



THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS – STUDY GUIDE

LESSON 2 A CLOSER LOOK AT THE ECCLESIA AT PHILIPPI

Acts 16

Where is Philippi?

Philippi was a Roman colony founded by Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. It was about 10 miles from the sea, in the province of Macedonia, on the main road from Asia to Rome. As a Roman colony its laws and administration were modelled on those of Rome. It was a popular place for retired Roman soldiers to live and the citizens of Philippi were proud of their Roman status.

Why did Paul go there?

Paul was called out by the Lord “to carry my name before the Gentiles (those who are not Jews)” (Acts 9:15). It was part of the divine plan that the Gospel should spread “in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Clearly Paul, with his Roman citizenship as well as his strict Jewish education, was an ideal choice to carry the Gospel message westwards.

During the First Missionary Journey Paul established a number of new ecclesias in Asia Minor (better known to us as Turkey). After reporting back to Antioch and Jerusalem he said, “Come, let us return and visit the brethren in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (Acts 15:36). So the Second Missionary Journey got under way.

Acts 16 tells us that Paul and his companions were guided by God not to preach at that time in Asia Minor, but to cross over the sea to Macedonia. This was clearly a momentous step for Paul, for now he was going to preach the Gospel in Europe for the first time.

Notice that in verse 10 the pronoun changes to “we”. Luke was the writer of Acts. He must have now joined Paul, Silas and Timothy. It has been suggested that Philippi was Luke’s home town. This may have influenced the decision to go to Philippi first.

How was the ecclesia started?

Acts 16:11-40 tells us about the first converts in Philippi and the founding of the ecclesia. Notice in particular the following:

1. The references to the Roman Colony (v.12), with its magistrates and other Roman-style officials (vv.20-22; 35-36): the people were proud of being Romans (v.21) and intensely embarrassed when they discovered that Paul and his friends were Roman citizens who should not have been treated so roughly (vv.37-38).
2. The hardship which Paul and Silas endured for the sake of the Gospel: the slave girl who told fortunes had some kind of mental problem which Paul cured. Her owners were so annoyed that they brought serious charges against Paul and Silas, which led to a nasty beating and imprisonment. The inner prison was no doubt dark, damp and foul. But the faithful companions knew how to rejoice in suffering, drawing personal strength from their recollection of the way Christ had “endured the cross, despising the shame”.
3. The process of conversion: In each case there was careful instruction which led up to baptism.

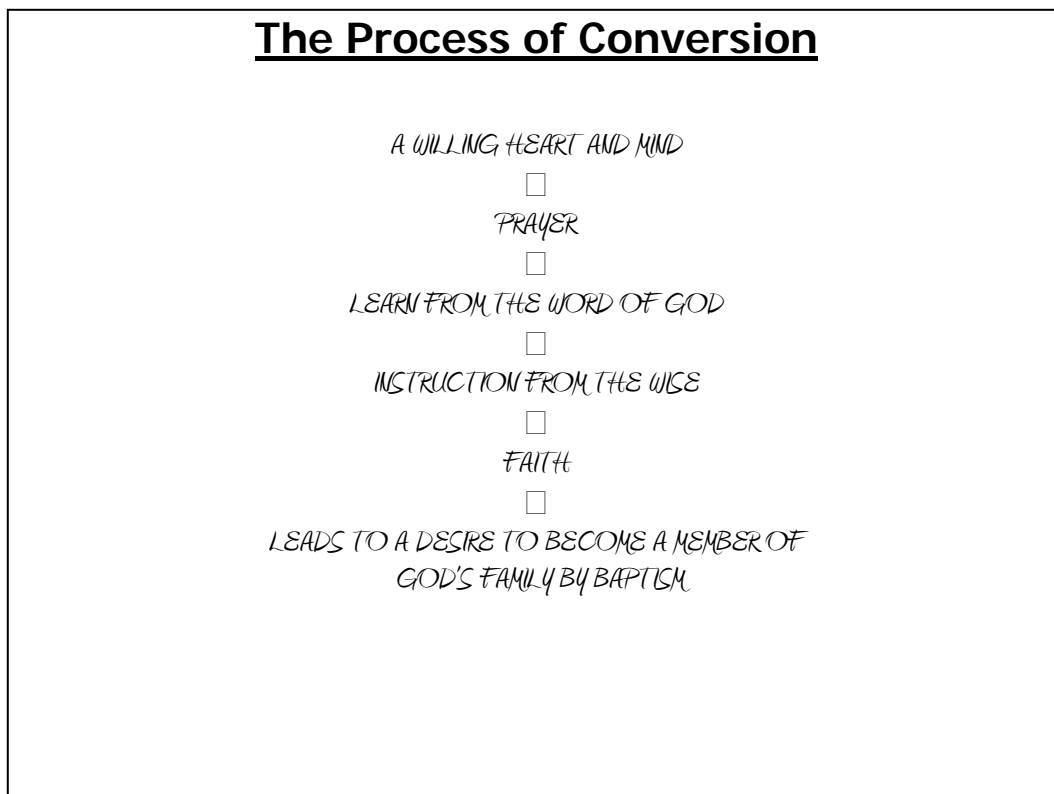
Lydia was a businesswoman who already worshipped God because she was a Jewess or, more probably, a convert to the Jewish faith. She had a reasonable amount of knowledge on which the Apostle could build, with God’s help. Unless we let God open our hearts and minds (“heart” here means both) by submitting willingly to His word (for us, the Bible), we cannot be taught. Lydia was a prayerful person who wanted to know the Truth. So she “gave heed to what was said by Paul” (v.14). As a result of faith in what had been learnt, both she and her household were baptised.

The Jailor was clearly impressed by the wonderful spirit shown by Paul and Silas during their beating and imprisonment. He listened to their prayers and hymn singing, He was so amazed by their refusal to take advantage of the earthquake to escape from prison that he fell down before them and said, "Men, what must I do to be saved? " What he had already heard had taught him of the need to be saved! Paul now told him that he had to "believe in the Lord Jesus Christ". But it was not sufficient just to repeat this phrase on the basis of emotion and ignorance. He needed to understand what was the basis of this belief. So Paul and Silas "spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house" (v.32).

Once again conversion was not instantaneous and in ignorance. It involved knowledge and understanding of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and was followed by baptism.

Understanding Baptism

We can now understand better the description of baptism as "an appeal to God for a clear conscience" (1 Peter 3:21). Jesus himself was baptised and said, "Let it be so now, thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). "He who believes and is baptised will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). Baptism can only be real when a person knows about the Gospel and believes that by accepting the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ there is forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Baptism is both a birth and a death. When a person is completely covered in water it is a symbol of being buried with Christ. By his death, Jesus destroyed the power of sin and, by his resurrection, he broke the power of death. When the person comes up out of the water, a new life commences. It is like a new birth into the family of God. The new life is now linked to the life of the risen Lord Jesus. God promises to give eternal life to faithful members of His family at the Second Coming of Jesus. (Look up John 3:5; Acts 8:35-38; Romans 6:3-9).



How was the ecclesia kept going?

A small group of believers had been established. But it was necessary for Paul to continue along the great Roman road to the west. He realised that these new brethren and sisters needed help to "devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). This

emphasises that baptism is only a beginning. It is a new birth. No baby with loving parents is left to fend for itself. New converts need help. They must be fed; their knowledge of God's Word must be built up. They must be kept warm and loved. Plenty of contact must strengthen fellowship.

It seems almost certain that Luke, whose home town was probably Philippi, was assigned the job of following up the Philippi campaign when Paul and his companions continued their journeys. Notice the pronoun "we", introduced in Acts 16:10, is dropped in Acts 17:1. It is re-introduced in chapter 20:6 when, on the Third Missionary Journey, Luke rejoins Paul and company as they travel through Philippi! This is a marvellous example of the way the detail of the text can tell us so much we would otherwise miss. Careful study opens up the wonders of God's Word!

Where was Paul writing from?

It seems most likely that Paul was writing from Rome, a number of years after both the founding of the ecclesia at Philippi and his later visit which is recorded at the beginning of Acts 20. We know for certain he was a prisoner (Philippians 1:7,13,14,17) but it was possible for people to come and see him. Acts describes a period of imprisonment in Rome:

"And he lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered" (Acts 28:30,31).

It is likely that Paul's reputation for co-operation with the authorities and his Christ-like manner meant that at this stage he was not in an unpleasant prison cell, although he was chained to a Roman soldier guarding him. It seems he took the opportunity to preach to his guards (Philippians 1:12,13). Paul originally went to Rome as a prisoner following a near riot in Jerusalem when he preached the Gospel there (Acts 21:27 onwards). He tells us in his letter that he is about to face trial and may be released (Philippians 1:19-25) - though the death sentence was a possibility for Christians in the First Century.

Contacts between Rome and Philippi

The distance by land and sea between Philippi and Rome was about 800 miles, roughly six weeks journey in those days. We know that Timothy was with Paul in Rome. We can work out that the following journeys at least were made to maintain contact:

1. A messenger travels from Rome to Philippi to tell the Philippians of Paul's imprisonment and need (Philippians 4:14).
2. Epaphroditus is sent back with gifts (4:18).
3. A messenger takes news to Philippi of Epaphroditus' illness (2:26).
4. A messenger tells Paul of the effect of the news on the Philippians (2:26).
5. Epaphroditus returns home to Philippi (2:25,28).
6. Paul hopes to send Timothy to the Philippians (2:19).
7. Timothy must return to Rome with news (2:19).
8. Paul himself hopes to be able to see them again (2:24).

Today man can travel right round the world by plane in less than 24 hours. Many people use the telephone to dial anywhere in the world and speak to others. Yet are we any closer in our practical concern for each other than were these believers who depended on messengers making lengthy journeys to stay in contact with those they loved in the Lord?

Earlier Contacts between Paul and the Philippians

These exchanges of news and practical assistance were typical of the relationship between Paul and the Philippians from the outset, no doubt reflecting too the wonderful influence of Luke upon the young ecclesia.

Soon after leaving Philippi, after the founding of the ecclesia described in Acts 16, the newly baptised believers sent a gift, probably of money, to assist in Paul's preaching in Thessalonica. They followed this up with a further gift. They realised the work had to go on (Philippians 4:15,16)!

It seems that when he reached Corinth, further assistance was given by these brethren and sisters from Philippi in Macedonia (2 Corinthians 11:9). Paul could then pay his debts and get on with the work of preaching:

"And when I was with you and was in want, I did not burden any one, for my needs were supplied by the brethren who came from Macedonia. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way."

The spirit of this giving is summed up admirably in an earlier passage in the same letter (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). It was not that they were giving merely what was excess to their own requirements, Paul insists.

"We want you to know, brethren, about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will" (2 Corinthians 8:2).

Real Generosity

The real test of generosity is when we give in a way which means we have to make sacrifices. In other words, we have to go without things we would like to have. We must give up something we would rather have kept. This is also a test of our faith in God, for we demonstrate our willingness to trust that He will provide all we need. "First they gave themselves to the Lord," wrote Paul (2 Corinthians 8:5). This is surely the response of those who accept that Christ has given all for them. If we give ourselves freely to the Lord's service, all that we are and have will be put at his disposal. No wonder, as we shall see, there was such love and joy in the relationship between Paul and the Philippians. Their fellowship was not merely a matter of belonging to the same group. It was a real sharing of understanding and experience.

Questions

1. Why did Paul go to Philippi?
2. What indications were there that Lydia was a God-fearing person?
3. Why were Paul and Silas arrested?
4. Why did the Jailor get ready to commit suicide?
5. How did the Jailor know anything about the Gospel?
6. What is necessary before baptism?
7. In what way is baptism (a) a death, (b) a birth?
8. Why did Luke stay in Philippi?
9. How did Paul witness when he was in prison?
10. What did he expect the result of his trial to be?
11. Can you make a list of ways you can give for the work of the Lord? Which one are you going to start with?