

## THE BELIEVERS

At one time, I thought of Paul as the great missionary who traveled around the Roman Empire proclaiming the good news of salvation so that people would believe in Jesus and be saved. This certainly was the central theme Paul taught at every opportunity—to Jew and Gentile, pagan and God-fearer, slave and Roman citizen. But, and this is not to diminish our need for God's gift of salvation in any way, there is more to the gospel message than "Jesus saves." From the beginning, God's great message of salvation has been about redeeming and restoring *shalom*—the harmony, beauty, and perfection he originally created—to a world broken by sin. Thus the gospel message encompasses the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus, the restoration of God's creation, and the truth that God reigns over all!<sup>1</sup>

Paul was trained by the best Jewish scholars and had a brilliant understanding of the Scriptures. He understood that God had called his people throughout history to be his witnesses, a light to the nations around them. They were to put God on display and make him known to people who did not know him. At Mount Sinai, God chose the Jewish people to be his partners—his kingdom of priests—in proclaiming by their words and demonstrating by their lives his message of redemption. They were not simply to *bring* God's message to a broken world; they were to *be* that message of redemption and restoration.

Fully committed to that mission, Paul took the gospel message to "the ends of the earth" at a level unknown until his day. He declared by word and example the good news that God's chosen Messiah—the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who reigns

on high—had come to redeem and restore all things to himself. As was often the case during his teaching journeys, Paul did not stay in Philippi for long. He was there for only a few days. But Paul and his companions shared the gospel of redemption and restoration through Jesus, and people believed. They accepted God's reign in their lives, and God's kingdom was extended into Philippi!

Paul taught those who believed that they had a mission too: to become God's message, to be a community of people whose lives proclaimed that the Lord is taking charge and this is what it looks like! Whenever the gospel is lived out, it has a significant impact—a fact that followers of Jesus today would do well to remember. The small community of believers in Philippi, a city where Jewish influence had not been as strong as in some other locations, became a community deeply committed to living out what they believed. In fact, Paul's letter to the Philippian believers a few years after his initial visit with them was the most positive and complimentary of all the letters he wrote to the churches he established. Let's consider how the gospel of Christ was received in Philippi.

### Opening Thoughts (3 minutes)

#### The Very Words of God

*One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.*

Acts 16:14–15

### Think About It

When we accept God's call to be a partner in his great story of redemption by sharing the gospel with people who don't know him, we can't be certain of what lies ahead or where that mission will lead us. The same was true for Paul when he walked into Philippi to share the good news of Jesus. He had never been to Philippi or met the people there. He didn't know what impact the gospel would have—if it would be received and believed or if it would be reviled and opposed. He didn't know who, if anyone, would believe. Yet he went to be a light to the Gentiles so that they could be set free from bondage to sin and be restored to God's family.

In what ways do you think Paul was prepared to share the gospel in a community that was to a great extent unknown to him?

What would you say is most important for us to understand, know, or do in order to be ready to share the gospel message of redemption and restoration with people in our world?

### Video Notes (29 minutes)

The father's house, a picture of redemption

The good news comes to Philippi

**A place of prayer**

**Lydia, the God-fearer**

**God's kingdom comes!**

**Citizens of a colony of heaven**

**"Contend" for the faith**

**Don't distort the message**

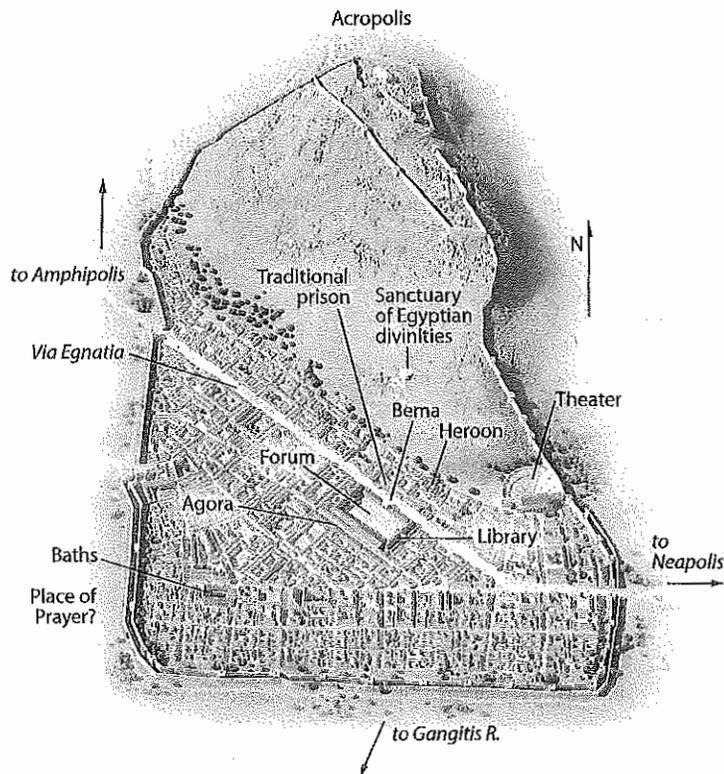
**Video Discussion (7 minutes)**

1. In what ways does the picture of community in the family of God as presented in the video differ from your understanding or experience of Christian community?

To what extent does our understanding of salvation—restoration to God's family—encompass the practical aspects of our daily lives and relationships?

2. Why do you think it is significant that Paul sought out "a place of prayer" in Philippi, a Roman colony?

How much of an impact does it appear the community of God's people in Philippi had before Paul arrived?



**NOTICE THE "IMPORTANT" PLACES IN THE ROMAN COLONY OF PHILIPPI—THE VIA EGNATIA, THE THEATER WHERE GLADIATORIAL COMBAT TOOK PLACE, THE FORUM, THE PRISON. OUTSIDE THE CITY WALLS, SOMEWHERE NEAR A TRIBUTARY OF THE GANGITIS RIVER, WAS A PLACE OF PRAYER WHERE PHILIPPIANS WHO WORSHIPED GOD GATHERED.**

3. When a person today accepts the gospel message that Jesus is Savior, Lord, and King, what do we expect will happen?

As we consider how Lydia responded to the gospel message, what might we be missing out on, in light of what restoration to God's family really means?

4. What message did Paul convey to the believers of Philippi about "contending" for the gospel, and why would this have been significant to them, given the history and culture of their city?

#### FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

##### What Is the Gospel?

Paul walked into the city of Philippi, a Roman colony, in 50 AD to bring the gospel of Jesus to people who did not know him. *Gospel* is the English translation of the Greek word *evangelion*, meaning "good news." Although we may think of *gospel* as primarily a religious word, the people of the Roman Empire knew of it as the term for good news about an emperor—news such as his coronation, a great accomplishment, or the birth of an heir.

Paul, of course, knew that this was what people in the Roman world understood *gospel* to mean. But he also was familiar with another meaning of *gospel*, or *good news*, from the Hebrew Bible. Notice how the prophet Isaiah uses *good news* in Isaiah 52:7:

*How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"*

Try to imagine how this good news, the gospel of the God who reigns, who brings peace, and who proclaims salvation would be received by people who already had the gospel of their own emperor who demanded recognition, honor, and worship.

### Small Group Bible Discovery and Discussion (16 minutes)

#### The Gospel Message of Redemption and Restoration

In God's great story of redemption, unfolded for us through the pages of the Bible, God is portrayed as the One who redeems and restores. He is deeply concerned for all of his children who suffer and are in bondage to sin. He is so concerned that to every person who accepts his gift of redemption he gives a mission: to be his partner in sharing the good news so that all people may experience redemption and be restored to the security and *shalom* of God's family. Faithfulness to that mission is why Paul brought the gospel message to Philippi.

Lydia, a woman who apparently worshiped God with the Jewish people in Philippi, heard Paul teach and became a follower of Jesus. Her story is one of the more dramatic examples of the power of God's Spirit anointing the work of Jesus' followers. Although Lydia is mentioned in only five verses in all of Scripture, the evidence her story provides of God's redeeming work through his human partners is inspiring. We see God's preparation for the gospel coming to Philippi and Paul's faithfulness

to the mission. We see the power of God's Spirit at work in the human heart. We rejoice in Lydia's restoration to God's family and her immediate desire to participate in the mission God has given to everyone who follows Jesus.

1. The apostle Paul was a Pharisee and a rabbi who had been thoroughly trained in the Text by one of the most highly respected rabbis of his time. He was deeply committed to obeying God's commands in every way possible. He described himself as being born into the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day, zealous for God, and faultless in righteous living based on the Law of Moses.<sup>2</sup> He enthusiastically embraced Israel's mission to be a kingdom of priests who would display God's character to all people so that they would come to know him. And when Paul met the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus and recognized him as the Messiah, he embraced the mission of redemption as Jesus defined it for him. Read Exodus 19:3-6 to refresh your memory of the mission God gave to his people at Mount Sinai.
  - a. What happened at Mount Sinai was a pivotal, defining moment for God's people. How does the mission that God gave his chosen partners there relate to the mission God has given all followers of Jesus? (See John 20:19-21; 1 Peter 2:9-10.)
  - b. What specific mission did Paul receive following his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus? (See Acts 9:3-6, 15.)

- c. Do you think this was a mission Paul expected to be given, one he found easy to pursue? Why or why not?

### DID YOU KNOW?

#### Restored to God's Family

For followers of Jesus who live in contemporary Western cultures, the idea of being redeemed and restored to God's family sounds good, but perhaps not as compelling as it might be. If we are to grasp the full meaning of being restored to God's family, we need to go way back in biblical history—back to the ancient Middle East where life was centered around the extended family.

The extended family, or household, was thought of as the "father's house" or *beth ab*. It could easily comprise thirty or more family members from several generations: the head of the family (the patriarch), his wife (or wives), his younger brothers, unmarried children, and married sons with their families (a woman usually joined the *beth ab* of her husband). The job of the patriarch was to use the family resources, which he controlled, to ensure the protection and care of each family member.

If a family member lost connection to the *beth ab* due to capture by enemies, poverty, or bad choices, the patriarch was responsible to do whatever it took to restore that person to the safety and fellowship of the family. Anyone in that cultural setting who found himself or herself without connection to the *beth ab*, such as a widow or orphan, was at serious risk because he or she had no means of support or protection.

So when we read in the Text about God redeeming and restoring his lost children, this is the image we need to have in mind. God longs to restore every one of his children who has been lost through bondage to sin. He is the loving Father who longs to embrace his children in the security and

blessing of his *beth ab*. And, as Abraham realized thousands of years ago, God wants his human partners to join him in the mission of putting him on display so that those who are estranged from him—even the most broken, lost, and hopeless children—can experience restoration and the faithful care of the *beth ab*.

2. The Hebrew Text is filled with images of God's love and compassion for his creation. We see evidence of his desire for all people outside his *beth ab* to be restored to the family of God. Read the following passages and describe what you discover about (1) God's character, love, and compassion, and (2) the mission God gives to those who serve him to display his character to people who need his redemption and restoration to his family.

The Text	How God wants those who follow him to demonstrate his character and embrace his mission of restoration
Exodus 22:21-27	
Deuteronomy 10:12-19	
Deuteronomy 24:14-15, 17-22	
Isaiah 42:5-7	

In what ways do these passages expand your understanding of God's passion for redemption and restoration of those who do not know him?

In what ways do these passages expand your vision, compassion, and commitment to the mission of displaying God's character so that all people can know him and experience restoration to his family—the mission to which God has called all who follow him?

3. Caesar Augustus had awarded Philippi status as a Roman colony, so it was home to many Roman citizens who were intensely loyal to the gospel of the Roman Empire. As a community, they were proud of their Roman identity that provided political peace and the most desirable material benefits of the time. However, such benefits came at the price of exemplary loyalty, so city officials were extremely protective of all customs and laws lest "foreigners" undermine their religious and cultural practices and jeopardize the benefits they received from Rome.

In contrast, the gospel of God's kingdom is clear: God's gift of redemption and restoration is available to all people regardless of their social or economic status. No one earns the right to experience God's *shalom* and be restored to the blessings of the *beth ab*. However, redemption is not without cost.

- a. What price was paid so that every one of God's lost children could be restored to his family? (See John 3:16; 8:34–36; Romans 5:1–2, 6–11; Galatians 4:4–7.)

- b. How does restoration to the *shalom* of God's kingdom differ from how people received peace and prosperity in the kingdom of Rome?
- c. How did Paul understand the message of the gospel of Christ in relationship to the mission God gave to his people at Mount Sinai—the mission Jesus fulfilled and extended to all his followers, even to this day? (See Galatians 3:14; Ephesians 2:11–20; Colossians 1:21–23.)
- d. What impact does restoration to God's family, God's household, have on those who have been restored and their role in continuing the mission God gave at Mount Sinai? (See Colossians 1:9–14; Titus 2:11–14.)
4. When Paul shared the gospel message in Philippi, who responded, and what is the evidence that she understood the meaning and mission of restoration to God's family and began pursuing it right away? (See Acts 16:13–15.)

**Faith Lesson (4 minutes)**

From the moment God introduced his plan to redeem his creation from the chaos of sin that came because our ancestors rebelled against him, God chose his human creation to be his partners in that great work (Philippians 1:5–6). Although we are incapable of doing what he has asked—apart from his gracious forgiveness, the power of his presence, the instructions of his inspired Word, and the support of a community—he commands everyone who follows him to be his partner in sharing the gospel message.

God worked his plan of redemption through Abraham and Sarah, choosing their descendants, the people of Israel, to be his priests who would present his love to a broken world. He redeemed them, provided forgiveness through the temple sacrifices, and empowered them to hallow his name (make his reputation known) and thereby bring the light of his redemptive love into the darkness of the nations around them. In gratitude for their redemption, they were to obey him as Lord and extend the reign of his kingdom.

Then God sent the Messiah, Jesus, not only to be the ultimate sacrifice for sin but to show those who followed him how to live as the “household” of God so that the world would see God’s love and compassion demonstrated through their daily lives. When the Spirit came on Pentecost, the redeemed community that formed that day was exactly the *beth ab* God intended. They shared all things in common, giving to each according to need, and thousands more were drawn to the Lord through the living example of his human partners.

God chose the apostle Paul to go to the ends of the Roman Empire not simply to proclaim the gospel message but to establish communities of Jesus followers who would continue the redemptive partnership that began with Abraham. They were called to be living examples of what the kingdom of God is like. When Paul went to Philippi, Lydia, a wealthy Gentile merchant, believed and joined the partnership. She opened her home to the new community of people whose citizenship was not in this world but in heaven. By the way they lived, they gave their world a taste of what living in God’s kingdom is like.

1. The partnership God began with Abraham continues today. Each of us who is a follower of Jesus is redeemed by his gracious sacrifice, filled with the presence of God’s Spirit, and called as a partner in his redemptive community to be a living example of what restoration to God’s *shalom* looks like. Have you caught the mission? How do you know?

What in your life and the way you live needs to better represent your high calling so that others will discover what God is like, submit to his authority as King, and join his household of faith?

2. In Deuteronomy 15:15, God commanded Israel to “remember” (in the sense of recalling and reacting to) God’s redemptive work in their lives. Take some time now to read Psalm 103:1–19 and remember, in the way that Moses reminded Israel, what God has done to restore you to his family and to call you as his partner in sharing his gospel of redemption with others. May a better understanding of God’s story of redemption inspire us to be less committed to the kingdom of this world and more determined to live like faithful, obedient citizens of God’s kingdom so that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

**Closing (1 minute)**

Read Matthew 5:14–16 aloud together: “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Then pray together, thanking God that he is our Father who has gone to great lengths to redeem and restore us to his family. Thank him for trusting us to be his partners in restoring *shalom* to his lost children. May we always be mindful of the great redemptive work God has done for us and throughout history and live every day in response to it. Ask for passion, commitment, and strength from him to be faithful partners who hold his light high in a broken world so that others will come to know and glorify him.

**Memorize**

*You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

*Matthew 5:14–16*