

## SESSION FOUR

## THE PHILIPPIAN JAILER

The good news that Jesus is Savior and Lord was never meant to be simply a religious message. Being a living example of Christ's character and ways has always been God's calling for his people. Based on the redeeming work of Jesus, the gospel calls those who follow him not only to teach God's ways but to demonstrate them in every life activity—whether it be politics, family life, social relationships, cultural practices, or business. The gospel of Christ demands compassion for those who suffer, obedient submission to the will of God, recognition of every person as a valuable individual created in the image of God, and sacrifice of oneself in order to serve the interests of others. In the Roman world, such a lifestyle would not go unnoticed. The daily sacrifices for citizens of God's kingdom were diametrically opposite to the Hellenistic priorities of the Roman way.

In Philippi, some people who had experienced life's chaos and had lived apart from God, not even knowing who he was, responded to the good news eagerly. The poor, the diseased, the slaves, the lonely, the oppressed, and the marginalized recognized that the kingdom of heaven Paul proclaimed was very different from the kingdom that ruled their world. In the kingdom of heaven, Jesus was put on display for them by the believers in Philippi, who loved, cared for, and treated with dignity. There was no division between slave or free, rich or poor, male or female, Jew or Gentile. In that! All were one in Messiah and shared with others as each had a need.

Some accepted the truth of Paul's message and immediately joined the mission as God's partners in restoring *shalom* and extending his reign in their community. They opened their homes and invited others to join them in the same way the first believers had that day in Jerusalem when God's Spirit came upon them on Pentecost.<sup>1</sup> In just a short time, a community of people came to know Jesus and joined the mission. As a community, they established a colony of heaven in Philippi and began presenting his gospel to a dark and broken culture. But not everyone was pleased.

Paul's message that the God of Israel was Savior and Lord and that his kingdom had come was very unsettling for some people. After all, the gospel of the kingdom of heaven has implications for every aspect of life. Trouble came from the wealthy and powerful who were comfortable with the system as it was because it benefited them greatly. So it should not surprise us that the first sign of trouble was not over a religious issue in the strict sense, but an economic matter. The people of Philippi discovered what the city of Thessalonica would soon learn as well: "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also" (Acts 17:6 ESV). That clash of kingdoms—so clearly demonstrated when the message of the kingdom of heaven is lived out in daily life and stands in sharp contrast to the lifestyle of the kingdom of this world—is the focus of this study.

### Opening Thoughts (3 minutes)

#### The Very Words of God

*"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.*

Acts 16:31–34

### Think About It

All of us face obstacles and challenges. Times when we have a plan to accomplish something we value greatly and things just don't go as we thought they were "supposed" to go. Times when we do what has always worked for us before, and it all goes wrong. Times when we successfully do the right thing, and it seems everyone hates us for it. Times when things go so "wrong" we don't even know what is happening!

In such situations, some people become hopelessly discouraged. Others give up. Some get angry. And some people are so committed and focused on the goal that they are energized by what stops others dead in their tracks!

What do you think accounts for the difference?

What motivates some people to keep the faith and expect great things to happen while others can't even face the obstacle(s), much less strive to overcome it (them)?

### Video Notes (32 minutes)

**Paul: citizen of Rome; citizen of heaven**

**Philippi: Roman in every way**

**Where the gospel of Caesar rules**

**Punishment Roman style**

**The Philippian jail**

**The price of being the message**

**Prayer and praise at midnight**

**Suddenly God shows up**

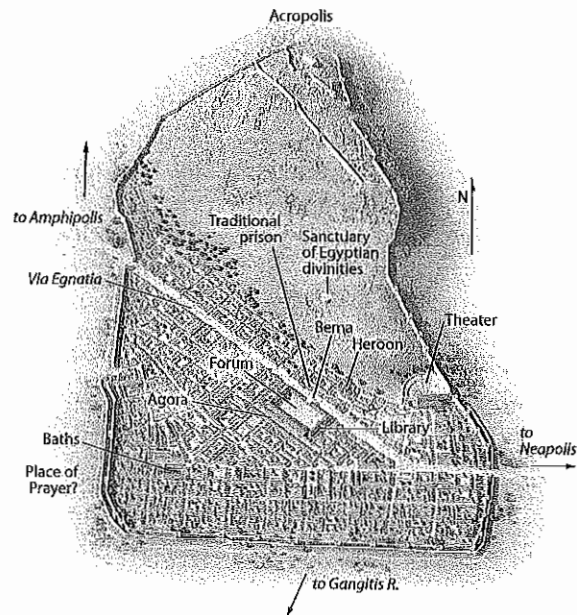
**The Philippian jailer: "What must I do to be saved?"**

**Validate the message**

**Video Discussion (7 minutes)**

1. As modern Westerners, we don't often think of how our surroundings make cultural or political statements about our world. But in the Roman world a person couldn't go anywhere without seeing "monuments" of all sorts that were reminders of the "gospel" of Rome. Discuss the cultural and political messages that would be conveyed to a person who simply walked through the Roman colony of Philippi, particularly through the forum, the heart of the city where much of this video was filmed. To help remember some of these locations, refer to the map of Philippi on page 156.

- The *Via Egnatia*—the Roman road next to the forum that stretched across ancient Macedonia from Byzantium to Dyrrhacium on the Adriatic Sea, then across the sea to the Appian Way that led to Rome.
- The Greek theater where the Roman games were held.
- The forum, where people gathered to exchange goods and ideas.
- The imperial temple with its huge, fluted columns.
- The imperial altar, set up for the veneration and worship of the emperor.
- The *bema*, where magistrates gave official pronouncements and passed judgments.



THE REMAINS OF THE IMPERIAL TEMPLE IN THE FORUM OF PHILIPPI

2. If we understand that in the Jewish mind “prayer” encompassed far more than just petition—but also worship, recitation of the Text, and singing—how does that inform our understanding of how Paul and Silas handled their imprisonment?

In what ways did their attitudes and responses toward the injustice, pain, and uncertainty of their imprisonment differ from what ours might have been?

What do you think enabled Paul and Silas to approach their horrific circumstances as they did?

3. The story of Paul, Silas, and the Philippian jailer is non-stop drama of tremendous consequence—the late-night earthquake, the release without escape for the prisoners, the jailer's deliverance from suicide, the baptism of his household, attending to the wounds of Paul and Silas, the magistrates' sudden release of Paul and Silas, and Paul's claim to citizenship and insistence on honorable treatment from those who had abused him.
- How memorable do you think each of these events was in the minds of at least some of the people of Philippi?
  - What impact might these events have had on how the gospel of Christ was received by specific people in Philippi—Roman soldiers and authorities, prisoners, slaves, Jesus followers, and others?

### Small Group Bible Discovery and Discussion (13 minutes)

#### A Citizen of Two Worlds

As we've seen, Philippi was a Roman colony where Caesar reigned as lord. The Roman citizens who lived there recognized their exceptional privilege and were extremely loyal to Caesar's kingdom, the Roman Empire. Paul was uniquely qualified to

bring the gospel of Jesus to this city because, as Luke informs us he also was a Roman citizen, possessing all rights and privilege: Paul was one of them! His message would be heard and validated, in part, on his status as a Roman citizen.

However, Paul apparently came to Philippi without making known his Roman citizenship. He must have dressed like a Jew and worn tassels,<sup>2</sup> as God had commanded, because the people of the city recognized him as a Jew. When trouble began, the enraged mob shouted, "These men are Jews" (Acts 16:20). Clearly Paul had not hidden his Jewish identity. He went into Philippi as a Jew and a follower of Jesus in order to continue to fulfill the mission God gave to his ancestors at Mount Sinai: "You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (see Exodus 19:2–6).

What did God mean when he called his people to be a kingdom of priests? In the ancient world, a priest's role was to demonstrate who God was and what he was like. And a kingdom was viewed as any situation in which a king reigned and people obeyed his will. So when God graciously redeemed Israel and commissioned them to be his kingdom of priests, he gave them the mission of displaying his character and ways so that people would come to know him. By obeying God's will in all aspects of life, his people would be, in effect, citizens of heaven who would extend his rule and his kingdom wherever they were. Whenever God's people obediently live out his will, God reigns and, as Jesus said, his kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

When Paul came to Philippi, he came not as a Roman citizen representing the kingdom and ways of this world but as a citizen of God's kingdom demonstrating what life is like when God is in control. It is not at all surprising that conflict would occur as Paul proclaimed and lived out the gospel message. The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world are always in opposition. What is surprising is that Paul does not reveal his Roman citizenship until he is ready to leave the city. He did not use the advantage that his status as a Roman citizen gave him even though doing so would have saved him from a great deal of personal suffering.

The fact that Paul didn't play his Roman citizenship card is surprising because he usually made use of every available situation to generate greater interest in his message. He wrote to the believers in Corinth, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:22-23). Why would he choose to hide his citizenship in a city filled with Roman citizens? If on other occasions he used the privileges his citizenship gave him to protect himself and enhance his opportunities to be heard, why not in Philippi?

1. Paul was born a Jew in the city of Tarsus, a wealthy commercial center of the Gentile world. For at least some of his early years, his family lived in the context of the social, educational, financial, philosophical, and moral values of the Roman world. But his family were Pharisees, so they would have been devoted to righteous living in obedience to Torah. Paul took his heritage and calling as a Jew very seriously. In what ways do we know he was a "citizen" of the kingdom of heaven as the Jews of his day understood it? Make a list! (See Exodus 19:3-6; Deuteronomy 5:32-33; 6:4-5; Acts 22:3-5; 2 Corinthians 11:22; Philippians 3:3-6.)
2. What other citizenship did Paul rightfully claim that was very important in the world in which he lived? (See Acts 22:24-28.)

### DID YOU KNOW?

#### How Paul Became a Roman Citizen

Luke's account of Paul's ministry reveals that Paul was born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28), which was unusual for a Jew. Although Luke do reveal how Paul's family became citizens, the writings of Jerome, one of the great Church Fathers (342-420 AD), offer a plausible explanation. Jerome lived in Israel and named Gischala in northern Galilee as the home of Paul's parents. Apparently, his parents participated in a revolt against Rome, were captured, and subsequently were sold as slaves to a Roman citizen in Tarsus. Later they were freed, becoming Roman citizens, which enabled their son to be a Roman citizen as well.<sup>3</sup>

Legitimate children of Roman citizens were required to be registered within thirty days of birth. The child's name was entered on the register in the province, and a *testatio*, a document not unlike a birth certificate, provided proof of the child's citizenship. A person would normally keep the *testatio* on a small wooden tablet called a *diptych*.<sup>4</sup> We do not know whether Paul carried such a document with him, but the penalty for making a false claim of Roman citizenship was severe. Because the Roman authorities apparently did not question Paul's citizenship, it is likely he was able to show some evidence for his claim.

3. Paul knew that as a Jew he was called to a life of obedience to God's commands in order to fulfill his pre-mission of making God known to his world. After Jerusalem met Paul on the road to Damascus, what specific instructions did Paul receive regarding how he was to fulfill his mission? (See Acts 22:21.)

How did Paul view his role in fulfilling the mission? (See Romans 15:15–19.)

In what ways do you think Paul's citizenship in two kingdoms—the kingdom of heaven as a Jew and a follower of Jesus, and the kingdom of Rome as a Roman citizen—prepared him for the mission?

4. What events unfolded in Philippi (Acts 16:16–22) that illustrate the deep rift between the kingdom of Rome (the kingdom of this world) and the kingdom of heaven (the kingdom of God)?

Do you think Paul and Silas anticipated that something like this might happen? Why or why not?

What issue caused the uproar? Was it what Paul said and taught or how he put God on display through his actions?

In what ways is the “citizenship” of the parties involved—the slave owners, Paul, the mob, the magistrates—evident in this interaction?

### Faith Lesson (4 minutes)

Paul was keenly aware that he was a citizen of two worlds: the world's kingdom of Rome and God's kingdom of heaven. But his citizenship in the kingdom of heaven—his allegiance to the laws and customs of heaven itself—determined how he lived as a citizen in this world. When his Roman citizenship enhanced his opportunities to proclaim Jesus as Messiah, Paul used that advantage, but not at the expense of his calling as a citizen of heaven.

For followers of Jesus then as well as now, citizenship in God's kingdom must always be first. Our authority as ambassadors of God's kingdom is validated by how we live—how we put God on display as we do his will every day. As one historian has observed, “The new believers were attracted to the community of Jesus' followers first. Only then did they begin to realize they were attracted to the person of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

In a letter from an early believer named Mathetes to Diognetus, we see a powerful description of how Christians lived as citizens of heaven during the late first and early second centuries:

Christians are not distinguished from other men by country, language, nor by the customs that they observe. They do not inhabit cities of their own, use a particular way of speaking, nor lead a life marked out by any curiosity. The course of conduct they follow has not been devised by the speculation and deliberation of inquisitive men. They do not, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of merely human doctrines.

Instead, they inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities, however things have fallen to each of them. And it is while following the customs of the natives in clothing, food, and the rest of ordinary life that they display to us their wonderful and admittedly striking way of life.

They live in their own countries, but they do so as those who are just passing through. As citizens they participate in everything with others, yet they endure everything as if they were foreigners. Every foreign land is like their homeland to them, and every land of their birth is like a land of strangers.

They marry, like everyone else, and they have children, but they do not destroy their offspring.

They share a common table, but not a common bed.

They exist in the flesh, but they do not live by the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, all the while surpassing the laws by their lives.

They love all men and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned. They are put to death and restored to life.

They are poor, yet make many rich. They lack everything, yet they overflow in everything.

They are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor they are glorified; they are spoken ill of and yet are justified; they are reviled but bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if raised from the dead. They are assailed by the Jews as barbarians; they are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to give any reason for their hatred.<sup>6</sup>

These devoted believers were not known by what they said, but by how they lived! They were continuing the mission God had given to Israel, the mission Jesus lived and taught, the mission Paul brought to the Gentiles!

1. What about you? Do people recognize you as a citizen of heaven, or do they see more of the world's citizenship in your lifestyle and relationships?
  
2. Write out some important things that you think distinguish a citizen of heaven in your world. How will you put them into practice in your daily life and interaction with others starting today?

### Closing (1 minute)

Read 1 Peter 2:12 aloud together: "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

Then pray, thanking God that he not only has redeemed us but has made us his partners in redeeming others from bondage to the kingdom of this world. Ask for his forgiveness for the times we forget (or ignore) that we are citizens of his kingdom who have been given the privilege of serving him so that we might make him known to a world that desperately needs him. Ask him for wisdom, grace, and faithfulness to live good lives that bring glory, honor, and praise to his holy name.