

*Read also Acts 16:11-40 and Psalm 9:1-4. Check out the service at [www.fpcd.org](http://www.fpcd.org).*

Do you have any really close friends who do not live near you? They might be so close that they come visit you and stay over for a few days. When is the last time you got a handwritten letter from them?

This summer I went to New York City and while there, I visited my dad's cousin. I think that makes her my second cousin. Before I came she wrote me a letter telling me about herself and giving me directions to her house; which subway to take, when to transfer to a bus, what her apartment building looked like and where it was located on the street.

She greeted me like an old friend. I spent an evening with her and she fixed me dinner. It was delightful and a highlight of my trip.

Just last week I received another letter from her, handwritten. She said my visit made her year. She looks forward to meeting me in Louisiana to go visit the town where relatives live. I can't wait to be able to do that—and to see her again.

The Philippian church received a letter from Paul. He had been there before and got to know them well. Lydia probably became an elder or deacon in that congregation. Women were highly involved in ministry in the New Testament.

Paul loves these people. He writes, "You have a special place in my heart and mind and soul." (v. 7)

You heard a story about Paul's previous time in Philippi. (Acts 16:11-40) What an introduction to a city! I'd call it nothing less than exciting! When you expect miracles from God, you don't really anticipate being freed from jail by an earthquake! That, along with the jailer's salvation must have put Philippi and these people in Paul's heart forever. I can just hear him now:

*'Let me tell you about the most spectacular conversion I ever experienced!'*

The way Paul got to Philippi was by trying to go someplace else. He and Timothy were traveling together; then Silas and Luke joined them. They were a group of men who were on mission. They tried to go to two different places but were "prevented by the Holy Spirit."

How would you like to live so dependent upon God that each day your life depended on His direction? That's how these men lived.

I do think there are times we, too, in 2014, depend on the Holy Spirit to guide us, or we experience the Holy Spirit's guidance just happening because we ask for it. Some might say, 'that's just an accident,' but we say *you go nowhere by accident. Wherever you go God is sending you...* So we look for God's presence with us.

Why would God send you? God has a purpose for you. **Living by faith is to live with purpose.**

If you step back for a moment and look at the big picture, you can see the purpose of God working out.

Years before, the Jews lived as a nation with their own government and language. But then they were conquered and the people exiled. They were carried off from Jerusalem and Israel's lands and dispersed into all these surrounding areas. As time passed they settled in those cities and remained there. Philippi was one of those cities. The region was then conquered by Alexander the Great, initiating the spread of Greek culture, and Hellenistic society developed. The Jews were Hellenized; they spoke Greek, although they were still Jews and were surely bilingual, because all young Jews learned Hebrew and the Old Testament Scriptures.

For instance, Paul's Hebrew name was Saul. His Greek name was Paul—they sound very similar. One of my sons is marrying a girl from Columbia. Her name is *Ang-hela* in Spanish, but Angela here. Paul used his names as appropriate.

When the Romans conquered the region, they built a massive road structure, which made transportation easy. And so Paul was able to travel and spread the gospel with relative ease. The dual languages of Greek and Hebrew made it accessible to all people.

Do you see the timing of God? Everything God does is for a purpose.

Paul took the gospel to the Jews first, traveling to each of these foreign towns. They had the Old Testament that prophesized about the Messiah. That was their foundation. Paul also went to the Greeks and when they believed, they joined with the believing Jews and had access to their Scriptures. So the Bible spread cross-culturally. Previous to this, there was no connection between Jews and non-Jews.

Philippi is one of the churches to whom Paul wrote, and now his letter to them addresses us. His letter traveled the roads of Rome to these cities and nations, and over the generations it spread farther and farther, and here we are, almost 2,000 years later and his letter is for us. This is the work of God.

God works by purpose, you see, sending Jesus at just the right time where the gospel could be spread throughout the known world. He continues to work by purpose every day, spreading the truth through you, until Christ returns.

Paul says to us: "I want you to grow in knowledge and understanding so that you can determine what really matters." (v. 10) That was Paul's overriding prayer.

Look at the map and you can see Philippi, and take note of where Rome is—because he was probably writing them from there. Paul was in prison.

Imagine him sitting in prison and thinking back to that crazy prison experience in Philippi.

*They are so dear to me, I think I'll write them,* he said.

Maybe the jailer was an elder by then. We don't know his name. It might have been Dick or Bobby or Kent or Dub. Perhaps the jailer raised some money to help Paul out because prisoners in those days had to provide their own support.

Being into prison was humiliating.

Paul wasn't living just to get a message out; do a job; or do what he should do. He was walking with God, being guided by the Holy Spirit. So in the midst of chaos that seemed out of control—being seized for doing a good thing and thrown in jail—God was busy doing miracles because God wanted this news out. God was determined that the Good News could reach you, your children, and your grandchildren, just like God wanted to reach the jailer and others in Philippi.

Do you see the big-picture? Do you understand that it really matters for your family and friends? That's the overriding concern of Paul for his beloved friends, for the Philippians—and for you. You, too, are a part of spreading that good news.

So Paul experienced chaos but he also experienced God's miracles because that's God's way.

I went to a pastor's "huddle" this past week – once a month pastors of Duncanville get together and this time several men talked about their walk with God. Often they were in dire straits when God stepped in in a miraculous way and helped them. They each said, *'I don't deserve it; I am no one special. Why would God do that for me?'*

You might think that Paul is someone unique and special but not so! No matter who you are, when you seek God with all your heart and mind and try to honor Him, God honors you.

This made Paul exceedingly joyful despite his circumstances.

Do you know any habitually joyful people?

You might. Let me rephrase that. Do you know any habitually joyful people who have problems?

Paul's trials, even though very difficult, actually gave Paul greater understanding about life; greater awareness about his purpose; greater insight into what is important and what happens when you step out in faith.

He learned to have joy in all circumstances. His joy over the Philippians was because of their partnership in sharing the gospel and their bond, even when he was in prison. They were close friends.

All of that is an introduction for Paul's introduction. Are you ready now to hear his words to them? (READ Philippians 1:1-11)

Are you ready to embrace what really matters?

AMEN