

**TUTORIAL**  
**2.21**

# The Holy Spirit guides Paul & his companions to Philippi

After visiting the existing fellowships in southern Galatia, Paul and his church planting team are keen to visit communities that don't yet have access to the Gospel. With the Holy Spirit's guidance, they travel to the city of Philippi.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts 16:6-40.**

## Last time

Paul and Barnabas attended a meeting, or 'Council' in Jerusalem that considered the issue of whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised and follow the Jewish religious laws. They gratefully returned to Antioch with the decision of the Apostles and church leaders who agreed that it was unnecessary because salvation is the result of God's grace, not human effort.

Paul and Barnabas decided to visit the churches they'd planted on their previous trip, but they disagreed over the addition of John Mark and finally went their separate ways. Paul invited Silas, a leader in the Jerusalem church, to travel with him. In southern Galatia, he invited a young disciple, Timothy, to join them, and the team went from town to town in that area strengthening the churches.

## With God's guidance the team heads to Macedonia

But now Paul is keen to take the Gospel to new areas. He plans to travel southwest into the Roman province of Asia. However, the account says the Holy Spirit stops this from happening. We're not told how the Spirit makes it clear that they should not head that direction, or why. What we can take from this though, is that there's nothing wrong with having plans laid out, but we need to be open to God's guidance in the actual implementation. This is how it is meant to work in the very real partnership that God delights in having with His people.

Heading across the region called Mysia, they eventually reach Troas, a port on the Aegean Sea, near the northern tip of Turkey's western coast (Acts 16:6-10). With the Spirit having made it clear for a second time that plans they've laid out don't line up with His, Paul and his companions may have been feeling some

confusion about what to do next. But because they are looking to God for guidance, He does indeed find a way to direct them. During the night, the Spirit shows Paul a compelling vision...a man is there pleading with him "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" In a way this man, whether a real individual or not, represents for us all the people in our time who desperately need someone to come and help them...to give them access to the Words of Life. God will faithfully guide us to opportunities to help where it is most needed if we honestly make ourselves available to Him.

The team doesn't hang around debating how they should respond: the text says that they leave *at once* for Macedonia...the Greek homeland of Alexander the Great and now a province of Rome. They find a ship that's about to leave on the 200 kilometer voyage northwest across the Aegean and, after overnighing on the mountainous island of Samothrace to avoid the dangers of night sailing, they land in Neapolis the following day. Walking along the well-made Roman road - the Via Egnatia, or Egnatian Way, parts of which can be still seen today - it would have taken them 2 or 3 hours to reach Philippi. Luke, who by now is writing this account in the first person "we", apparently having joined Paul's team in Troas, describes Philippi as "a major city of that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony." There are quite a few Biblical scholars who feel that Luke was actually a doctor from this city, although others feel there is more evidence for Antioch in Syria being his home town.

## **The church in Philippi starts as Lydia is saved**

The beginnings of the church in Philippi, that would one day become so well known in the ongoing Narrative, are anything but dramatic (Acts 16:2-15). Paul and the others have had a few days in the city, perhaps being shown around by Luke so they can get a feel for this cosmopolitan city that is proud of its standing in the Roman Empire. But now it's Saturday, the Sabbath. There's no significant Jewish community and therefore no synagogue, but it's not hard to find the handful of people around here who worship our One True God. Yes, just as you'd expect, they've gathered down by the river to pray...mostly women today.

It's pleasant sitting here with the water rippling past, away from the hustle and bustle of the city, sharing the Gospel with people who are interested. Particularly one lady who says her name is Lydia. She's actually from Thyatira, way over there in Asia Minor, probably an agent or buyer for a manufacturer of the famous purple cloth they make there. Possibly she attended the synagogue there before moving here to Philippi. Whatever her history, the Lord has obviously prepared her heart because as she sits listening to Paul sharing the truth there's no doubt that she's wholeheartedly accepting the Good News about Jesus.

Before long, others from Lydia's family and no doubt people working for them, have also put their faith in Jesus Christ, and they are all baptized. The Narrative

doesn't spell it out, but it seems fairly certain that it's in this home that the Philippi church, that we'll hear so much more about, has its start. It's worth noting that this really represents a much more common scenario for the expansion of the *Ecclesia* than the spectacular, headline events like Pentecost. We've seen some instances in Acts of barriers being dramatically breached by the Gospel in a great rush, with miraculous signs and large numbers of people being added, but these events are in the minority. Most often, in the time of the Apostles and since, it has been a quiet but steady trickle moving out in many directions at once...through God's children being willing to put themselves in situations where they are ready and able to share truth clearly with whoever is willing to listen.

Many times, like here in Philippi, local fellowships begin with one opportunity being taken to share with a heart that is ready; with a commitment being made to share God's Narrative with one family or group of friends; when the patience and effort needed to build genuine relationships bears fruit; when new believers through their lives and testimony begin to draw others. A church is formed when the Lord gradually brings those people together to make a 'body', gathering them around the teaching of His Word, helping them respond together in genuine worship, equipping them to function and be a light in that context, giving them a common identity and sense of purpose. Of course God's Spirit can and does sometimes use events to create dynamics, which prepare a number of people - even an entire community - to come to faith at the same time. These sudden forward surges of the Gospel are important landmarks in the Task that we can certainly celebrate...but we should be just as quick to see God's purposes being accomplished when an individual like Lydia comes to faith and, in time, becomes an integral part of a local fellowship.

## **Paul and Silas are wrongly beaten and jailed**

The peaceful start to their time in Philippi doesn't last (Acts 16:16-25). Being part of a church planting team with Paul is rarely boring. When he, in the name of Jesus Christ, commands demons to leave a slave-girl who they've been controlling, her owners are outraged. It's not completely clear from the text whether the evil spirits actually had a genuine ability to see the future or not, but this girl certainly has a reputation in the area as a fortune-teller. No doubt it has been her abnormal behaviour and the strange voices coming from her mouth that convinced people she was receiving prophetic powers from the "python spirit" of Greek mythology.

Whatever the case, realizing their money source has suddenly dried up, the men who've been exploiting the girl turn their anger on Paul and Silas. They drag them before the authorities and loudly accuse the two church planters of being Jews who are teaching customs that are illegal for them as Romans. Many residents of Philippi, like Paul's home town of Tarsus and other cities in the Empire, had been granted Roman citizenship in the past. Accusing them as Jews is likely to play on prejudices, because quite recently all Jews - as Luke

mentions soon in the Narrative (Acts 18:2) - have been expelled from Rome...possibly because of the Christian teaching that is gaining momentum in the Empire's capital and causing concern for the Emperor. The Philippi officials listen to popular opinion - the two visitors are beaten with rods, and then locked up without real trial in the town prison.

So there they are...no doubt it's a dark, windowless, filthy cell where they are sitting with their feet clamped in heavy wooden stocks, unable to turn or change position. So what has gone wrong? Did they make a mistake when they thought God's Spirit was guiding them here to Macedonia, instead of Asia? How are they supposed to do anything worthwhile now? Is this what they get for giving up the comforts, security and fellowship back home?! Don't the Lord's servants have any rights? But no, their co-worker Luke records a very different picture of the two men. Of course we don't know everything they are feeling, but his description of them praying together and singing hymns of praise loudly enough for the other prisoners to hear certainly reflects contentment and even gratitude for the circumstances they find themselves in.

## **After an earthquake the jailer comes to faith**

The story of what happens next is familiar (Acts 16:26-34). The jailer, asleep. What is that? What's going on? A nightmare? No, it's real. Everything's moving, swaying, crashing. He's standing now, barely awake, every door in the jail wide open. The prisoners must be gone, every one! I'll pay for this, with my life. There will be no mercy. Better to just finish it...a quick thrust with a sword in my throat. But wait, who's that calling out? A voice from the darkness, "Stop! Don't kill yourself! We're all here!" Oh, the relief. It's those Jews, who've been teaching about how God sent His own Son...to be a sacrifice. "Hey, someone bring a light. Come out, come out. Please, tell me how I can be saved. Oh, so it's nothing I have to *do*, nothing I *can* do, just believe in Him, in the Lord Jesus...He did it all! Yes, I believe that. I believe in Him. Now, let's get your wounds cleaned, and get you something to eat. I want you to share all of this with my family."

## **They get an official apology before leaving town**

The next morning the city officials have changed their attitudes. Something has alerted them that they have acted inappropriately (Acts 16:35-40). But Paul is not going to go quietly. As Roman citizens their rights have been violated. He wants a public apology...perhaps he's thinking about the young Philippi church and wants the authorities on the back foot so the believers will be left in peace. Paul knows that they receive their ultimate authority to undertake their church planting objectives from the One who'd sent them out in the first place, the One who said He'd always be with them. The world system and those who pursue power within it are never going to be sympathetic to the true mission of the Church. But clearly Paul also knows that when God chooses to, He can use human authorities and laws to provide a context in which His truth can spread

and His Body can prosper. In the Narrative so far, we've seen examples of God using both official persecution and protection to further His objective. As His co-workers we need to be alert to the opportunities He brings along and ask for the grace and wisdom, the courage and contentment, to participate in what He is doing at any given time.

Luke concludes the story of this time in Philippi with the comment that before leaving town, Paul and Silas go to the home of Lydia to meet with the believers and encourage them again. For the next section of the Narrative, Luke resumes telling the story of the church planting team's adventures in the second person: "they". He will join them again later, but it's thought by some that he's staying in Philippi for now, to help establish and strengthen the new *ecclesia* there.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

*The Holy Spirit guides Paul and his companions to Philippi*

1. What are some things that stand out to you from the Acts account about how the believers received guidance from God? Do you think that we can be led by God in the same way today, or are there some differences? Do you find the process of discerning God's will challenging, or are you generally confident that you know what He wants you to do?
2. Can you easily see yourself walking up to the people by the river in Philippi that morning and getting into a conversation that results in you sharing the Gospel...or is that hard to imagine? If you were there and had begun to talk with Lydia, how would you go about it? What guiding principles, if any, do you think would be good to have in mind?
3. In light of the whole Narrative, do you think that we, as believers, have any 'rights'? What about those sent out to be involved in new church planting initiatives? Can God's children and workers expect some level of protection? Please explain.