

THE GOSPEL OF CAESAR

I love walking on the *Via Egnatia*, the ancient Roman Road that stretched nearly 650 miles from Byzantium (the European side of modern Istanbul) in the east to Dyrrhacium (Dures in present-day Albania) in the west, where it connected via the Adriatic Sea to the Appian Way in Italy. The large paving stones that Roman soldiers placed almost 200 years before Paul walked on the *Via Egnatia* are still in remarkably good repair. As I walk a section of this ancient road between Neapolis (Kavala today) and Philippi, I find myself surrounded by the silence of a pine forest—quite isolated from the bustling, modern world of northern Greece and the tour buses that pass nearby. Step by step I hear the sound of my sandals on the stones, and it feels as if I have traveled back in time to the world of Paul. I imagine what it might have been like to walk with him as he journeyed from the Roman province of Asia into Macedonia to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord of all.

As I walk that narrow, ancient road, I wonder what Paul thought about as he walked.

Did he recall his experience on another road—the Damascus Road—where the resurrected Jesus met him as he urgently pursued the early followers of Jesus so that he might arrest and punish them? That encounter radically changed Paul's understanding of Jesus the Messiah and his life's calling.

Did he consider the importance of Macedonia to the Greek, and now Roman, empires? Did he ponder its Hellenistic, human-centered worldview that was so antithetical to that of his own Jewish training in the teachings of the Torah?

Did he anticipate how his journey was bringing him ever closer to the heart of Imperial Rome and the emperor who claimed to be the Son of God and declared that he had brought peace to all? Whether such thoughts occupied his mind is impossible for us to know. But we do know that Paul had studied the Torah (the Text, God's Word) extensively and understood it to be the summary of God's great story of redemption. He knew that God chose the Hebrew people to be his partners in bringing the message of redemption to a world in chaos because of sin. At Mount Sinai, God assigned to his people a task of utmost importance: to be a light to the Gentiles and make God's name known to all nations so that all people would be blessed and the whole earth would be filled with the knowledge of God, liberated from bondage to sin, and join the hosts of heaven in praising him.¹

Paul not only understood the mission God gave to his people at Mount Sinai, he recognized that Jesus, the promised Messiah, had carried out that mission and commissioned all of his followers to continue it by bringing the good news—the gospel—of his coming to the ends of the earth. Thus Paul's calling was to announce the arrival of the Messiah who died to redeem all of humanity from bondage to sin, and afterward rose again and ascended to be seated at God's right hand as the true Son of God, Savior, King, and Lord of all. In fervent, but humble, obedience to Jesus, Paul pursued the mission to be God's light to the Gentiles by living a righteous life that would invite others to know and give glory to God.

In his brilliant defense before governor Festus, Paul described his calling in those very terms:

But God has helped me to this very day, so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.

Acts 26:22–23

Eager to fulfill his God-given mission, Paul entered the Roman colony of Philippi. Despite the fact that an opposing gospel ruled the hearts and minds of the Philippians, he began sharing the gospel of Jesus.

Opening Thoughts (3 minutes)

The Very Words of God

After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia.

Acts 16:10–12

Think About It

There can be no more life-changing event than to accept God's free gift of redemption and submit ourselves to his reign in our lives. The Bible makes it clear that being a follower of Jesus makes us partners with God in his great story of redemption and restoration. As his partners, God gives us the mission of making him known to all people. But when we submit ourselves to his lordship and pursue what we believe that mission to be, what do we expect will happen?

What are our expectations for how our service for Christ will be received?

How do we respond when we think we are supposed to do one thing but the doors keep closing?

How easy or difficult do we anticipate accomplishing our mission will be, and what keeps us motivated to pursue it when we face obstacles?

Video Notes (32 minutes)

God's great story

Paul proclaims the gospel of Christ to people who live by the gospel of Rome

The *Via Egnatia*: Paul's route into Macedonia

Philippi: battles that changed the world

The emperor establishes his claim as lord and god

Heroon: built to honor and deify the most accomplished heroes

Jesus: exalted to the highest place by being a humble servant

Video Discussion (6 minutes)

1. How aware were you that in the Roman Empire there was an existing gospel—the gospel of Caesar, the deified emperor—that conflicted with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

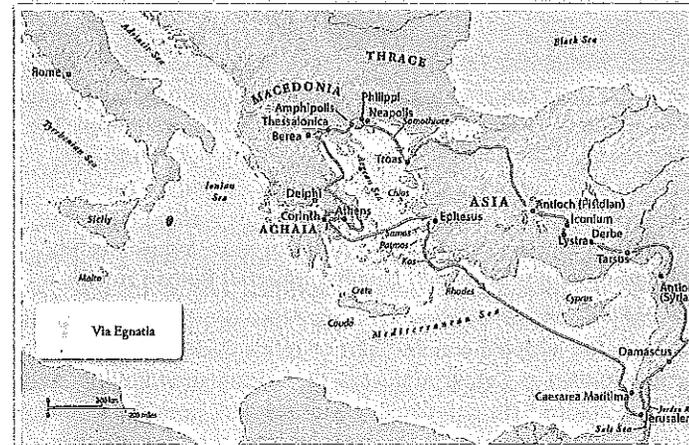
What was the gospel of Caesar, and what insight does it give you into what Paul and the early Christian community faced as they sought to obey Jesus' command to take his gospel to the ends of the earth?

How does being aware of conflicting gospel(s) affect the way we might approach sharing the gospel in our culture?

2. The battles that took place on the Plain of Drama near Philippi literally changed the course of world history. What impact did those battles have on the beliefs and lifestyle of the people who lived in Philippi, which Octavian (Caesar Augustus) designated as a Roman colony?
3. If you had grown up in Philippi, immersed in a culture that sought honor for oneself above all else and at any cost, how do you think you would have responded to the gospel message of Jesus that Paul and Silas brought to town?

4. Paul was on his second teaching journey, visiting churches he had established previously in Asia Minor, when he had a vision that he interpreted to mean that God wanted him to go to Macedonia. Eager to fulfill his God-given mission to tell the world of God's plan of redemption, he immediately headed to Philippi, a major city in Macedonia, which we know of as northern Greece

On the map of Paul's second teaching journey, locate Philippi and trace Paul's route from Troas to Neapolis, where he headed west on the *Via Egnatia*. Also consider Philippi's strategic location and the role of the *Via Egnatia* in the battles of 44 BC that effectively ended Rome as a republic and ensured its future as an imperial power.



PAUL'S SECOND TEACHING JOURNEY

Small Group Bible Discovery and Discussion (14 minutes)

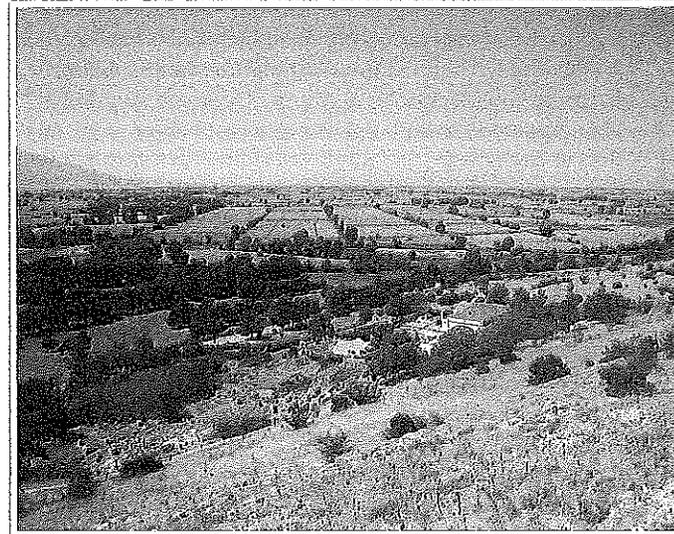
Paul Brings the Gospel of Christ to Philippi

Philippi was established on a hill above the Plain of Drama in about 360 BC and was soon ruled by Phillip II of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great. Gold and silver from the mines of Mount Pangaion above the city are believed to have financed the military campaigns of both Phillip II and Alexander the Great that spread the worldview and self-serving lifestyle of Hellenism throughout the known world. More significant, Philippi's close proximity to two ancient seaports and its location on the *Via Egnatia* made it vitally important commercially and militarily. The city served the Greek objectives well and later played a strategic role in the expansion of the Roman Empire.

In 42 BC, about two years after the assassination of Julius Caesar, one of the most far-reaching battles in Roman history was fought on the Plain of Drama, just beyond the city walls of Philippi. The battle changed the course of Western civilization. On one side, Octavian and Anthony envisioned Rome as an empire ruled by an emperor. On the other, Cassius and Brutus wanted to restore Rome as a republic. Octavian and Anthony were victorious, putting into motion what would become Imperial Roman rule by a deified emperor.

Octavian, the adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar who would become known as Caesar Augustus, then designated Philippi as a Roman colony.² He populated it with soldiers from the legions he defeated on the Plain of Drama (and later veterans of other Roman legions) who would influence the local culture and demonstrate the advantages of the Roman way. As citizens of a Roman colony, they enjoyed all the benefits and privileges of citizens of Rome, and those privileges were highly regarded and protected.

By the time Paul arrived in Philippi in 50 AD, the city had become like a miniature Rome. Luke refers to it in the book of



THE PLAIN OF DRAMA AS SEEN FROM THE ANCIENT CITY OF PHILIPPI

Acts as the "leading city of that district" (Acts 16:12). As in all Roman colonies, temples for the worship of Greek, Egyptian, and local gods were permitted as were Jewish synagogues, but the worship of Roman gods and the emperor as lord and god was predominant. In fact, the imperial temple dominated one side of the forum in Philippi, and historic references include mention of an altar of Augustus.

So when Paul came, a powerful gospel message was being lived out in Philippi—the gospel of Caesar, the deified savior and lord who brought peace and prosperity to those who served him well. What would happen when Paul brought a different gospel to the forum of Philippi—the good news of redemption for all people through the shed blood and resurrection of Jesus, the true Son of God? Certainly, the stage was set for confrontation between two "sons of god," two "lords," and two "saviors" representing two opposing kingdoms—the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world.

1. Paul came to Philippi with a mission—the same mission God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai, the same mission Jesus fulfilled by his life and ministry, and the same mission Jesus gave to his followers who would come after him. That mission is to be a light to the world and represent God in such a way that all the world will come to know him.
 - a. What do you learn from the following passages about the nature of the mission God has given to all of his people and the impact he wants them to have on the world around them? (See Exodus 19:3–6; Isaiah 12:4–6; 42:6; 43:10–12; 49:6; Matthew 5:14–16; 28:18–20.)
 - b. From what you have learned about the Roman colony of Philippi, what potential conflicts do you see occurring as Paul seeks to fulfill his mission there?

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING**What Is a Kingdom of Priests?**

The Bible uses the concept of a priesthood to describe the mission God has given to his people (Exodus 19:3–6). In ancient times, priests would mediate between the gods and the people. A priest represented and acted on behalf of the god; so, in a sense, to observe the priest was to know the god.

At Mount Sinai, God gave his people the mission of being his “priests” to the whole world. The nature of that mission is for God’s people to serve him and humanity by demonstrating through their words and actions God’s will and character. God’s people are not only to *bring* the message but to *be* the message in everything they do.

In what we know as the “Great Commission” (Matthew 28:18–20), Jesus extended this mission to all of his followers. Thus the apostle Peter reminds followers of Jesus that they are “a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9, 12). For this reason, God has called and commissioned all redeemed followers of Jesus to this day to make him known to the whole earth and to live good lives that are worthy of that calling—the same mission God gave to the Hebrews at Mount Sinai.

2. When Paul came to Philippi in 50 AD, he came to a Roman colony where the Roman way was put on display. So the city already had a gospel—the gospel of Caesar as lord, god, and savior—that brought peace and prosperity to its citizens. As a result, the citizens of Philippi were devoted to Roman privilege and law as the way to peace and a good life. Let’s consider how the gospel of Jesus challenged the fundamental claims of the gospel of Caesar. Read Philippians 2:5–11 and then consider the contrasts between the two gospels.
 - a. Caesar Augustus claimed a miraculous birth that made him a descendant of the Roman gods Venus and Apollo. Furthermore, he was the adopted son of Julius Caesar who was deified following his death, making

Augustus the deified son of a god. What does the Bible say about Jesus and his divinity? (See Mark 1:1-3; Luke 2:11; Philippians 2:5-8.)

What is ironic about Jesus' claim to deity when compared to that of Caesar Augustus?

- b. Caesar Augustus became "lord" by political action, military victory, and official decree. Many thousands sacrificed their lives in battle so that he could gain power and recognition for himself. The divine right to rule that Caesar Augustus claimed for himself was confirmed by the authority and dominance he wielded. In contrast, what was Jesus willing to sacrifice for the benefit of others, and why did that make him worthy in the eyes of God? (See Philippians 2:6-11.)

Explain how the attitude and actions of Jesus that God deemed worthy of recognition and honor were opposite those held by Caesar and the community of Philippi.

Even though there is no indication that Paul overtly critiqued Caesar Augustus or labeled his claims to be lord and god as fraudulent, what impact do you think his presentation of the news about Jesus might have had on people in Philippi?

DATA FILE

Octavian Becomes "Lord" and "Savior"

After Octavian crushed the republican resistance to Rome becoming an empire in 42 BC and later defeated Antony in 31 BC, the way was clear for him to seize power in Rome. But in a surprising move, he actually forgave some of his enemies, returned power to the Roman Senate, and relinquished control over his armies. In response, the Roman Senate granted him the title "Augustus," meaning the honored or worshiped one!

The title "Augustus" conveyed power far beyond political power, giving Octavian absolute authority over humanity and nature. Gradually he accumulated all the political powers of an emperor. After Julius Caesar's spirit was declared to be enthroned in heaven with the gods (deified), as affirmed by a bright comet that appeared during his memorial, Octavian began to accept honor as the son of a deified one. Thus Caesar Augustus became the worshiped son of a deified one, or the son of god!

Then Augustus came to be viewed as savior because he saved the Roman republic from the disaster of constant civil war. And finally peace, the *Pax Romana*, came as a result of his reign. No wonder there was conflict when Paul brought the good news of Jesus—the true Son of God, the Lord and Savior who offers peace to all who believe—to Philippi.

- c. At the beginning of the video presentation, we saw the Roman gate of the city of Jerash, which testified to the gospel of a later Roman emperor, Hadrian. The gospel of Caesar claimed to be a gospel of peace and security—the *Pax Romana*. It brought running water, paved streets, temples, fountains, baths, education, theaters, art, the games, recognition of accomplishment, accumulation, and other things that made life pleasant and happy (at least for the upper classes). A Roman emperor who brought an end to wars and ushered in such peace, which Caesar Augustus did, was viewed as lord, god, and savior of the world.

In contrast to the Roman peace, Paul preached the gospel of the Savior who brought peace by restoring God's *shalom*—harmony, meaning, purpose, beauty, and wholeness—to a world suffering under the chaos of sin. Read Acts 10:34–38, John 14:27, and Philippians 1:1–2 and discuss specific differences between God's message of peace through Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior, and the peace Caesar offered. What thoughts and questions might the people of Philippi have had as they listened to Paul's message?

3. When Paul brought the good news of Jesus Christ to Philippi, it quickly became clear that he was not representing the gospel of Caesar or advocating the Roman

idea of peace. What about the gospel of Christ seems to have caused great concern for the people of Philippi, and how did they respond? (See Acts 16:19–21.)

Faith Lesson (4 minutes)

For the most part, those of us who follow Jesus and live in Western cultures aren't radically different from other people in our communities. Christianity has always been a significant part of our cultural heritage. Although we may face opposition to our beliefs or slander, we generally do not face the severe persecution that Christians who live in some other cultures have endured (and endure to this day).

Ours is not the situation Paul faced in Philippi when he brought the gospel—the good news that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lord, the Savior of the world had died and rose again so that all who submit to him could know true peace. Everyone who heard Paul's message already knew the gospel of *Pax Romana*—the Roman peace. Their son of god, lord, and savior who reigned supreme and brought the benefits of peace was Caesar. To even suggest that any other gospel existed was radical and dangerous.

For Paul to proclaim the gospel of Christ in Philippi was to imply that Caesar's gospel was a fraud. Would anyone believe Paul? Would he survive the reaction of those who realized that the gospel he proclaimed would turn their world upside down? As we continue this study, we will see that men and women, rich and poor, slave and free became convinced that Caesar wasn't really god and savior, and that what Rome called peace really wasn't. They too chose the radical gospel of Christ over that of Rome.

What does this have to do with us? We live in a culture that, like Rome, proclaims a gospel of its own making. All too easily we bow to the gospel of humanism, making ourselves our own Lord: "I am lord of my life; I decide what is right and wrong; I do it my way." We serve the gospel of hedonism by living for pleasure and leisure. We honor the gospel of materialism by making life all about what we have and what more we can get. And we worship as heroes those who make it to the top of the heap.

1. Just as God brought Paul to Philippi to share the radical news of the gospel of Christ, God has led each follower of Christ to this time and place so that we can continue the mission he gave to his people at Mount Sinai and bring by word and example the good news of Christ. The question is, are we willing to take our place in fulfilling the mission God has given?

How willing are you to not only *bring* the message but *be* the message?

2. As followers of Jesus, we bring a radical message: the good news of the Son of God, Lord and Savior, who sacrificed himself to bring true peace—harmony with God, harmony with others, and to the best of our ability, harmony with all of creation. Words alone will not convince our broken world of the truth of the gospel of Christ. If we live a self-righteous, self-serving, self-absorbed, narcissistic lifestyle, we won't persuade anyone of the radical truth of the gospel—they already live this way. Many in Philippi became convinced that the gospel of Christ was true by what they heard and *saw* in Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke. It is no different for us.

By which gospel do you live? The gospel of this world or the gospel of the kingdom of heaven?

What needs to change in your heart, mind, and life so that people will come to know who God really is?

Closing (1 minute)

Read Philippians 1:1–6 aloud together: "To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Then pray, thanking God for giving us the true gospel, the good news that Jesus has come and sacrificed himself so that we can be restored to a relationship with God who gives peace to everyone who calls on him. Thank him for that great kingdom of priests he raised up and commissioned to be his partners in bringing and being the gospel message so that we could hear it and praise God for who he is. Ask him to help us to be faithful in carrying out that mission in our world. May we not live for ourselves, but empty ourselves as Jesus did and thereby complete the work of making the God of heaven known on earth!