



**Joy in All Circumstances:
Paul's Encouragement to the Philippians and to Us
Wednesday Bible Study with Pastor Hetrick
September 16, 2020**

Other than part of the second chapter, known as The Christ hymn (2:6-11), the book of Paul's letter to the Philippians is not really mined for its content. Though not all of the epistles are believed to have been actually written by Paul himself, Philippians is one of the undisputed epistles-scholars agree upon his authorship. Paul often is wordy and even brusque, but this letter shows a softer side as he is addressing a topic just as timely today:

- **What does it mean to live life "in Christ" in the midst of crisis?**

While we let that question begin to dwell with us, first, some background about Philippi.

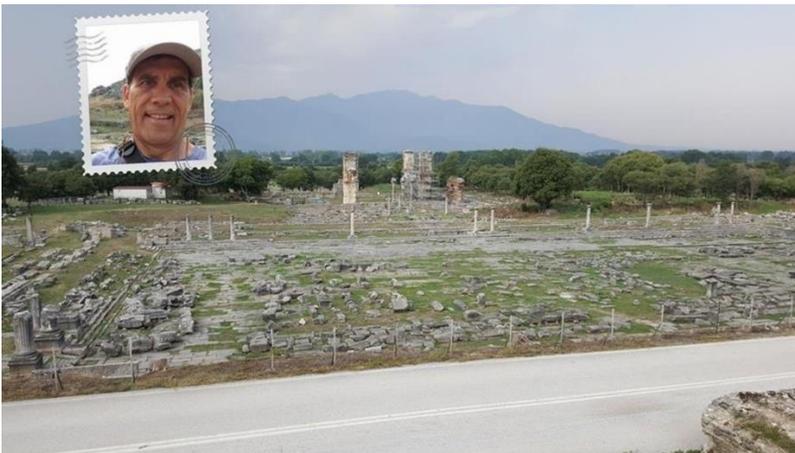
The remains of this walled city lie at the foot of an acropolis in north-eastern Greece, on the ancient route linking Europe and Asia, the *Via Egnatia*, a Roman military road.



Founded in 356 BCE by the Macedonian King Philip II, the city developed as a "small Rome" with the establishment of the Roman Empire in the decades following the Battle of Philippi, in 42 BCE. Philippi was populated by people banished from Athens. It is bordered on the north by mountains and the south by a high acropolis. The *Via Egnatia* increased wealth and trade prosperity.



In 42 BCE Mark Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius in the Battle of Philippi settled veterans there. After the Battle of Actium more veterans settled there.



The vibrant Hellenistic city of Philip II, was walled with gates, the theatre, the funerary heroon (temple), Roman public buildings, such as the Forum, and a monumental terrace with temples to its north. On the other side of the via Egnatia, opposite the forum and reached by a monumental staircase, was a basilica (known simply as Basilica A) which was constructed in the 5th century CE. Measuring 69,965 square feet and having three aisles, it was the largest basilica built in that period. The city became a center of the Christian faith following Paul's visit in 49-50 CE. The remains of its basilicas constitute an exceptional testimony to the early establishment of Christianity.

The Via Egnatia ran from Rome through Philippi on the way east.

The journey from Ephesus to Philippi was about a week.

The road went to the center of town.

In Paul's day, Philippi had population of about 10,000 of Thracians, Greeks, and Romans. The surrounding villages were agricultural, producing grain and wine. Philippi was the marketplace for the agricultural produce and a shopping area for travelers on the Via Egnatia.

Philippi was governed by Italian law- the highest honor a Roman province could have. Paul had to remind his listeners that their citizenship is heavenly. Roman citizens had the right of ownership, transfer and purchase of property and the right to civil lawsuits. Philippi, with its elevated status was free of provincial land and personal taxes as well as tribute.

Religiously, Philippi was about as diverse as it could be. The people were syncretistic, regularly participating in the city's many cults:

Worship centered around Apollos and Artemis- Thracian gods, as well as Greek god Dionysus, Roman gods and gods of Asia Minor and East, including Isis. Add to this worship of the Roman state. There is some suggestion the city was divided into areas by religion.

To the south was the center of Roman state religion.

In the North, worship of various healing deities, including Cybele- the mother goddess. There may or may not have been Jews in Philippi at the time of Paul, but none are listed among Paul's converts in Acts.

Lydia is a Gentile (Acts 16)

The first Christian church in Europe was founded at Philippi (built on top of a tomb of a Hellenistic hero). Lydia was notable as the first European to be baptized there. When Paul the Apostle visited Philippi, founding the first Christian Church in Europe, the appearance of the city changed. Among those who heard the Apostle Paul's sermon was a woman called Lydia. Lydia decided to be baptized in the waters of the River Zygaktis and she thus became the first Christian woman in the whole of history.

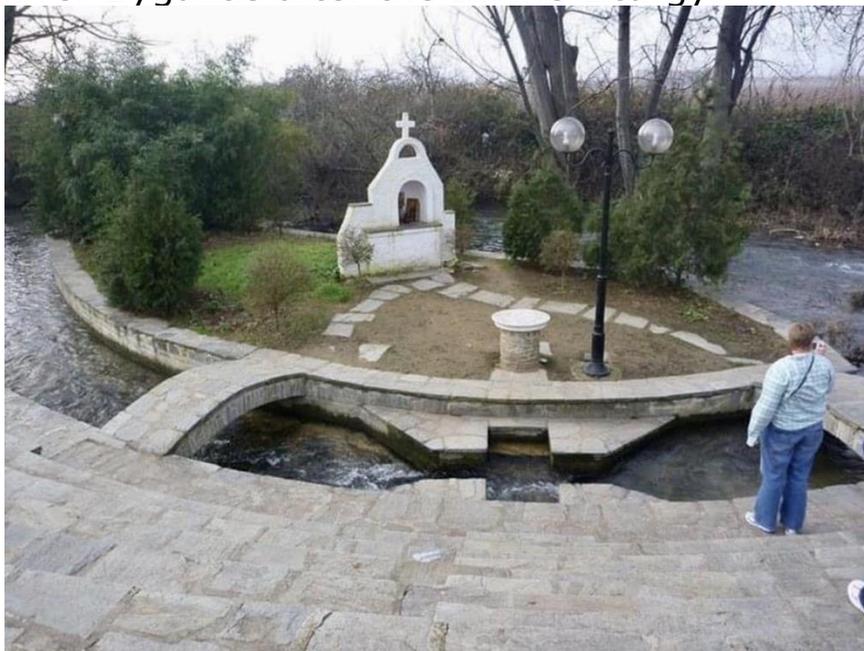


Paul visited Philippi on another three occasions, a fact that, along with his Letter to the Philippians, shows the long and close relationship between him and the community of Philippi.

The modern Baptistery of St Lydia (1974), with an octagonal design, can today be found very close by to the archaeological site.

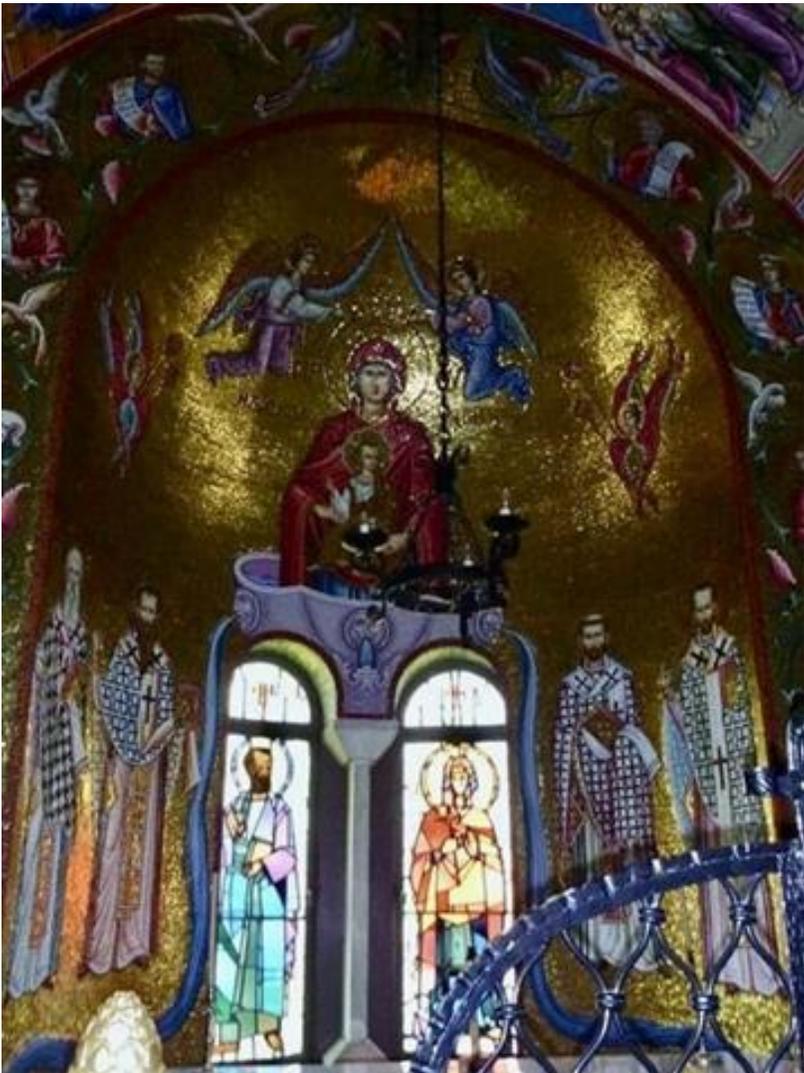


On the adjacent bank of the River Zygaktis is an open-air baptistery within the flowing stream, similar to those that survive in the Early Christian basilicas of Philippi in the shape of a cross. On May 20th each year, the day of memory for St Lydia of Thyatira, an adult baptism is performed in the River Zygaktis after the Divine Liturgy.



Unlike our baptisms, those being baptized descend the steps into the water to be immersed before coming out the other side. Note the shape of the cross.





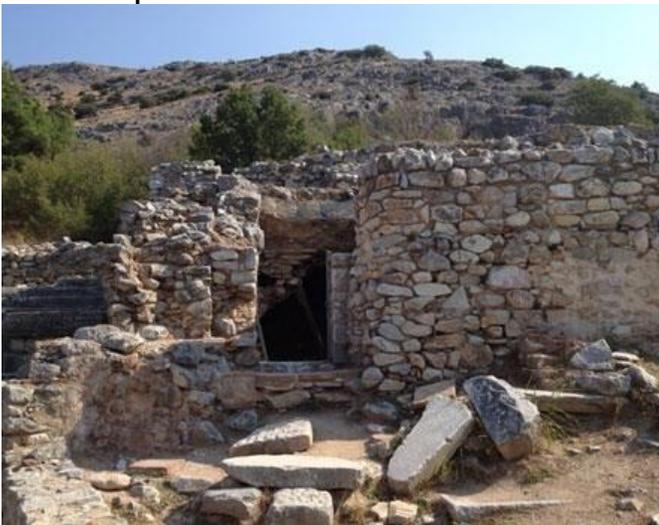




Interior of St.Lydia's of Philippi holy baptistery - Photo by Giannis Giannelos

In the following centuries Philippi flourished and benefitted from an extensive building program. In Late Antiquity Philippi was a prominent city in the Eastern Empire and an episcopal seat. Once more the city's urban landscape evolved to include large churches, towered buildings, and new city walls.

A curiosity is the rumored 'cell of St. Paul' where it is claimed the apostle was imprisoned. It is an old water cistern.



Now a little background and Paul and the church at Philippi:

1. It is a church with which Paul has a strong attachment.

We know this because he is commending them throughout, and there was no need for an official greeting. Paul's authority is not being challenged. He has great confidence in them and rejoices frequently. He portrays them as organized and generous and they have supported him financially and spiritually. They have sent Epaphroditus to assist him, and this is the only church from which he has accepted monetary aid. They are not only his converts and co-workers they are his friends.

2. Paul speaks from this position to their possible internal struggles as well as their external pressures. Envy (or "spite") and strife ("selfishness") militate against the unity Paul is commending to them. The motive of Christian love is to mirror the nature of God and motive of Jesus' actions to work for the deepest good of others.

3. In the early part of chapter one, Paul is assuring them, assuaging their fears about his imprisonment, and also correcting their understandings about the effect of this situation for him and for the spread of the Gospel.

Paul notes that because the guard in the prison changes every hour he has new opportunities to share the good news. And for those fellow believers in the prison, they have become emboldened too. This prison is not a hindrance to Paul's work as it would seem.

4. The faithfulness of Christ does not exclude believers from trials but there is still reason to rejoice.

Now we can come back to our question:

What does it mean to live life "in Christ" in the midst of crisis?

a. Paul's Dilemma and Paul's Discernment:

In verses 18-26, Paul reflects upon his own situation, like we have a seat as he thinks out loud. He found a new life on the Damascus road. That life is "in Christ." Living in Christ, as opposed to living "in myself" means his own best interests are no longer central. They are not the determining factor in his decisions.

Our reading for Sunday begins with verse 21, but this section is better divided by starting at verse 18. It is here that Paul rejoices even in his imprisonment- this is a future tense and progressive movement notion. He cannot choose his circumstances, but he can choose how he will respond to them. The basis for this is it will result in "my salvation through your petition."

What supports us in such times? Paul is telling the Philippians- your prayers matter. Praying for him to be liberated to return to them is a gospel purpose. Paul also notes that he is being given a "supply of the spirit of Jesus Christ." Through prayers of the community and the power of the Holy Spirit, he is being given human and divine assistance in this time.

Interestingly the word “supply” used here is the term used for a ligament, that which supports a joint in the body. Someone told me that “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” is a comfort in times of struggle. Paul is saying this is his support but also his liberation.

This notion of being supported is one that tells us we may be in more of a marathon than a sprint. If we try to push through alone we end up depleted. How has this time changed your perspective on what strengthens you or carries you?

For Paul, one of three things will happen- he will be released from prison; he will be vindicated in a trial; or if he dies, he will go to live with Christ. He is eagerly watching and hoping for whichever of these will come. In articulating vindication, he is not unlike Job who seeks vindication in a time of trial and struggle. Either release or vindication allow him to return to the Philippians, though the time may be long. Of the three options, Paul clearly would rather just go be with Jesus.

But this is the place of dilemma- which is better? Being freed to return to the Philippians or being freed from this life’s struggle to be with Jesus. The latter sounds really appealing, but then he imagines the Philippians and discerns.

It is better for them to grow in faith and joy now. Prison is rough, waiting for an outcome probably seems daunting. But he is going to hold fast for the Philippians and also for the opportunities in front of him now. There is a difference between happiness and joy. Paul has come to see his life in Christ IS an expression of Christ. Within everything, God works for good and Paul will be a coworker in this. Life does not just begin in the great beyond, our eternal life with Christ has already begun- we are in it now.

If you begin with Chapter 1 verse 27, and read through to chapter 2, verse 4, you will see Paul is appealing to the Philippians and to us to live with fortitude and unity in difficult times. He will continue to show us the example of Christ before returning again later in the epistle to appeal that we live with fortitude and unity in difficult times. Fortitude and unity are heavy words that by their nature remind us of the weight and different directions life can tug at us.

In these last few months, have there been any “joyful surprises” where you received unexpected joy or a new purpose amidst challenges that you might not have experienced otherwise?

Paul would rather “depart” his current circumstance, but he will remain if that most assists the Philippians, advances the gospel and therefore pleases the Lord. Paul’s example shows how to accept suffering in the hope that God can bring good from within it, and how to deal with jealousy and rivalry without adopting those actions and attitudes for one’s self. This is not to say that God causes suffering, nor does God cause rivalry and strife. God meets us in these places, as God met Paul, to guide us to set aside even clear personal preferences in favor of the greater good.

Can you think of something in your life, perhaps in this time where you have had to wrestle with what you would prefer versus what others needed?

INSTRUCTIONS TO THE PHILIPPIANS AND TO US

In verse 27, we shift from Paul's circumstances to that of the Philippians. Paul begins exhorting the readers to greater unity based upon the model of Christ. Humility and servant hood are the path to such unity.

- A. Live your life worthy of the gospel.** This phrase, "live your life," means "be a citizen" or "behave as a citizen." It brings to mind allegiance to a form of government. This was as countercultural then as now. Rulers and leaders want our "loyalty." The question then is whose will is the ultimate will for our living? Is it one of our own construction, or is it divine will? Who or what is the center of our lives? Paul is raising a practical point- what we do shows whose we are. As St. Vincent de Paul once said, "If God is the center of your life, no words are necessary. Your mere presence will touch hearts."
- B. Whether Paul comes to see the Philippians or not, stand firm in one spirit, one soul, struggling together for the faith of the gospel.** Paul is encouraging the adopting of a common life principle and attitude. A common goal and purpose. Whether you get what you want (i.e. Paul's visit) or not.
- C. The struggle is not against adversaries, the struggle is for the Gospel.** Have you ever noticed that sometimes we spend more energy on what we are NOT than upon what we are? What we are against instead of what we are for?
- D. Paul knows that adversarial energy can be contagious. And intimidating.** He is speaking to focus in the midst of crisis. Remember you are given the gift of grace and salvation. Your belief is "in Christ." This may be a double entendre- Christ is the object of your belief and the giver. We are in fellowship and unity with Christ.
- E. This is both the source of our strength and struggle.** At times you may struggle because you hold fast to Christ and to his teachings and commands. Paul ended up in prison, Others have also struggled by remaining true to faith in Christ. Living with the integrity of Jesus may not always be easy, but it brings life and joy and light to others. And it is a sign of resurrection.

What comes to mind when you imagine being a citizen of the kingdom of Christ as opposed to being a citizen of where we live? Are there times it is a challenge to square loyalties?

Paul speaks about unity- being of one mind. This is not the same thing as uniformity. Some say we should seek "unity in the essentials and liberty in all else." What things would be essential to "unity" as you understand following Jesus?

Sometimes the Bible gives us more questions than answers. If you have any moments that made you pause, pray for that supportive spirit of Christ to lift you up. If you know of anyone struggling, pray for them to know God's love.

