

Five Weeks in Philippi

Session One – An Introduction to Philippi

Philippi Then

Philippi was a large walled city in Macedonia, now part of northern Greece, at the top of the Aegean Sea. It was located not far from the base of Mt. Pangaion, where there were a number of productive gold mines. Shortly after it was established in the mid-300s BC, the town was taken over by Philip of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great), who renamed it after himself. It was situated between the Strymon and Nestos rivers, and by the smaller River Krenides, which provided a reliable source of fresh water. The nearby harbour of Neapolis provided a major port for trade and travel.

It was a wealthy city because of the mines, its relationship to Rome, and its commercial importance on the Via Egnatia, a major Roman highway and trade route. The population would have consisted of a mixture of Greeks, Romans (largely retired veterans and their descendants), and foreigners.

In 42 BCE the city famously gave its name to the battle which saw Mark Antony and Octavian (later “Augustus”) gain revenge on Julius Caesar’s assassins, Brutus and Cassius. The battle had involved the largest number of troops in Roman warfare up to that point. 19 legions of 110,000 men on the Triumvirate side faced 17 Republican legions of 90,000 men, and the result was 40,000 casualties. Augustus re-purposed Philippi as a Roman colony, to make homes for his military veterans. He was also motivated by a desire to establish a military presence in this strategic area and to further the cultural and political Romanization of Macedonia.

As a Roman colony, Emperor worship thrived in the city, but so did the worship of Greek, Roman, Thracian, Egyptian, and Asia Minor deities.

Philippi Now

The modern town of Filippi (pop 10,000) is adjacent to the ruins of the ancient city, which today exists only as an archaeological site – but a large and well-excavated one! The port city of Kavala (ancient Neapolis), 12 km away, is the nearest major population base (70,000).

Among the remains of Philippi visible today is a theater (built in the 4th cent. B.C. and altered by the Romans in the third cent. A.D.), two Byzantine era churches, some remains of the ancient forum, and foundations of a sanctuary dedicated to Egyptian gods.

The Church at Philippi in the Time of Paul

Paul founded the church in Philippi during his second missionary journey, between 49-52 AD. It is noteworthy that Philippi is the first European city in which the Gospel is preached! Up until Paul’s journey from Troas (ancient Troy, in Asia Minor, today’s Turkey), across the Aegean to Neapolis, there are no records of missionary activity in Europe. Luke, writer of the Acts of the Apostles, was an eyewitness of at least the early part of Paul’s time there, as Luke writes his account of Philippi in the first person (“we,” “us”).

Paul's European outreach marked not only a geographic transition, but a new ministry team. Paul had been teamed with Barnabas, Paul's mentor in the faith. Unfortunately, a falling-out arose between them over whether John Mark, a previous companion who had left under unexplained circumstances should rejoin them. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company, Barnabas and Mark going to Cyprus, and Paul and new companion Silas into Syria. They were soon joined by Timothy and Luke.

There is no firm indication of just how long Paul spent in Philippi; Luke sums up Paul's ministry there in three vignettes: the conversion of Lydia and her household, the deliverance of a slave-girl, and the conversion of a jailer and his family.

The Conversion of Lydia (Acts 16:11-15)

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

The dyeing of fabrics in Thyatira was well known in the ancient world. Homer speaks of purple-dyeing taking place in the regions of Lydia and Caria as early as his time. Pliny notes that the practice was invented by the Lydians in the city of Sardis. Seven inscriptions have now been discovered that attest to a guild of dyers in Thyatira. One inscription even speaks of the guild of purple dyers in Thessalonica honoring one of their members who was Thyatiran. Two inscriptions discovered in Philippi mention "sellers of purple." Purple dye was commonly made from a marine shellfish called a Murex, but there is also evidence that dyers from this area used the root from a madder plant. "Lydia" could be either a proper name or a nickname referring to her city or trade.

It is not surprising to find a woman undertaking such business in Macedonia or in Asia Minor. Women had begun taking on significant business and civic roles in these areas. Evidently, Lydia had moved to Philippi and set up a business of selling dyed fabrics to Romans in the colony. Her business was apparently doing well if she owned a house large enough to accommodate Paul and his team in addition to the members of her household. She is described as "a worshiper of God," a term Luke uses to indicate a Gentile who is sympathetic to, and to a degree participating in, the Jewish faith – perhaps like Luke himself, prior to his Christian conversion.

The fact that the area of prayer is by the river indicates there may not have been a proper synagogue in Philippi; Jews (and interested parties such as Lydia) either met at a building by the river, or simply an open gathering-place. It is described as "outside the city gates." As a city dedicated to traditional Roman gods and emperor worship, the Jewish community may have felt the city to be "too pagan" for a synagogue to be located there; or, conversely, the city was "too pagan" to tolerate one!

"We," writes Luke, began to speak to the women there. Why only the women? Worship was segregated in many locations, with men in an inner area, and women listening in. Non-Jews would be in the area together with the women. It is possible that Paul and company addressed the women

in this outer area first, or even only? It is equally possible that the men were gathered in the synagogue, and the women – and outsiders, such as Lydia – in an alternate location. Perhaps Paul and company were not invited to speak to the gathering in the synagogue, and so moved to the less formal gathering. The story is short on such details!

Lydia responds to the Gospel – “The Lord opened her heart to receive Paul’s message” – and, together with her household (family, servants, any children, but no mention of a husband), is promptly baptised. She persuades the missionary party to stay in her home. Acts 16:40 indicates that her house became the meeting place for the Philippian church.

Lydia’s home town of Thyatira became one of the primary churches in Asia Minor, receiving a “letter” in the Book of Revelation. Is it possible that Lydia was prominent in bringing the Gospel back to her home city? Unfortunately, by the time of the writing of the Book of Revelation, the church in Thyatira was struggling with issues surrounding sexual and ethical immorality.

The Deliverance of the Slave Girl (Acts 16:16-24)

Luke’s second vignette involves an unusual encounter between Paul and a slave girl who was reputed to foretell the future. This young girl receives her inspiration from what Luke literally calls a “python spirit” (pneuma python). The Python dragon or serpent was associated with the oracle sanctuary at Delphi, about eighty miles northwest of Athens. In the story of the origin of the cult, Apollo killed this large snake that was guarding the entrance to the oracle cave. Apollo then became the guardian and patron of this sanctuary, which was an entrance to the underworld. During the Greco-Roman era, people came from all over the Mediterranean world to consult the priestesses of Apollo (called pythia) for advice. The Pythia descended into the oracle grotto to seek inspiration from the god by allowing herself to be possessed by a spirit. She then arose and uttered the god’s instructions to the inquirer—first in an ecstatic, gibberish speech and then typically in the form of Greek verse. The slave girl in our story would have been purchased in Delphi and exploited by her owners in Philippi for this purpose.

Upon meeting Paul and company (Luke: “We”), the slave girl began shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” Over a course of days, she repeats this whenever Paul is around. This recalls when, in the Gospel accounts, the demon-possessed would cry out to Jesus, telling all that he was the Messiah. As this is as much a distraction as an attraction to the Gospel, Paul commands “the spirit” to leave the girl. Immediately, the girl loses her prophetic powers, and the owners are enraged. They react by taking Paul and Silas to court, naming Paul and Silas as Jews, and inciting a mob to riot on the basis of disrupting the city’s religious life and customs. The magistrates have them stripped, beaten and jailed.

The Conversion of the Jailer and his Family (Acts 16:25-40)

Paul and Silas, jailed and chained, are singing hymns at midnight (!). A miraculous earthquake springs the doors and frees the chains of all the prisoners. The jailer, thinking a jailbreak had occurred, was about to kill himself – an indication of what he expected to receive from failing his duty – when Paul and Silas prevent him, indicating they were all still there. Luke describes the scene (Acts 16:29-34 NLT):

The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household.” And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. He brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God.

Their punishment complete, Paul and Silas receive word they are to be released. Revealing they are Roman citizens, and have been beaten and jailed without a trial, they demand to see the magistrates personally. The officials come, and beg them to leave the city without making further trouble.

The Purpose of the Vignettes

The Conversion of Lydia demonstrates the power of the Gospel to persuade the “God-fearing Gentiles,” which would become the backbone of the Pauline churches. On the “outer fringe” of Judaism, these believing Gentiles become the inner circle of the faith.

The Deliverance of the Slave Girl powerfully demonstrates the superiority and power of the Gospel over demonic power as well as over the traditional Greek and Roman religions – and the dangerous back-lash arising from it.

The Conversion of the Jailer and his Family is a powerful story in a city settled by Roman veterans, of which the jailer would have been one. Luke often mentions Roman soldiers sympathetically, in his Gospel and in Acts, which would have been well-received by his Gentile audience.

The Conversion of Households

Lydia and the Jailer both include conversions of the “entire household.” Households consisted of families and servants; the conversion of the head of the household would mean the adoption of the faith by the rest of the family and staff. While this seems unusual to us, it is entirely consistent with both the Old and New Testaments, where faith is not an individual concern, but a family matter. God deals with families! (See Acts 10:2; 11:14; 18:8; 1 Cor 16:15; 2 Timothy 4:19 for other examples from the ministry of Paul).

Occasion and Date of Writing - Purpose and Nature of the Letter

Approximately 62 AD - Paul is in prison in Rome, awaiting trial before the Emperor. The Philippians have sent money and personal assistance to Paul, in the form of a servant, Epaphroditus. The money will provide food and improved accommodations, and Epaphroditus will provide much-needed help the increasingly frail Paul. However, it is Epaphroditus who has fallen ill, and Paul sends this letter back with him, to clear him of any charge of abandonment, and to encourage the Philippians in the face of Paul’s imprisonment and impending execution. He also addresses some problems and personal conflicts which have arisen in the church.