

Invincible Joy – Series Introduction
Acts 16; Philippians 1
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On March 27th – just two weeks into this pandemic, a colleague in my pastors group – a group of 25 pastors from around the country – only a year into her new call as head of staff in a large congregation – shared this story with our group. She writes to us these words:

*A church member reached out to the pastoral staff today with an email whose subject line was one word “Concern.” As all of you know, an email with “CONCERN” as the subject line makes a pastor nervous! As I read on, she said she had a concern she needed to express, on behalf of herself and **many unnamed others** (again – alarm bells are going off!).*

But this was different. Her concern, days into the pandemic, was for the pastoral staff. She knew we must be very anxious about how to pull off an Easter service in just a couple weeks, in the midst of all that’s going on. Here’s what the member wrote:

Easter is its own glorious, amazing miracle. Put up the words to some familiar Easter hymns that we might sing off key in the solitude of our own homes. Deliver a message that reminds us simply that if Jesus’ resurrection is possible, absolutely anything is possible. Share a recording of some mighty chorus to remind us what the voice of humanity in communion sounds like and WILL sound like again when this crisis is over.

*Bottom line, **please, please, please** promise the congregation that loves and adores you, that you will be easy on yourselves as we move through these difficult days. There will be much to do when we emerge from our quarantines; you will need reserves of strength at that time. Do whatever you need to do now to lighten the burden for yourselves, and we, your congregation, promise to be resilient in the meantime.”*

You cannot imagine what a blessing this was for us, her colleagues, to hear – especially because we knew this pastor’s previous congregation had not been an easy one to serve.

Words of encouragement in difficult times can bear us up. In fact, I – we – all of us on the team – have received notes, cards, emails and calls of thanks and encouragement for our work during this time. There is a basket of them sitting on the island in the mail room that we’ve all had a chance to look through and read or even re-read. And they have been a rich blessing.

And that’s a perfect introduction to Paul’s letter to the Philippians. It’s a letter of thanks, a letter of blessing, a letter of encouragement to beloved friends. Here’s what professor Tom Wright tells us in his video overview:

The Philippians it seems, were one of Paul's favorite communities. They didn't have the same problems that he seems to have run into in Corinth, Galatia, or some other places – they seem to have had a really good relationship. And I suspect that's why for me and many people, the letter to the Philippians is actually something of a personal favorite as well.

It's also because this letter has lots to do with joy, celebration, the possibilities of a whole new world opening up; an amazing, inspiring world. And Paul invites us to come and join in with that world. It's a world focused supremely on Jesus – and in the letter to the Philippians Paul says some of the most striking things **about** Jesus.¹ Tom Wright's course will be fun!

So, who are these Philippians to whom Paul is writing? The Book of Acts introduces us to the beginning of the church in Philippi. Let me summarize:

In Acts 16 we learn how Paul and his friends cross the Aegean Sea and land in Macedonia, not far from Philippi. Philippi was a leading city of the district – and also a Roman colony – right on the main road from Asia to Europe – the Via Egnatia. When Paul goes to a place of prayer outside the city gates because there is no synagogue in Philippi. He begins speaking to the women gathered there in prayer and Lydia of Thyatira – a dealer in purple cloth – is won to the Christian faith by Paul's teaching. She and her household are baptized and she invites Paul and his friends to come to home. And they do.

On another day at the place of prayer, the apostle and his colleagues meet a slave-girl with a spirit of divination, whose owners make a great deal of money by her fortune-telling. For days she follows Paul and friends around while they are preaching and teaching, crying out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Paul finally cast the spirit out of her in the name of Jesus.

But the loss of income so incensed her owners that they denounce Paul and his friends to the magistrates who – along with a crowd that has gathered – attack the men, then have Paul and Silas stripped and beaten with rods, and thrown into jail, and put into the stocks in the innermost cell.

Perhaps some of you know the rest of the story, where Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns at midnight in their jail cell, when suddenly an earthquake opens the doors and unfastens chains. The jailer sees what is happening and is ready to kill himself, but Paul shouts from the cell in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." Calling for lights, the jailer rushes in and asks, "What must I do to be saved." Paul and Silas tell him, "Call on the Lord Jesus Christ," and you shall be saved. The jailer and his household are baptized; they wash Paul and Silas' wounds and feed them a meal.

The next day, after finding out Paul and Silas are Roman citizens, the magistrates apologize and let them go. The two of them leave the jail and then go back to Lydia's house; and after encouraging the brothers and sisters there, they continue on their mission. Lydia's house. The brothers and sisters there – **this is the Philippian Church.**

Paul sowed the seed of the Gospel in Philippi, and a splendid harvest it was to yield. For the little company of Christians who had their first meeting in Lydia's house grew into a church dearer to Paul than any other.

A wealthy woman from Asia with a second home in Philippi, a Roman jailer, and perhaps even the Greek slave girl. An extraordinary cross-section of ancient life;² crossing multiple social and cultural lines; all part of this Philippian faith community; all closely connected to Paul and his friends. A church NOT segregated by race, class or nationality.

It's now years later when Paul writes this letter to the Philippians. But if you read through scripture you'll understand along the way their friendship has flourished. The Philippians sent Paul help for his needs when he was in Thessalonica, and again when he was in Corinth. So it is no surprise when Paul says of them in Philippians 4, "My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown." These REALLY ARE some of Paul's favorites.

So – the occasion of this letter? Paul has been arrested – and he's now in custody – perhaps Ephesus, maybe Rome – awaiting his decision. In those days, it wasn't a prison sentence – they put you in prison when they were waiting to see what they would do with you. Execute you? Fine you?

They also didn't feed you in prison. Friends had to bring whatever you needed. Word got back to Philippi that Paul was in prison, and the church there "passed the hat" as we might say. Then the church sent a man named Epaphroditus with a present of money for Paul and the offer to stay – himself – and assist Paul – e.g. to get what he needed, to take care of his needs while he was in prison. This is the act of the Philippian church. Unfortunately, while with Paul, Epaphroditus became seriously ill. When he was well enough to travel, Paul sent him back – **with a letter of thanks** for the gift he had brought. **The letter to the Philippians.**

It can be said this letter gives us the truest, loveliest and most complete picture we have of Paul the Christian. Some scholars comment on its beauty, others its simplicity, still others its warmth and Paul's gentleness, or its spirituality. All lift up the intimacy of the letter – it's a friend, writing to beloved friends.

In this letter Paul uses the word joy more times than in any other of his writings save one. Perhaps you have heard one of the better known verses: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice."

Even imprisoned, with the prospect of dying, Paul writes to them: "For to me, to live is Christ; to die is to gain." "For I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Invincible Joy. May it be so. AMEN.

1. NT Wright – Paul and His Letter to the Philippians; Small Group Edition; www.udemy.com; overview to course.
2. William Barclay, Daily Study Bible Commentary, Philippians.