

Paul was on the island of Troas when he saw a vision of a man asking him to go to Macedonia. Paul immediately set sail and landed in modern day Greece. He set his sights on Philippi, which was a port city, and a major stop between Rome and the East. Paul immediately got to work spreading the gospel, converting new believers, and doing what he did best – stirring up controversy. When I visited Philippi, I was struck by its size; it is not that big. Someone new coming to town would get noticed. Someone new coming to town preaching a new religion would get noticed. Someone new coming to town preaching a new religion and casting out demons would really get noticed.

Here is the story from Acts Chapter 16, about what happened to Paul in Philippi. Listen for God's Word:

¹⁶ One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was an earthquake so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

³⁵ When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." ³⁶ And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, "The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace." ³⁷ But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison, and now are they going to

discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.”³⁸ The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans,³⁹ so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.⁴⁰ After leaving the prison they went to Lydia’s home, and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

As you can see, it did not take long for Paul to get himself thrown into prison. This is a common cycle for Paul – arrive somewhere, make some noise, get thrown into prison. As a matter of fact, when we fast forward and read the letter Paul is writing to the Philippians, he is again in prison. We do not know where he was in prison when he wrote this letter. We do know that he wrote it because a man named Epaphroditus, a member of the church in Philippi, was returning to Philippi and could be the currier for this letter. The Philippians had heard Paul was in prison, and he wanted to reassure them of his spiritual well-being and his undiminished joy. This is the letter where we hear Paul’s famous words ‘rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.’

Hear now what Paul writes to his friends in Philippi: (SHOW VIDEO)

I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God’s grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually resulted in the progress of the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ, and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Paul felt like being in prison was progress for the gospel. He found joy even in his imprisonment because he could convert the guards, and he had time to write, and he was able to encourage others by his example. The jail where he and Silas were in prison in Philippi was small! Stone walls, stone floors, probably some bars. It was very rough. And Paul knew the Christians were being persecuted in Philippi, probably spending time in that same prison because of their faith.

When we look at these two stories – Paul in Philippi in prison and then Paul out on his travels writing from prison we get a strong image of this man. He was very courageous. He was putting himself out there for the sake of the gospel and paying the consequences of his actions. He does not seem afraid to take on the authorities. He does not seem anxious about personal safety. He

does not seem concerned about preparing for his future. He is only concerned about preaching the gospel and building up the churches in the places where he travels. These are the ways Paul is overtly courageous.

But there are less obvious ways in which Paul displays the virtue of courage. He was courageous to change his mind and convert to a new religion. He was courageous to have faith in something bigger than himself. He was courageous to share his story - not just the highlights but the times when he was a sinner, the times when he failed, the times when he was in jail, the times when he got kicked out of town. Paul was willing to be vulnerable with people. And vulnerability fosters relationships. Vulnerability breaks down walls. Vulnerability allows healing and conversion. Paul used his own story to bring others to Jesus.

We could say a lot of things about Paul from these two texts but the one I would like you to take away with you today is that he was courageous enough to be vulnerable with his faith, his heart, and his journey. Storytelling is powerful, particularly when it connects to issues of the heart, and stories of struggle, and matters of faith. I am guessing Paul was an extraordinary evangelist because he was passionate about Jesus and desperate for people to hear the good news. But also because he shared openly with his mind and his heart – he shared his thoughts and he shared his feelings. Paul’s writings are beautiful and emotional and poetic.

Faith in American Protestantism has become very privatized. It has become a personal thing we deal with privately or at least in the confines of our own homes. Sharing our faith is not something we comfortable doing or find culturally appropriate. Therefore, we don’t talk about our faith and we definitely not our doubts or our struggles, and even joys and hopes are stifled. DC has an obnoxious way of thinking that we build connections and intimacy based on the schools we went to and the people we know. These surface connections do very little to foster relationships. They do not bring people together, they do not create meaning, they do not allow for intimacy. A friend of mine told me that after many years, the only place he found any real community in DC was at his AA group. The expectation in this group was that you were all going through something, you all had struggles, you all had stories to tell – and you were going to tell them. You had to tell them. It was there that he found friendship, he found accountability, he found hope.

Paul was the kind of guy you could tell your stuff to because he was the kind of guy who told you, his stuff. Heart on the sleeve kind of guy but not in a down beat, woe is me kind of way. I mean he was in prison and yet also singing his heart out. He knew he was going to die soon yet writing to the Philippians telling them to ‘shine like stars in the darkness’. He is telling them to rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice! And he means it, he lives it.

How many times have I read that passage, Philippians Chapter 4, at weddings, at funerals, in my own devotional time? Paul’s words still give us comfort and strength and direction as to how to live our lives as Christians. “Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again I say rejoice. Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is an excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise – think about these things.”

This is Paul's framework – find joy in his calling and sharing that joy with others. And what lies underneath this framework is a profound faith in Jesus Christ. A faith that he had been forgiven. A faith that he has been called. A faith that he had been saved. He 100% believed that by the grace of God he was going to be with God in heaven when he died. That fundamentally changed the way he lived his life. This framework made him willing to be open and passionate and courageous. We have a lot to learn from Paul about how to be Christians and courage of the heart is where it begins.

Thanks be to God. Amen.