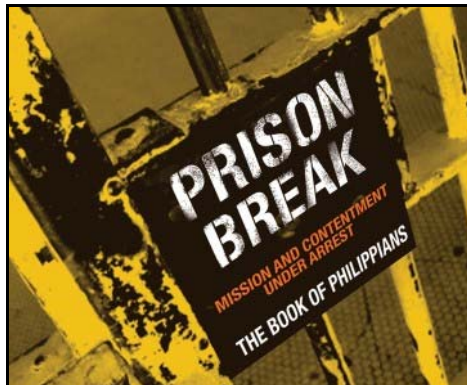


## Prison Break – Mission and Contentment under Arrest



### A Brief Introduction to the Book of Philippians

Jean Jacques Rousseau once wrote that “man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.”<sup>1</sup> We would suggest that we are born in chains but have yet to truly understand how to live free. The book of Philippians was written by a person whose freedom had been stripped from him by the government of his day. Yet while under house arrest in the city of Rome, Paul, an early Christian leader, writes rejoicing as a free man. How do mission, contentment and joy flow out from someone living in chains? This semester at Inversion we will be focusing on this question by traveling together into the ancient letter of Philippians, a book which oozes wisdom for living together in the mission of God.

We are going to take a walk through the book and it would be helpful to get the proverbial lay of the land before launching out. This short, well maybe it is not so short, paper will serve as a broader introduction to the book for those geeks who are interested. With any letter of the New Testament some really important background information can really help us understand what is going on. So let’s look at this letter, known to us as the Letter to the Philippians, by investigating a few of the major issues surrounding the book.

### Where is Philippi and Who Lived There?

I remember when I first became a follower of Jesus I was a bit weirded out by some of the books in the Bible. The names of these books seemed really strange and I wasn’t sure if I just missed out on the proper Christian decoder ring to figure out what these titles meant. Then a friend helped me out with the titles of some of the New Testament books whose names I just didn’t get. He told me that many of the New Testament books were letters to new Christians who lived in certain cities. First Corinthians would be much like titling a letter to believers in Nashville, First Nashvillians. That turned on the light for me. Philippians therefore is a letter written to a people in the ancient city of Philippi, so as we begin it is probably going to help us out to know a bit about that place and its cultural history.



Ancient Philippi was located in an area which was known as Macedonia, in what is now modern day Greece. The name of the city derives from Phillip II, King of Macedonia, who established the city in 356 B.C.<sup>2</sup> Many of us may be unfamiliar with Phillip II, but most will easily recognize the name of his son Alexander the Great. The city of Philippi was strategically located near Mount Pangaeus and its gold mines<sup>3</sup> along an ancient trade route known as the *Egnatian Way*. This trade route connected ancient Rome

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Chicago,: H. Regnery Co., 1954).

<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*, New International Biblical Commentary ; 11 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

with its provinces in the east. It was a city on a fertile plane about ten miles inland from the influential port of Neapolis.<sup>4</sup> In the book of Acts the city is described as *a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony* (Acts 16:12) so its renown and influence were well known in the New Testament era. Its description as a *Roman colony* is of some importance, so we'll briefly touch on what that means.

Philippi became a place of dispute during several Roman civil wars. First, it was the site of the battle between two coalitions in 42 BC. One led by Octavian and Marc Antony, the other led by Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar. Upon the victory by Octavian/Antony, Philippi was founded as a Roman military colony.<sup>5</sup> Octavian, later to become Caesar Augustus, populated the city with his own victorious military leaders and ex-soldiers establishing it as a city with strong Roman allegiances. A colony of Rome was much different than an area simply ruled and administered by the empire. A colony's inhabitants were official citizens of the empire and their government was modeled after that of the Rome itself. The important thing we need to know is that Philippi was very Roman in culture and identity, it would be seen by its people as an extension of Rome. She and her people shared Roman laws, customs, and religion and were extremely proud of this reality. They were a people who were culturally entrenched and culturally satisfied. We see this quite prominently in Acts 16:20, 21:

*And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice."*

These were a people with long established cultural norms who saw the faith of Christ's followers as antagonistic to their very way of life. This is the soil in which the church at Philippi was birthed. It was a good place for church planting; a good place to start some sanctified trouble for the sake of the gospel. And there was a man on the scene that was intent on doing just that.

### Who Wrote This Letter and Why?

There is broad consensus that the author of the letter to the Philippians was Paul, an early leader of the Christian movement. In the greeting of the letter we see the authors self-identified as Paul and Timothy (Phil 1:1) who speak of themselves as being *doulos*, servants or slaves of Jesus. Additionally, Philippians contains some of the most descriptive autobiographical information about Paul in the entire New Testament. So there is little drama among scholars that the author of this letter is none other than the one self described in Phil 3:5-7. Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus (see Acts 8:1, and Acts 9), *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. But whatever gain he had, he counted as loss for the sake of Christ.* One author describes well the apostle and the transformation Jesus had brought to his life.



*In addition to revealing the life of Paul, the epistle contains a fresh presentation of Jesus Christ. In a lofty hymn about Jesus Christ, Paul called his readers to an examination and interpretation of the mind of Christ. Paul clearly believed his life had been transformed radically because of following Christ, and thus every portion of the epistle reveals the Lord through his servant.<sup>6</sup>*

The letter was written with purpose of thanking the Philippians for a gift they provided to Paul, as well as to encourage them to continue faithfully in the mission of the gospel. Paul wrote to them while he was incarcerated in Rome with most placing this imprisonment during the persecution under the Emperor Nero around 62 AD. Most scholars point to Rome as the place where the letter was written although there are a few who put forth Ephesus and Caesarea as possibilities. The consensus remains with the

<sup>4</sup> Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, ed. Terry Muck, The Niv Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, The Ivp New Testament Commentary Series ; 11 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Electronic ed., Logos Library System ed., The New American Commentary, vol. 32 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001, c1991), 22.

traditional view of a Roman origin of the letter as it fits what we see in the New Testament. Additionally, the Roman origin has been the resounding opinion of the church for close to 2000 years. I see no reason to question this tradition, as the arguments for a Roman origin are many. Paul spent time towards the end of his life under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16, 30). He did not have GPS anklet which could track his every move, but he would have had a member of the imperial guard (the Praetorium mentioned in Phil 1:12-14) in his back pocket around the house. Yet even while under house arrest, with his personal freedom hindered, Paul made the most of it as an opportunity to express his soul which is soaked with freedom in Christ.

Rather than writing as one bound by his personal prison, Paul rejoices that his imprisonment has been for the sake of the gospel. His suffering was for the defense and confirmation of the gospel of Christ (Phil 1:16) and even the members of the imperial guard had taken notice of this reality. Strangely enough, he seemed happy to be in jail, as his own hardship was resulting in believers being bold for the kingdom and Christ was being preached widely. For this he rejoiced – he found mission and contentment even while under arrest. The prison was broken by the power of the Spirit at work in the life of a man who could not be bound; because for Paul, to live is Christ, to die is gain (Phil 1:21). Such people are destined by God to transform the world.

### What Did Paul Think of the Philippians?

It is evident from both the style and greeting of the letter to the Philippians that Paul felt a deep love and friendship with his readers. In the greeting segment of the epistle, he only calls himself a *slave* or *servant* of Jesus; he does not use the title *apostle* like he does in other letters. For instance, in his letters to the Corinthians, a church with which Paul had more strained relationships, his greeting is stated “Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 1:1) and “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (2 Cor 1:1). With the Corinthians Paul establishes his credentials, his calling as an apostle, his authority, his backstage pass to speak into their lives. This is very different from the way he addresses the Philippians. With this church we feel that Paul is talking to his closest companions, his dearest of friends. One commentator, William Barclay, describes this endearment well. Feel the love:

*In the other letters he begins with a statement of his official position, why he has the right to write, and why the recipients have the duty to listen; but not when he writes to the Philippians. There is no need; he knows that they will listen, and listen lovingly. Of all his Churches, the Church at Philippi was the one to which Paul was closest; and he writes, not as an apostle to members of his Church, but as a friend to his friends.<sup>7</sup>*

Many scholars have described this letter as a “hortatory letter of friendship”<sup>8</sup>; here is the big word of the day. I first read this and thought “what the heck does *hortatory* mean?” A little dictionary work shows it to mean the letter was written to his friends to *advise* them, *spur* them on, to *exhort* them to *encourage* them forward in the gospel. So if you are prone to giving advice and exhorting your friends, you could be called *hortative*. Your scrabble game just took flight...you’re welcome.

The Philippians and the apostle were tight and the letter is much like an e-mail you would write a dear friend who knew your heart and shared common struggles. The nature of Christian friendship is the overarching tone and it is present throughout the book. Yet these friendships were formed not on a whim, but centered in and on Jesus and his gospel. We might call the friendship Paul experienced with the Philippians a deep *missional friendship*. They were all called to Jesus, to know him, love him, follow him, and serve his mission in their generation. This brought their hearts together; it was not some random civic association or club. Gordon Fee describes the nature of this friendship as a three-way relationship between Paul, the Philippians and Jesus himself:

<sup>7</sup>William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, Revised ed., The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975), 9.

<sup>8</sup>Fee, 20-21.

*Most significant, friendship in particular is radically transformed from a two-way to a three-way bond between him, the Philippians, and Christ. And obviously it is Christ who is the center and focus of everything. Paul's and their friendship is predicated on their mutual participation/partnership **in the gospel.***<sup>9</sup>

A friendship centered in the gospel is what we are calling missional, it is friendship in and around the person and purposes of Jesus. Such friendships are a great gift from God; indeed it is almost shocking that the incarnate God, Jesus himself, chose to call his disciples his friends.

*No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.*

*John 15:15-17 ESV*

From just a quick reading of Philippians we can see that Paul and his friends at Philippi heeded these words of Jesus. They did love one another and their friendship was missional, it was centered in their Father's business. Their business was to exalt the name of Jesus together, to bring honor and fame to God by bearing fruit in their lives. Fruit of seeing people become followers of Jesus, fruit of seeing a new community form, fruit of seeing others mature in the faith and give their lives away in Kingdom service. The teaching and exhortation which Paul gives in the letter are therefore centered in deep gospel reflections about the nature of Jesus<sup>10</sup> and the nature of the mission together with him. There is also much practical insight for living for Jesus day to day in the mission. We will turn over much of this ground together in our walk through this book.

### How Was the Church at Philippi Started?



The Christian way has always been one of planting gospel-centered, gospel-preaching communities of faith. From the disciple's day until our own, followers of Jesus have planted churches—New Covenant communities which are called out to live and proclaim good news to those around them. According to the book of Acts, Paul began one of these churches in the city of Philippi during his second missionary journey, right after his arrival to Europe around AD 50.<sup>11</sup> The story of the Philippian Church is an intriguing one indeed, a great example of the wacky, fun, and wild ways in which people on mission plant churches to the glory of God. We find the story in the sixteenth chapter of the books of Acts.

In Luke's record<sup>12</sup> of the story we find some really interesting things going on. Historically, the church was planted when a group of men arrived in Macedonia in order to preach the gospel there. These events took place less than twenty years after the death of Jesus<sup>13</sup>. The actual details of the "church plant" are really intriguing. First, Paul and Silas had been joined by Timothy and Luke in the missionary effort. The band had arrived in the area of Macedonia as the result of some spooky weird circumstances. Basically, the Holy Spirit forbade them from going to speak the Word in Asia and then

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 21. Emphasis in original.

<sup>10</sup> The section in Chapter 2, which is written in the form of an ancient Hymn, has some of the richest theological reflections on the incarnation, God becoming a man, in the entire Bible.

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; 2002), 3:836.

<sup>12</sup> Luke is the author of the two part narrative in the New Testament often referred to as Luke-Acts. Luke, a physician who was Paul's traveling companion drew up his account of the gospel and then told the continuing story of the early church in the book of Acts. For more on the gospels and their authorship see the paper - Reid Monaghan, *Dating the Gospel Tradition* [Adobe Acrobat File] (Power of Change Blog, 2001, accessed August 8 2006); available from <http://www.powerofchange.org/blog/docs/apologetics/gospeltradition.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce, 3.

the Spirit of Jesus told them they could not take the gospel to an area known as Bithynia.<sup>14</sup> How this forbidding and preventing actually took place, whether by audible voice or spiritual impression, I have no idea—but it sounds like these guys were dialed into the Lord. Think about how strange this is. The same Jesus who commanded his disciples to preach the gospel to all of creation was now telling them to sit tight for a minute. He had other plans for them and a direct assignment was soon to come. And come it did in the form of a vision. In the vision, a man from Macedonia appears and asks Paul to come and help them and Paul rightly concludes that God indeed wants them to preach the gospel in Macedonia. With this clarity, the missionary quartet pointed their boots towards the region of Macedonia by way of the port city of Neapolis (see Acts 16:6-10).

As Philippi was one of the influential centers in the region on a prominent trade route, they traveled there first. Paul's usual pattern was to share about Jesus in the synagogues, the center of Jewish religious life in the major cities along his journey. I don't want us to miss Paul's continued focus in the New Testament on urban centers as places of influence and impact; Philippi was no exception. Remember that Philippi was steeped in Roman Culture and although there were some Jewish people there, no synagogue existed in the city. Apparently the Jewish community was not substantial enough to form and sustain a synagogue at this time.<sup>15</sup> Yet there was a small group of Jews and God-fearers<sup>16</sup> who met on the Sabbath outside of the city by a river for prayer. Paul and Silas went out to this place of prayer and spoke with a group of devout women who had gathered there. It is at this riverside service that the first convert in Europe, a woman named Lydia, came to believe in Jesus Christ. From her description in Acts 16 she was obviously a businesswoman of influence and wealth<sup>17</sup>. Her companions and other members of her household formed the launch team or core group of the new Philippian church plant. Macedonian women had a reputation for influence<sup>18</sup> and these women were obviously no exception. So here is a lesson for you—if you are a successful, influential woman, God may want you to be a part of launching and planting new churches among those who need to know Jesus. It is something to pray about.

From there a crazy little slave girl with a future-predicting demon (you used to see this sort of stuff on the Sci-Fi channel's "Crossing Over with John Edward") keeps running her mouth about Paul and Silas. After saying "These men are servants of the most high God" about four hundred times, Paul gets sick of it and casts the demon out of her. Big Problem. Her owners were making bank off of her demon's fortune telling skills and they were pretty upset that Paul had ruined their capability to turn a profit. So Paul and Silas get a beating, get thrown in Jail, God performs a real and serious "Prison Break," the jailer gets saved, his household gets saved, they all join the church at Lydia's house and the mission continues. You can read it all in Acts 16. Being on mission with Jesus sounds a bit wild, crazy, fun, painful, and glorious; much better than the dead religion many travel in today. The bottom line is this: The same God who led these men and women is the same God who leads us in mission today. The same Jesus which saved Lydia, cast out the Sci-Fi channel demon, and caused a jailer and his family to believe, is the same Jesus which walks with us today. Get going to your place of prayer and see how Jesus moves when you are actually on mission with him.

### **The Mega Themes in Philippians for Our Day**

There is so much going on in this short letter from Paul to this new church in Macedonia. We won't unpack it all here, but I did want to highlight a few of the big themes that jump out from the pages of

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<sup>14</sup> Bithynia, was a Roman province in the northwestern part of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) – see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bithynia> for more on this region in the first century.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce, 4, 5.

<sup>16</sup> God-fearers or (sebómenos) were Gentiles who devout people who revered the God of the Jews. The following from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia is helpful: The participle sebómenos (from verb sébomai, "worship") and the cognate adjective eusebēs are generally used in Acts to refer to a class of Gentiles who attended the synagogue and observed the Jewish laws but were not full proselytes, inasmuch as they were not circumcized. (The usage in Acts 13:43 appears to be an exception, as sebómenos is used with prosēlytos.) This class of sebómenoi was the most receptive to Paul's preaching, since circumcision was not a condition for salvation. Bromiley, 1:941.

<sup>17</sup> Thielman, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce, 5.

Scripture (or computer screens; I love my tricked out Bible software). I'll quickly highlight seven themes for our day:

### ***Friendship (Missional Friendships)***

What a great joy and privilege to be on mission with your friends. We are going to see this in the writings of Paul to the Philippians. Paul wrote to his friends: *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.* I think it is great to have these kinds of relationships, to live, to serve, to proclaim the gospel, with your friends. We'll see this in Philippians.

### ***Humility***

Peter tells us quite frankly that *God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble* (1 Peter 5:5). For me, I don't want "opposition from God." I have enough problems with my own sin and struggles to add God as an opponent. Yet how does one become humble? Philippians will give us the best example of the path to humility. We will have a two part series where we talk about this. The first part is entitled *How to Make Nothing of Yourself*. Doesn't sound like the American way; but God wants us to go there. The second part will be called *How to Make Something of Yourself* where we look at some true greatness. Humble people seeking true greatness; God would have it no other way for us.

### ***Suffering and Counting the Cost***

God has a plan for each of our lives. Oh how I wish I could tell you that his plan only included happy days, sunshine, no pain. If I told you that I would just be a liar and would not be too faithful to the Bible. To be honest, in our country, where health/wealth prosperity preachers abound on the TV, we have lost the biblical reality that God uses suffering for our good and for the proclamation of the gospel. The mission moves forward founded upon Jesus' sufferings on a bloody cross. The gospel is displayed in the world as God's people live, yes even suffer, in a way that is hopeful, a stark contrast to the despair we see around us. There is no greater joy than following Jesus, delighting in God, and communing with the Holy Spirit. Yet, it is a way that includes a cross. I invite you to walk with me as *we know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible we may attain the resurrection from the dead* (Phil 3:10,11).

### ***Holiness***

Becoming like Jesus includes growing in holiness. Not growing in self-empowered legalistic piety, but Holy Spirit empowered holiness. The H-word is not a four lettered word; it is a word that means "like Jesus." We indeed seek to be like him, we desire that we be able to see him more clearly. We must remind one another again and again that without holiness no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). In Philippians chapters 3 and 4 we will be challenged to focus our hearts on what is good, right and true. We will be challenged to pray continually (however that works) and maintain close fellowship with God so our lives represent the beauty and holiness of our Lord.

### ***Contentment***

In a world of unrest, pain, disappointment, temporary highs, materialism, busyness, betrayals, death, chasing worldly power, position, and possessions...how does one find contentment? Where is peace of mind and freedom for the soul to be found in the prisons we see all around us in this world? Paul found a secret; a secret he shares with us in Philippians chapter 4. It is what we need more than anything, to have a soul satisfied while moving forward in mission. Life and Satisfaction in the goodness and greatness of God – this is the hope of Inversion.



## **Joy and Rejoicing**

Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice! The words rejoice and joy are found in twelve verses in the book of Philippians (ESV). It was Paul's deep concern that the Christian life would be one of joy and continual rejoicing. Rejoice literally means to give joy to...again and again and again. Oh how we need an inexhaustible fountain of joy from which to drink. We do not need a happy-clappy, fake, superficial, "put on a smiley face" life. But true, deep, abiding, God centered, joy which does not burn away like the fog in the face of suffering. GK Chesterton once observed something very profound about the Christian way:

*The following propositions have been urged: First, that some faith in our life is required even to improve it; second, that some dissatisfaction with things as they are is necessary even in order to be satisfied; third, that to have this necessary content and necessary discontent it is not sufficient to have the obvious equilibrium of the Stoic. For mere resignation has neither the gigantic levity of pleasure nor the superb intolerance of pain. **There is a vital objection to the advice merely to grin and bear it. The objection is that if you merely bear it, you do not grin. Greek heroes do not grin: but gargoyles do--because they are Christian.**<sup>19</sup>*

We are not looking to fake it in life. We want to be able to grin in the face of kind or difficult providence. When things are good and when things really suck, we want a joy that can remain. In other words, we need a true joy that can bear all the burdens of real life in this fallen world. We must fight for our joy to be found in Jesus – no other person can sustain it. To him we now turn.

## **The Person of Jesus**

It is clear over and over again that the book of Philippians is a Jesus-centered book. It is a gospel saturated book which tells us that the source of joy, life, mission and friendship is the person of Jesus. He is our example of humility, he counted the cost and suffered for us, he is holy and calls us to the same, he went to the cross for his joy and ours, and he is our great hope, our high priest who brings us to God. Jesus is more than enough to satisfy the longings of our souls. The other satisfactions being pimped around in our culture are sorry substitutions which leave us empty and dying on the inside. So more than anything, as we begin our Prison Break, as we continue on mission and seek contentment while under the arrest of a fallen world; let us remember this Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

He lived the greatest life ever lived, he took a brutal beating and died a heinous death for our sins, he showed us love and true joy, he calls us into mission every day, and he calls us his friends. To him this study is dedicated, and to him we look for our life, our hope, and our marching orders in this fractured world.

To the Glory of God and the Joy of His People,  
August 31, 2006



Reid S. Monaghan

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<sup>19</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Image Books ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 104. Emphasis added.

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