is recited while standing and facing the Ark that contains the Torah scrolls. The prayer consists of nineteen blessings divided into three general types: Praise, Petitions, and Thanks. After these there is a concluding prayer said for the entire congregation.

Besides the SHEMA and the SHEMONEH ESREH, this place of prayer would also include the hearing of an exposition or exhortation from a traveling Jewish teacher and the receiving of a blessing. That is why Paul and his companions sat down with these women and began to speak to them.

It’s interesting to note that this was a small group of people who were devoted to several things: prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and the reading and exposition of Scriptures. We don’t have any mention of singing but

singing was typically present in Jewish services. This sounds a lot like our congregation – a small group of people who devote themselves to praise, prayer, giving of thanks, and the reading and teaching of Scripture. They too did not have many people but that did not stop them from meeting. The location did not matter. The meeting together was what was important. Like us, they did not forsake the gathering of themselves together just because they had so few in attendance.

What can we learn from this event? **Look For Opportunities and Start With What You Know**

Paul was doing something he did every Sabbath. He sought out a place of worship. Because there was no synagogue he knew the opportunity for him to speak at the place of prayer was available. They would be eager and willing to hear what he had to say. So he went out prepared to do what God had called him to do – preach the gospel to the unsaved.

Though Paul tended to start with the Jewish places of worship there were many other opportunities that Paul took advantage of. He often went out into the marketplace to preach -another place he knew well since he was a tent maker and sold tents in the marketplace. Paul took the opportunity to speak of Christ no matter where he was or what circumstances presented themselves. He took advantage of the opportunities God provided for Him to speak. And he started in the places he knew well.

I think sometimes we miss the opportunities God gives us to speak of His love and grace because we do not look for them even when they're in our own backyard. God provides opportunities but we have closed our hearts and minds to the possibility of them. One of the reasons we do this is because we are not God-focused, we are flesh-focused. When our flesh is uncomfortable or unwilling we do not fight it. We give in to it. We take the easy way out, believing it harder to obey than to resist. We need to be more like Paul who put His God-given assignment ahead of his flesh-driven desires.

Opportunities usually come through normal circumstances such as when talking to people at work, school, or while traveling or shopping. They can even come as we respond to the “interrupting circumstances” in our lives – an accident, a letter, an email, a phone call, or an encounter with a stranger. Sometimes the interruption itself is the opportunity. No matter how they come about we are meant to take advantage of them, even if we create them ourselves as Paul did in Philippi.

Last week Wendy, and I had the opportunity to watch the new documentary “Holy Ghost”. What impressed me the most was the eagerness of those who believed in God’s love and mercy to go out and demonstrate it, seeking every opportunity to minister healing and salvation in places where we normally do not expect ministry to occur.

But it was not the places they went that inspired us. It was their faith in action. They so firmly believed in the power of the Holy Spirit to heal and to speak truth into people’s lives that they did not hesitate to speak or to offer healing to people. They were polite, they were loving, they were considerate. They asked permission to speak or lay on hands. They did not force themselves on anyone either in speech or in deed. But it was their belief in God’s willingness to move that was catching. People wanted to see what God was going to do. And God showed up in power and grace.

There was no lack of faith on their part. They firmly believed God was with them and was using them to accomplish His purpose of bringing people into His kingdom. And He did. Even those who claimed to be Atheists received a touch from God.

In Mark 11:23-24 we read, *“Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.”*

In 1 John 5:14-15 we also read, *“This is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.”*

These people knew without any doubt that God wanted people to be saved so they went out and preached the gospel. They also firmly believed that God was willing to heal people through prayer and the laying on of hands. So they went out and prayed and laid hands on people and they were healed.

Perhaps one of the reasons we don’t see opportunities happening is because we lack the faith to believe God would do something. If we do not believe God would use us to preach the gospel or that something would happen if we laid hands on people then we won’t look for opportunities to preach or heal. And on the flip side, why would God provide these opportunities if we were unbelieving vessels unwilling to be used? Remember Jesus said, *“All things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you”* (Mark 11:24)

We must be willing to walk the walk and not just talk the talk if we expect to see the same results as those in the documentary did. We must be convinced that God’s life-changing presence within us is sufficient enough for God’s power to be manifested. And we must be willing to let that power flow through us to others. Opportunities are all around us. We simply need to keep our eyes and ears so we can take advantage of them and speak of God’s love and grace when they occur.

The second encounter was with a woman named Lydia and it resulted in: A NEW BIRTH. We read about this in

#### **ACTS 16:14-15**

*A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.’ And she prevailed upon us.”*

Thyatira was located on the border between [Lydia](#) and [Mysia](#) and is one of the seven cities mentioned in the book of Revelation. It was famous for its purple dyes and for dyeing clothes – industries mostly carried out by women in their homes. So it is not unusual to read that Lydia was a seller of purple fabrics.

We don’t know why Lydia is in Philippi but we do know she had a home there and likely carried out her business from this home. Since Philippi was known as a miniature Rome and the gateway to Europe, many opportunities to sell her merchandise presented themselves to her in this city.

Due to her trade and the rarity of her dyes, Lydia would have been a wealthy woman and as such, a person of influence in the town of Philippi. Because no husband is mentioned we may surmise that she was either a widow or unmarried and that some of the women gathered there for worship were relatives and servants living in her home. She is only mentioned one other time and it is in this same context. We have no other information about her recorded in Scripture.

## What can we learn from this event? **The Message is the Method**

I have a friend who once said to me, “I love to help people. When I see someone on the side of the road who has a flat tire I stop to help.” I then asked, “Do you take this opportunity to preach the gospel to them? Or at least to tell them the reason you are stopping is because of your love for Christ?” He said, “No. I don’t mention my faith. I think my act of kindness speaks for itself.”

Acts of kindness can speak loudly. And changing a flat tire can speak volumes to a woman with three kids in the car who is stranded on a busy highway at commute hour. But life is full of kind-hearted and helpful people on their way to hell. Kindness alone is not enough. It can open a door but if salvation is to occur the gospel must be spoken.

### ROMANS 1:16

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”*

### ROMANS 10:17

*“Faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.”*

God’s method for bringing about salvation is the gospel of Christ and we are the instruments through whom He has chosen to speak this gospel. 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 we do not speak? And how will they come to faith if the word of Christ is not preached?

It has been said that we may be the only Bible anyone ever reads. While this may be true our lives can only lead one to seek the truth. We are not the truth. The truth only lives within us. If truth is to be revealed the proclamation of the gospel must be an integral part of the process. For it alone has the power of God to bring about salvation.

There have been many books written about how to grow a church particularly over the last century as technology has increased and knowledge has grown. But the largest increase the early church saw happened in one day within the space of a few minutes when Peter preached the gospel to unbelievers (ACTS 2:41). 3,000 souls were added to the church that day, proving that God’s method of reaching people is the preaching of the message of the gospel.

We must not lose sight of the fact that speaking the message of the gospel is the method God has ordained as the way to faith. We should, as Paul told Timothy, be ready in season and out of season to preach the word (2 Timothy 4:2). But we should also remember that Paul said, *“Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”* (1 THESSALONIANS 1:5). If we are to see results we must be as convinced of the gospel’s power as God Himself is.

So what have we learned from Paul’s visit to Philippi? After following God’s call to go to Philippi Paul had two encounters which resulted in the following: AN OPPORTUNITY and A NEW BIRTH. And what did we learn from these events in Paul’s life?

- 1) **Look for Opportunities. Start with what you know.** God will provide opportunities to share the gospel but we need to keep our eyes and ears open to see them and not shy away from them. God-given opportunities are presented so we can help change someone’s destiny. When we know what

God wants to do and we are willing to be used by Him to accomplish it, then we will take advantage of every opportunity to see God at work.

- 2) **The Message is the Method.** God has determined that the preaching of His word is necessary if salvation is to occur. Living our lives in faithful obedience can cause either curiosity or disgust. But if people are to be saved they must hear the gospel, for it alone has the power to save. The message of the Gospel is the method by which salvation occurs.

These are the things I observed and learned as I looked at these Scriptures. How about you? What stood out to you as we walked through these first three encounters Paul had while in Philippi? Did you learn other lessons besides the ones I mentioned?

Next month we will look at the last five encounters Paul had while in Philippi. Knowing what happened to Paul before and during his time in Philippi is intended to give us a better understanding of the book of Philippians. We'll bring that study next month as well. But next week is Preparation Sunday so we will take a week off from Paul and his time in Philippi to give you an opportunity to share what the Spirit is doing in you.

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