

Essays in Philippians: Memories

Philippians 1:1-11

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Paul's letter to the church at Philippi is an encouraging letter. Generations of saints have sought comfort from its joy-filled pages. Troubled times reveal our need to be encouraged. Troubled times sparked the writing of this letter. Both Paul and the Philippians wanted to console one another.

As Paul begins this affectionate report of his imprisonment, he expresses his gratitude to God for every remembrance of the saints at Philippi (Phil 1:3). Memories have a way to comfort us. Paul had good memories of his time with the Philippians. Their relationship began years earlier, when Paul, Timothy, Silas, and Luke were led by the Spirit to the region of Macedonia (Acts 16).

After spending a short time in Philippi, they found a few women worshipping on the Sabbath. These women were not in a synagogue. Instead, they worshipped on the riverbanks just outside the city limits. Paul preached to them. Lydia and her household were baptized. Undoubtedly, this was one of Paul's treasured memories that warmed his heart in a cold prison.

Speaking of prison, while preaching and performing miracles in Philippi, Paul and Silas were beaten and put in prison. This violent injustice must have been difficult to endure. Nevertheless, they sought comfort by worshipping God in prayer and song.

While they were incarcerated, an earthquake shook open the prison doors. The Roman soldier on watch that night feared that the prisoners had escaped. Escaped prisoners would have meant severe punishment for the Roman soldier. He could face imprisonment or death. His family could be sold into slavery. Rather than face his superiors, he attempted suicide.

Just as the soldier was about to stab himself, Paul cried out, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here" (Acts 16:28). After calming the fear of the soldier, Paul and Silas preached the Gospel to him. The Roman soldier and his household were baptized: another warm memory for Paul.

Eventually, Paul and Silas were released from prison. Their detention had been a violation of the law. In keeping with his brazen character, Paul demanded a public apology from the authorities. After one was given, he and Silas returned to the home of Lydia. Her house had become the meeting place of "the brethren:" the newly formed church at Philippi (Acts 16:40). By faith in Christ, they were all now family.

Remembering how the church at Philippi got started would have encouraged Paul. Paul worked hard to persuade people that Jesus was Lord. He suffered greatly for the cause he advanced. Seeing the power of the Gospel was and remains encouraging.

Also, Paul witnessed the power of the Gospel to unite people. Paul's work consisted mainly of two objectives: 1. Teach the Gospel. 2. Bring unity to God's family. While there had been a time when Paul was opposed to Jesus of Nazareth being the Messiah, eventually, he believed and obeyed. Being a Jew, he viewed faith in Jesus as the Messiah as partly the fulfillment of the promises God made with Abraham. The other part of the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham was the addition of Gentiles into God's family by faith. To this end, Paul preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.

But, how does this relate to his work in Philippi? Paul witnessed how faith in Jesus as the Messiah could unite people of different backgrounds. Paul did not establish churches for Jews only or churches for Gentiles only. Instead, he passionately worked to unite the human family in God's family through the common faith in Christ. Unity was achieved in Philippi.

For example, Lydia was worshipping on the Sabbath by the river. Of course, only Jews worshipped on the Sabbath. They were worshipping like the Jews worshipped while in Babylonian exile: down by the riverside (Psa. 137). The worship of Lydia and these women would not have been welcomed or permitted in the city of Philippi.

Remember, Philippi was a Roman colony. The colonists sought to advance the cause and culture of the Roman Empire. Paul and Silas were viewed as threats to this culture. This is why they were arrested. Yet, a Roman soldier and his family renounced this culture and obeyed the Gospel.

The result: a Roman soldier and his family and Lydia and her family became the first members of the church at Philippi. If we could have been a fly on the wall the first time they all worshipped together! While this meeting was likely uncomfortable in the beginning, over time, they built a relationship. People who had lived such different lives with such different beliefs now shared faith and love. These two distinctly different households became one family in Christ. Paul's experience in Philippi proved the power of the Gospel to save, transform, and unite: another warm memory.

The power of the Gospel to save, transform, and unite is more than a warm memory. The Gospel has the same power to unite our world today. People continue to come from a wide range of backgrounds racially, nationally, and socially. The church at Philippi is an example of how we can become united by faith in Jesus. As polarizing as our society is today, by uniting in faith in Christ, we can become a beacon of hope to our community.

Conclusion

Paul and his companions did not stay long in Philippi. Their brush with authorities prompted them to get back on the road. Yet, the church at Philippi thrived without Paul's direct involvement in their work. When he wrote his letter to them, the saints had matured. They had leadership: elders and deacons.

While they were separated by distance, they continued their relationship. Paul identifies the church at Philippi as his partners in the Gospel. They financially supported Paul in his preaching. Paul was grateful he that was able to rely on the Philippians to help him.

This section closes with Paul's prayer for the church at Philippi: "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:9-11). Through faith and love, they could fulfill this prayer and we can too.

Over the next several weeks, we will consider Essays in Philippians. These articles will attempt to offer Biblical insights into the lives of Paul and the Philippians. In so doing, we will seek to encourage our faith personally and strengthen our work collectively.