

Lessons from Philippians: God's Bigger Plan

by Bayless Conley

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Hello, friend. I'm glad that you have joined me. If you have a Bible, why don't you grab it? We're going to get into God's Word together. If you were with me for the last broadcast, the last message that I brought, you'll remember that we were talking about a church that the apostle Paul was used by God to found in the city of Philippi. Philippi was a Roman colony. Prior to that, it was founded by Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. This city actually sat down in a little depression in these hills that divided the hills east from west, and literally was the point, the gateway, if you would, between Europe and Asia. It was incredibly strategic militarily. Many battles had been fought over that. Then, it eventually became a Roman colony, meaning that many Romans lived there. A lot of retired Praetorian guards would have been there, retired Roman soldiers there. The outstanding feature of any Roman colony is that they never forgot they were Romans. They wore Roman dress, they spoke the Roman language, they observed Roman customs, and the ceremonies that were carried out in Rome, they did in a Roman colony. They never would have dreamt of being assimilated into the people among whom they were set. Paul, understanding that, writes in the book of Philippians that they are a colony of heaven.

My friend, we are part of a community that supersedes anything here on earth. We are subject to a higher law, to a higher King. His name is Jesus. If you're a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, our colony is from heaven. We're in the world, but we're not of it. We shouldn't be acting like the world and talking like the world. Frankly, if you look at someone and they claim to be a Christ follower, but you see no difference between them and the world, I would question the authenticity of their relationship with Christ. In the world, but not of it. You can have a boat in the water. Okay, that's fine. But it's not fine when the water gets in the boat. I'm a believer. I'm in this world, but the world shouldn't get in me. My belief and my behavior need to run parallel. I can't say, "Well, yeah, I believe in Jesus. I've accepted Him as my Lord and Savior. But my behavior—I'm out here sleeping around, and I'm talking just like the world. My morals are the same as the world's. My priorities are the same as the world's." No, there needs to be a difference. So, the book of Philippians was written to the church that Paul had founded in the city of Philippi. We read in Acts 16, actually, how that church came to be. I want to read to you from Acts 16:6–7 NKJV.

⁶ Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they . . .

That is Paul and his companions; there was Silas, there was Luke, and there was Timothy with him. It says,

⁶ They were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia.

Or in Asia Minor. But they tried to go there in Asia Minor. The Holy Spirit forbid them to go there.

⁷ After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them.

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You can't go everywhere. You can't be everything. So, there are certain places where the Holy Spirit said, "I don't want you there. I don't want you there, but I'm going to show you where I want you to be." We read on. It says in verse 8 NKJV,

⁸ . . . they came down to Troas.

Which, by the way, is the site of the ancient city of Troy. Verses 9–12 NKJV

⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. ¹¹ Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. (A Roman colony) And we were staying in that city for some days.

So, not Asia Minor, not Bithynia, not here, not there, but Macedonia. Why Macedonia? Well, boiling it down to its simplest terms is because there were hungry hearts crying out to know God. "Come to Macedonia and help us." The best help we can give to people in need is the gospel. It is wonderful when we're able to meet practical needs and to put the gospel in work clothes. I believe in that, and it's scriptural. But the most important help that we can give to any human being is the gospel of Jesus Christ. My friend, this world is just a dressing room for eternity. And where you will spend eternity is the most important thing that you can make ready for in this life. So, we must bring the gospel to people. There were people in this Roman colony of Philippi who were crying out to know the truth. So God gave this vision and they determined that the Lord was leading them to go to Macedonia. And in particular, they ended up in the city of Philippi.

I remember listening to this minister one time. He had this profound leading by the Holy Spirit to go to a particular region of the Middle East. He was a well-known evangelist and could have preached anywhere he wanted here in the United States. He could have gone to many places in Europe and had huge crowds. He shared, "I had this profound burden, and I recognized the Holy Spirit was talking to me to go into this particular area of the Middle East. So, I booked my flights, and I made arrangements for a place to stay. I connected with some believers there, and I went. I was expecting grand things to happen." He was there for, I think it was maybe five days, maybe a week. He said, "The only ministry that I did was to one woman. That was the only door that opened. I shared the gospel with one woman and her life was profoundly impacted by what I had to share with her."

He said, "I got on a plane and flew back to the United States. And I was thinking to myself, 'God, that was a waste of time and a waste of money. That was expensive in terms of time and resources. All I ministered to was one person. Did I miss You? Why did You send me there?'" He said, "The Holy Spirit spoke to me so clearly. He said, 'Son, I sent you there to minister to that one woman.'" Then, he said something I'll never forget. He said, "The Holy Spirit said to me, 'I may be extravagant, but I am never wasteful.'" Jesus said, "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" So, friend, the value of one soul is worth more than the world and all of its wealth. Who knows what happened through the life of that woman? That's kind of what we find here in the city of Philippi. God is always working a far bigger plan than we can see. Now, it said, "Once they had the vision, we sought to go to Macedonia." That means that they endeavored. They didn't immediately go, but they sought to go. That's important. The Greek word there means to seek after a means, to try to find a way, to prepare,

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to plan, and to do what you can. There is a lesson for us in that. They had this vision. This is where we're supposed to go. There is something significant up ahead. So, they sought and made plans. They sought a means for it to happen. They tried to find a way. They prepared.

I've talked to many people throughout my sojourn here. They had big dreams, and they would say, "Bayless, I feel like God has called me to"—I talked to a woman—"God has called me to minister to women. I know I'm supposed to speak at conventions, and God has given me this plan, but no doors are open for me." I'll begin to talk to them and find out that they've done nothing to prepare. I'll ask, "Okay, do you think you're supposed to teach? Have you prepared some teachings? Have you written a syllabus that you can pass out to the women in these conventions and go over?" "Well, no, I'm just waiting for God to open the doors." Well, you need to do some things and prepare. I've talked to people who feel like they're called by God to take the gospel to foreign soil as a missionary. I say, "Well, great. What have you done to prepare?" Well, I'm just waiting for God to open the doors." No, don't just sit there. Go get yourself a passport. Do some language study, seek contacts, arrange travel, gather information, and raise support. That's what it means when they sought to go into Macedonia. They plan. They look for a means to make it happen.

So the vision happens in Troas, which was ancient Troy. They sailed from there, it says. But, they were not idle while they were in Troas. Obviously, from what we can see in Scriptures, they won people to the Lord while they were there, while they were seeking for a means to take this next step and get to where God wanted them to be. They did not sit idle. They won people to Christ. Apparently, they established a church in Troas. Though nothing is written specifically about it, we do read in Acts 20 that Paul is there in Troas, in this ancient city of Troy. The church is gathered, and they are in an upper room. Paul is preaching and sharing with them. They have lamps burning, and he's preaching till midnight. That's where the guy is sitting in the window. He is overcome with sleep, falls down three stories, and dies. Paul goes down, grabs the guy, prays, and he comes back to life. Everybody is encouraged. So what do they do? They go back upstairs, and Paul preaches until dawn.

There was a group of believers there. There was a believing community, a small fledgling church that apparently, one of them or someone else—we're not told who or how that happened—but we know they more than likely had a part in it. Most of the stuff we do is not going to be written about. It's not going to be celebrated and applauded. It's not going to be in a history book of the church, but it is written down in heaven and is incredibly significant. If you're waiting to be lauded and to have parades on your behalf, well, just forget it. You need to be fruitful where you're planted. And they were. While they're in Troas, before they got to Macedonia, they were busy. You need to be busy where you are. I know I'm speaking to somebody. You have a call of God on your life to preach, and you know it. Start with your neighbors. Start at the local market. Share Christ with your friends. Do what you can with what you have and where you are.

You might say, "Well, I just feel like I'm called to Vietnam." Seek for a means to go, do some language study, and get yourself a passport. In the meantime, go to some local Vietnamese restaurants and make some friends with the cook, with the staff, and lead them to Christ. Get started. Do what you can, where you are, and with what you have. Now, Paul has this vision from God. A man of Macedonia says, "Come to Macedonia and help us." Surely, if this vision is from God, they're going to be met with banners in the streets. The mayor of the city is going to give them the keys to the city. They're going to have an instant citywide revival. Well, that actually didn't happen. We read in verses 11–12, that they come to Philippi and they are there

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for some days. They're just sort of searching out the land, praying, and waiting on God. "What's going to be our first move?" Verses 13–15 NKJV,

¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. ¹⁴ Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. ¹⁵ And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, (or a true believer) come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us.

Now, here they are. There is no synagogue in the city of Philippi. Paul's normal method of operation is that he would go into the synagogue, as a guest there, and, previously having been a rabbi, he would be invited to speak. He would share from the Scriptures about the Messiah, about Christ. But apparently, there is no synagogue there. Some sources tell us that in the ancient world, it was Jewish custom that they had to have at least 10 Jewish families to form a synagogue. So there are not even 10 Jewish families more than likely in this Roman colony of Philippi. In fact, when they didn't have enough people for a synagogue, they would customarily go down to the riverside and pray. There aren't even men there. There are just women. So Paul goes down and preaches. God moves on the heart of Lydia. One lady gets saved, and her household gets saved. That's it. Again, you think, "Well, I thought this vision was from God. Where are the banners? Where are the fireworks and the multitudes coming to Christ?" Only one woman? Well, it reminds me of the story of my friend going to the Middle East to that one particular area to minister to one woman.

It's interesting. She is from the city of Thyatira. She was a seller of purple. It was an incredibly lucrative business in that day. They would get the purple dye from mollusks that were in the area of Thyatira from the rivers there. This purple dye, that came from this mollusk, they would use it to dye Roman togas and, actually, the garments of royalty. It's very, very expensive. This woman has a big house. She has a staff. She is quite wealthy. She is still going to have her business ties. She is a seller of purple. That's where she gets the dye from. So Paul and his companions wanted to go into Asia Minor. God is working a plan, a tapestry that is much larger than they can see. God said, "No, I want you to go to Macedonia. You reach this woman, and the gospel is going to travel through her, through her business ties, and through her family to the place you wanted to go." My friend, God has resources and people that you don't know anything about. The body of Christ is very big and quite varied and multifaceted. God just has a million and one ways that you could never think of to get the job done.

Now, Lydia is referred to by many as the first European convert. Some historians have referred to her conversion to Christianity as the turning point of Western civilization, that literally now the gospel is going to come into Europe. She was God's foothold to win a city and change history. God's providence brought her there and brought her and Paul together. Now, it's interesting. She worshiped God. She prayed and gathered with others. She wasn't saved, but she had a reverence for God. She still has shops to run. She has manufacturing to take care of. She has shipping to take care of. She has to buy the cloth for the garment. She has employees. She has all of these things going on. She is a very, very busy woman. But she has time for God. Because she had time for God, she found more of God. She found blessing from Him. She found purpose, and she became a world changer. And I know I'm speaking to some business people right now. Sir, don't be so busy with your business that you don't have time for church. Don't be so busy with your work that you don't have time for God. God, His work, and His Church need to come first. Don't relegate God and His Kingdom to some secondary position.

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Now, Lydia gets saved, and her household gets saved. It says that the Lord opened her heart to heed those things spoken by Paul. Another translation says, "God moved on her heart." Don't think God can't reach your loved ones. God can still move on their heart. God is bigger than the devil. Some people are just lamenting, and they're depressed. "Oh, the devil's got a hold of my husband. The devil's got a hold of my kids." Listen, God is bigger than the devil. God can reach your children. You do not let go of God. Wrap your fingers in His garments and intercede for them, pray for them, use wisdom, and share with them. God can change their lives. But in verse 15, it says that, "When she and her household were baptized, she begged us, 'If you judge me to be a true believer, stay with me.'" The first thing she did was get baptized. It's an outward expression of an inward grace. It's a command of Jesus. It's not a doctrine to be debated. It's a command to be obeyed. If you put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you need to be water baptized.

It's symbolic that when I'm going under the water, it's like when Jesus went to the grave. I'm dead to my old life. Then, when you come up out of the water, you're identifying with His resurrection. I'm leaving my old life behind, and I have a new life with Christ. It's something that we do publicly. We invite family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and enemies to come. It's before all of heaven and before all of hell. We're making a declaration. "I belong to Jesus Christ. My old life is dead, and I have a new life with Him." Then, we begin to live it out day by day as we feast upon God's Word and gather together with His people. We serve, we worship, and we hear the instruction of the Word of God. So listen, if you haven't been baptized, I want to encourage you to get baptized in water. Invite your friends. Invite your co-workers and share the gospel with them. Water baptism is incredibly important, but first you need to have a born again experience. Invite Jesus Christ into your heart, commit your life to Him, confess Him as Lord, and then show outwardly through water baptism what has occurred to you inwardly. Now, I only have time to talk to you about one more thing. It's the next interesting thing in this story of how this church at Philippi got started. So, we have so far, Lydia and her household. They've been saved. They've been baptized. Then something really interesting happens. We read in verse 16, it says,

¹⁶ Now it happened, as we went to prayer . . .

So they continued to go to the riverside for these prayer meetings.

. . . as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling.

She's a fortune teller. And notice she brought her masters much profit. Fortune tellers charge today. They charged back then as well. But I want you to notice she was possessed by an evil spirit, by a spirit of divination. There was a supernatural element to what this girl was doing. People who are involved in seances and fortune-telling are engaging and having interaction with evil spirits. So this girl, who is a fortune teller and possessed, it says in Acts 16:17–21 NKJV,

¹⁷ This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." ¹⁸ And this she did for many days. But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out that very hour. ¹⁹ But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities. ²⁰ And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; ²¹

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and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe.”

Now, this is just such an interesting story. This gal possessed by the spirit, she just doesn't do this one time. She follows after them and cries out for many days. “These men are servants of the most high God to show us the way of salvation.” What she said was right, but the spirit behind it was wrong. Nobody needs a demon advertising for them. First of all, everybody would have known what this woman was about. She would have been well known for this. So it immediately associates the gospel with the occult. Then a lot of people in their minds would think, “Okay, this new thing that these people are preaching is not any different than this fortune-telling business that's going on.” But again, I think because it was a demon spirit that had possessed her, that more than likely she did this in a mocking tone, in a derisive tone. It would not have been helping the cause at all. It says that she did it many days. And it says, “Then Paul was greatly annoyed.” I like the old King James. It says that he was grieved. He turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ, come out.” And it came out that very hour. First of all, as believers, we have authority over unclean and evil spirits.

Jesus said, “In My name go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. These signs will follow those who believe. In My name, they will cast out demons. They will speak with new tongues. If they take up serpents, it will not harm them, etc.” But one of the things He said would follow believers is that they would cast out demons. Jesus said, “I give you authority over all the power of the enemy. Nothing shall by any means hurt you.” James said, “You resist the devil and he will flee from you. Submit yourself to God.” You resist the devil. Paul didn't say, “Lord, please cast the devil out of her.” No, we've been authorized to deal with the devil in Jesus' name. I want you to think about this for a moment. This gal is saying all the right things, but she's obviously very wrong. And it said that Paul, being grieved, cast out the spirit. There was this inward troubling, this inward grieving. The Holy Spirit gives that to all of us. You have an unction. John said, “You have an unction, an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things.” He did that in connection with recognizing and discerning true believers from false believers, with recognizing the truth from the devil's lies.

Sometimes you'll get people who will come, and it says in the book of Jude that these people who are reprobate and are agents of the devil, but they feast among you. They come to your love feast. But he said in the Greek language that they're literally like these underwater reefs that can't be seen. Ships would run aground on them. It said that they're trying to pull people into lewdness and seduce people and draw them away from the gospel. But they came in pretending like they're sheep like everyone else. But they're wolves in sheep's clothing. So, if somebody is saying all the right things, yet their motivation is wrong, they're just trying to slide in next to the believers and do what seems to be right and sounds right because they're actually trying by degrees to turn people away from the faith. How can you know that inward grieving? Paul, being grieved, realized it was a wrong spirit. Listen to this. John 13:2 NKJV says,

² And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him.

So the devil has put something in the heart of Judas. He is going to betray Jesus. Judas is now being influenced by Satan. In fact, at one point, it says that Satan entered into him. So they are there together, and Satan has put this in the heart of Judas to betray Jesus. We read then in verse 21,

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²¹ When Jesus had said these things, He was troubled in spirit, and testified and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me."

Interesting. Satan put something in the heart of Judas. Things are wrong. He is with the other disciples. Everything looks right. Everything sounds right, but Jesus is now suddenly troubled in Spirit. He says, "One of you will betray Me." It's like the apostle Paul. He was troubled in his spirit. He was grieved in his spirit because this fortune-teller girl was saying the right things, but something was wrong. We need to learn to listen to them as believers because the Holy Spirit will show us. You get around some people, and it's not that you're trying to be judgmental or you're looking for a demon behind every bush. I mean, that's weird. But you know, and I know as believers, sometimes you get around a certain person and you don't know what it is, but something is wrong. There is just something. Something is wrong. I talked to my son. I rang him up the other night, just late. He is the lead pastor of our church now, here at Cottonwood. I had seen someone whom he and I both know. When I saw this person whom he and I both know, they were in the company of another person. I was grieved inside, my spirit was troubled. So much so that I just don't—Even right now, I'm not sure what it's about, but I know it's about something. Something is askew. Something is wrong.

So I called Harrison up. I said, "Harrison, I just want to tell you that I looked at so and so. I saw them in the company of certain people, and I just don't know what it is. Something is not right." He says, "Dad, that's so interesting that you said that, because the last time I was up in the pulpit preaching, I saw that same individual in the company of those same people. I was busy preaching. I didn't think about it a lot. But now that you mention it, that same thought just struck me very quickly when I looked in their direction as I looked out over the congregation. Something is not right. But then I got back to my message, and I sort of forgot about it." Now, I'm not sure what is going to happen with that. I'm not trying to be judgmental, and I'm not going to rush in. Right now, it's in the place of prayer for me. But the Holy Spirit wants to lead all of us in this way. So right now, if you have an inward grieving, if you're troubled inside, take time and pray about it. Don't keep pressing forward. See what God is saying to you. I have so much more to say, but I don't have time. I pray this has been a blessing to you. We will see you again.

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