

Strange Start for a Joyful Church

Acts 16:11-40

Introduction: Happiness is an elusive pursuit. As quickly as you grasp it, it slips through your fingers like trying to hold water in one hand. The pursuit of happiness knows no borders, ethnicity, or economic limits, and is the longing of every heart. It's why the Founding Fathers of the American experiment started the Constitution:¹

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, **that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness***

In the latest "**World Happiness Report**" (it's a real thing) shows that happiness levels in the U.S are falling, ranking the U.S in 18th place worldwide (the Dutch were 6th, naturally). Despite the fact that per capita incomes have risen about three times since 1960, and material wealth, technological advantage, and life expectancy rising, measured happiness has not risen at all. Jeffery Sachs, one of the authors of the report, blamed social factors, obesity, substance abuse (including opioid addiction) and depression on the decline of happiness. Fewer people feel they have control over choices in their lives, they have fewer people around to count on in times of difficulty, have less trust in politicians, and are less generous toward others as they used to be. "America's crisis is, in short, a social crisis, not an economic crisis." John Helliwell, another of the academics behind the report, summed it up the pursuit of happiness this way, "*If you pursue happiness, you won't find it. You more like to be happy as a reward for a life well-lived.*"²

Truthfully, we did not need a report to clarify these things. Happiness is elusive. Since happiness is based on circumstances or happenings, it will always come and go as quickly as conditions around us do. Think about what makes you happy: kids, family, winning, a good meal, a beautiful sunset, your wedding day, holidays. Each of these is a gift, but the time is fleeting. Kids are designed to grow up and leave. Family dynamics change. Winning turns to losing or waiting til next year (or 30 + years for Dodger fans), meals are consumed, sunsets usher in darkness, weddings to the hard work of marriage and so on. Happiness is good, but not ultimate. Striving after it leaves us discontent, stressed, lonely, depressed, disappointed, frustrated, and angry, since we can never achieve it in a lasting way.

What we truly need, and what we are offered in the gospel of Jesus Christ, is joy. Joy has the markers of happiness in that it expresses itself in **delight** and **gladness**, but is a gift from God that resides in our inner man, brought to us in salvation, and produced by the Spirit. Joy transcends circumstances and has assurance and hope in the object of God and the person and work of Jesus Christ. Since our God is "in the heavens and does whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3), He is never frustrated, always accomplishes His will, and is unshakably happy. He takes delight in His work of salvation and the work of His Son, redeeming people to Himself. When God is our greatest joy and we treasure Him through the work of Jesus on the cross and by walking in the Spirit, joy is produced.

¹ Thomas Jefferson espoused the idea of the pursuit of happiness from the work of the philosopher John Locke, who equated happiness with pleasure, unhappiness with pain, and that the desire for happiness is a natural law that is implanted into us by God and motivates everything we do.

² <https://www.fastcompany.com/40544341/america-desperate-for-happiness-is-getting-less-and-less-happy>

Philippians is a book about joy, and a joy specifically rooted in Jesus Christ (who is mentioned over 40 times in the letter). The letter was written by Paul to a church that was dear to his heart, had no major doctrinal or moral failures, and who supported him like none other. We want to dive deep into this little epistle to crystallize our understanding that when our life IS Christ, joy is not optional, and walking in a manner worthy of the gospel is imperative. Paul wrote this letter more than 10 years after he was there at its founding, and he wrote them with thankfulness and joy. We turn back to the book of Acts to see how did this exemplary church begin, and what do we learn about our own through them.

Unprecedented beginning (11-16)

So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to **Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony**. We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named **Lydia**, from the city of **Thyatira**, a **seller of purple goods**, who was a **worshiper of God**. **The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul**. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.

A Gospel First: *Planting in Europe*

Paul and Barnabas were set apart by the Holy Spirit at the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3) to be the first official *missionaries* released from a church specifically to make disciples and see churches planted. Up until Acts 13, wherever believers were dispersed through travel or persecution, they would evangelize, make disciples, and as a result, churches would be formed. This is exactly how the church at Antioch was started (Acts 11:19-30). The hallmarks of these missionaries were: **they went to Jews first, then Gentiles** (non-Jews) in every city they entered; **they faced physical persecution** (Acts 13:50, 14:5, 14:19); **churches were planted in Asia and Asia Minor**.

At the conclusion of this first trip, Paul and Barnabas had a falling out over the young man John Mark (Acts 15:36-41). This caused the dynamic duo to split up, and Paul took Silas with him, and they picked up Timothy and Luke (Acts 16:10 – the first of the “we” passages) to form their missions team. The team traveled West through Asia, but the Holy Spirit did NOT allow them to speak the word. They got to the furthest city on the West side (Troas) and waited, when Paul received a vision of a man calling them to Macedonia (modern day Europe), which would have been brand new territory.

The first place they stopped in Europe was a leading city called **Philippi**. It was named after Philip II of Macedonia (father of Alexander the Great) who saw the strategic value of the city. It is situated on a mountain pass along the **Egnatian Way**, which meant you had to pass through this city to go East to West. In 42 B.C, Octavian and Mark Antony defeated the forces of Brutus and Cassius, and the Roman Empire was born out of the Roman Republic. It became a **Roman colony**, which meant it was settled by former soldiers who were given lead positions in the city to rule it, making it a “little Rome”. As a colony of strategic value, it was granted the level of *jus Italicum*, which meant that its citizens could be ruled by themselves (with local *praetors and lictors* which we’ll see in the Acts narrative), they were exempt from poll and property taxes, and could own land under the laws of Rome. This city had the feel of a melting pot, with Roman soldiers, native Europeans, and travelers from Asia mixing together. The one glaring people group that was missing, however, were Jews, and that sets the stage for the founding of the church.

A Missions First: Starting with Lydia

On a Sabbath day, the group of missionaries would typically enter into a synagogue, and being a Pharisee, he would know the protocol and have opportunity to speak. However, in Philippi, they did not find a Synagogue, which means there were not the 10 Jewish men residing in the city which was a requirement for gathering. Instead, they went down to the riverside where a group of women had gathered to pray (Psalm 137:1 – Jewish exiles would pray by the rivers of Babylon). One particular woman was named **Lydia**. Here is what we know about this exceptional woman:

- **She was not a Jewish woman who's origins were from Asia** – Thyatira was across the sea in Asia, but it was business that brought her to Europe
- **She was wealthy** – She was a fashionista who sold purple goods, which were favored by the wealthy and royalty with purple produced by hard to get shell fish and scarce plants. She owned a large home
- **She was a God-seeker** – She had seen through the poly-theism of the culture, and God had opened her eyes to see Him through creation (Rom. 1:18-22). She would seek Him and pray to Him, and possibly even tried to keep the commandments.
- **She needed to hear about salvation in Christ alone** – Notice the text says that “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul”. This was similar to when Jesus explained who He was from Scripture to the men on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27-32). God had prepared her for the message of Jesus, but there needed to be messengers to explain the work of Jesus, His life, death, and resurrection.
- **She was baptized with her whole household**
- **She immediately showed hospitality and her home became the meeting place of the church** – “if you have found me to be faithful (or a believer) in the Lord, come to my house.”

This is a fascinating and unexpected start to a church. Here was an Asian woman, living in Europe, who became the first person to hear the gospel and become the first convert. Paul did not come into the city to triumph women's rights, but rather was consistent with the truth of the gospel. The gospel is open for anyone who believes. God's Word gives value to both men and women as image bearers (Gen. 1:26-28), and gives dignity and virtue to women, regardless of culture. Lydia had the honor of opening her home to other believers as the church in Philippi was gathered. God goes out of His way to show us that the gospel turns our conventions on their heads, that HE CALLS AND BRINGS WHO HE PLEASES, and that He does not discriminate.

Unwarranted attack (17-24)

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a **spirit of divination**, and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.

She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “**I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.**” **And it came out that very hour.**

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and **they are disturbing our city**. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore

the garments off them and **gave orders to beat them with rods**. And when they had **inflicted many blows upon them**, they **threw them into prison**, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Setting a Satanically oppressed slave girl free

In contrast to a rich, free, and independent woman, the next main character we meet in Philippi was a slave girl who was not only bound by money hungry slave owners, but by a controlling spirit of divination. The word used here is "*pythona*", which means a "python" spirit. This is a reference to the soothsaying divinity conceived as a snake that inhabited Delphi, which was originally known as Pythia. These "priestesses" at Delphi were called "Pythiai". The spirits would direct the future for these women by overpowering them, putting them into frenzy and tell of future occurrences. This was a lucrative business since no general would dare go to battle without first consulting such a fortune teller. This is also how we know the house of Slytherin was so bad.

There are a couple of principles revealed here in this interaction:

- **What the demon said was true, which made it dangerous** – Notice that what she had to say was accurate, true, and even Biblical. "servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation" She would cry this phrase out day after day, loudly, distracting the real message of the cross, potentially confusing those who were listening and defaming the message since it came from demonic, deceptive sources. Satan is at his most dangerous when he speaks the truth, or at least speaks enough truth to be plausible and acceptable. He is willing to have people believe in Jesus, just not that He is God, that He is the only way of salvation, and that He has already won. Jesus Himself did not allow the demons to speak during His time on earth (Mark 1:34; Luke 4:41), and rebuked demons who cried out to Him but did not bow to Him.
- **Christ has power over all principalities and powers** – When Christ was raised and seated at the right hand of His Father, all things, including demonic host, were put in subjection under His feet (Eph. 1:20-22). Paul could call out this demon oppressing this girl and it had to respond **in the name of Jesus Christ**. The text does not say what happened to this girl after this, but there is hope that she became a member of this young church, since her eyes were opened and her mind and heart were free from demonic slavery, no longer able to bring her owners the income she once did.

Receiving unjust treatment from a pragmatic populace

This incident sets up the rest of the chapter. The owners were not going to sit idly by while their bankable asset was gone. They dragged Paul and Silas in front of the *praetors* of the city, those who were set up to rule without interference from a regional leader. **Notice** that the issue and source of anger was **economic**, but the nature of their *argument was religious and political*. People often hide their real motives and intentions behind sanitized arguments. They said that what Paul was doing was **unlawful** for Romans to **practice**. Desirous to "keep the peace", the praetors did the only thing they knew how to do: they gave Paul and Silas over to the *lictors*, the enforcers of the law. These men carried rods that were bound together to enforce and inflict pain on law-breakers. Paul and Silas were beaten with these rods, breaking skin, cracking ribs, causing internal bleeding, and damaging organs. To keep them quiet, they had them thrown into prison to keep them safe from the mob. This was completely **unjust, cowardly, and a pragmatic choice** to appease the crowd. Paul and Silas had broken no law, had done no wrong, and had hurt no one, yet they faced persecution to the most painful degree.

What was going on here? The outcry in the city was that these men were “disturbing” the peace that was there. The *Pax Romana* was over 200 years of relative peace among a vast Roman civilization that encompassed 1/3 of the world's population. In order to maintain this peace, citizens or those within had to accept Caesar as their "king" or ruler and polytheism as the standard. The gospel obliterated both of these. The gospel understands there is only One God and there is one true king, Jesus Christ. He is Lord. He rules and reigns. We find an intriguing statement from Thessalonica, the city Paul move to next, as they heard what had happened in Philippi:

"These men **who have turned the world upside down** have come here also...and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying **there is "another king, Jesus."**

This message continues to turn the world upside down, continues to call people from self-reliance and worship to understand our offense to a holy God, and Jesus as the true king and Lord of all who gave Himself up in death for us, bringing us back to God.

Unmatched response (25-40)

Singing when it hurts

About midnight Paul and Silas were **praying and singing hymns to God**, and the prisoners were listening to them,

Paul and Silas (Timothy and Luke apparently avoided arrest) were unjustly treated as they were **beaten in public**, stripped of their right to trial, and left in a dark, dank prison. Often these stories seem like they are mythical or legendary, or could never happen in a civilized society as ours, but Philippi was a place of laws, order, and do process, yet this still happened. Think about the type of physical pain, shame, disappointment, frustration and anger these missionaries would have felt. What would your response be? Sorrow? Anger? Seeking vindication? If we are honest, some of all of these would make up our response, yet note how these two men responded: praise and prayer! This is the epitome of joy in any and every circumstance. How were they able to get there:

- **They had proper expectations of life** - Paul and Silas understood that their life in ministry would involve suffering (Acts 9:16; Col. 1:24). They knew that proclaiming the gospel would bring on persecution and it was actually through their suffering that the gospel would be seen. That is why their mindset was intact as they were treated so cruelly. They did not cry out for justice but instead found ways to worship. What are our expectations of life? The sure fire way to avoid suffering of any kind is simply to keep our mouths shut and hope no one recognizes us, but that is not what we are called to.
- **They let the "Word of Christ dwell in them richly" (Col. 3:16)** - They prayed and sang. Its what we do alone and together as we worship corporately. But sometimes we think that the songs we sing are for this gathering alone, to praise God and then leave them here. But songs should teach, equip, and inform us. They should be truth based so that when we are in need to recall the truth, we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to saturate ourselves in Christ. Notice it was their singing that caused the other prisoners to listen, as well as the jailor to cry out, "what must I do to be saved."

Relinquishing revenge

and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, "**Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.**" And the jailer[a] called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, "**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**" And they said, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.**" **And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.** And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he **rejoiced** along with his entire household that he had believed in God

As the earth shook and the doors swung open, it would have seemed that vindication was theirs. The jailer would get what's coming to him, God brought about deliverance, and they could get back to their mission. But their focus was not on **vindication or justice**, but on their mission. Because they relinquished revenge, they could see the one who inflicted extra pain on them (unjustly) with compassion and love. Through their pain they were able to explain the goodness of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, the fact that He is Lord, and how to be saved. Belief in the Lord Jesus meant not only a mental ascent, but a confession of sin, an asking for forgiveness, and acknowledgement that He owns our life.

Turning obstacles to opportunities

But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. **Therefore come out now and go in peace.**" But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. **So they came and apologized to them.**

And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.

Finally, notice that Paul and Silas were vindicated in how they were treated. The local government realized they had messed up, that they had a big lawsuit and civil liability on their hands, and hoped it would all just go away. They asked the missionaries to please leave quietly so as not to disrupt anymore. Notice that Paul leveraged this opportunity not for financial gain, but to protect the young church in the future. The local government were going to be less prone to attack or put their eye on Lydia's house knowing they had escaped a pending lawsuit. Paul was willing to have his rights violated for the gospel, but he absolutely knew them as a citizen and leveraged them for the good of the church and the sake of the gospel.

Principles to Consider

- **Joyful worship and praise comes from our objective assurance in Christ, not circumstances. Joy is found in Christ alone, and happiness sought apart from Him in a mirage.**
- **The makeup of the church matters** - Notice that God started the work in Europe with an Asian woman, a slave girl, and a common Gentile worker (and their families). The church is not about finding people who are *like* us, it is being a part of those who have been redeemed by the same God and Savior Jesus Christ

- **God preps, draws, and calls people to Himself, but they still need messengers to hear the gospel**

Counseling Thought:

How do we know if we are fighting for joy or merely settling for happiness? Happiness is a gift to be enjoyed, but it makes a terrible goal. We enjoy the gifts God gives us in order to enjoy Him, the gift giver. How we respond if the gift is taken away tells us much about happiness vs. joy. The foundational reason marriages fall apart is that we are pursuing happiness, not joy. We think that our spouse is there to make us happy rather than seeing them as a gift. When we are unhappy, we view them as a roadblock to our true happiness, and are deceived into thinking a "change" will bring about the happiness we crave. The solution: fight to pursue joy in Christ, and our marriage and spouse can be treasured, served, and loved.