

## Faraway Familiar City Scenes: Touring the Early Church in 7 Cities Message 4 – Philippi

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### **PHILIPPI: THE CHURCH THAT IS AN EMBASSY OF HEAVEN**

One of the greatest minds in the last century in the area of Christian truth belonged to C. S. Lewis. You may know his name best from the Chronicles of Narnia. In another of his writing called The Screwtape letters – we find a senior devil coaching and mentoring a younger apprentice devil. Their job of course is to draw and entice us humans away from God. He coaches this younger devil.

“One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately – that is quite invisible to such humans.”

You see what he is saying – the church as it operates with all its faults and failings, divisions and splits is actually the greatest ally that Satan has. But what would terrify him is if the church would really see and understand itself for all that it truly is in the sight of God – a spiritual army with banners held high – following the one as Revelation says – sits on a white horse and his name is faithful and true.

[Prayer]

If we broke into discussion groups for a few minutes and asked you to discuss – what do you think is the one thing that would radically change our church – make a paradigm shift in our ministry – change our entire way of looking at our city – what would that be.

We would come up with a variety of answers –  
More prayer  
Stronger Worship – more hymns – less hymns  
More commitment – less committees  
Teach on money – don't teach on money  
More discipleship – more evangelism

The list goes on – and in some way – each of these things would be right – would bring some results.

But I would like to suggest to us this morning that perhaps the one thing that would bring the greatest impact on the church would be to grasp the power of eternity in our lives and to see the tremendous way that our belief in eternity has as it impacts our daily lives right now.

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You have all heard that folksy saying – Christians are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly use. This morning – we are going to debunk that. You have to be heavenly minded in the very best sense to be of any earthly use.

As we travel from city to City in Acts in our church bus on our ministry road trip – today we visit a church that lived very much in the midst of a foreign land – but living with the reality of heaven.

Our ministry road trip starts with its tour guide – the Apostle Paul in Acts 16

12 From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

Several exciting things happen – a woman who is a trader in purple cloth becomes a Christian – a couple of pimps own a slave girl with psychic powers – and they are using her as a psychic prostitute – not selling her body but her mind - she is freed from this mental imprisonment and abuse and set free – her owners are furious because their source of income is gone – so they have Paul and Silas arrested – thrown into jail – but in a midnight praise and worship service – they are set free and the jailor and his family become believers.

Our other insight into this church comes from a warm letter Paul writes to them. Some background – Paul is in prison – probably Rome – and this church in Philippi wants to send him a gift – there is no Federal Express or UPS – so they send it with a church member- Epaphroditus – they tell him to stay with Paul and help him in any way he needs. Epaphroditus does that – so much so he almost dies – Paul sends him back to Philippi with this letter.

This small letter – 4 chapters – is always seen as a letter of warmth and joy – word - joy appears about 16 times. It is a warm letter of thanksgiving and affection. We see that strongly in the feel of the letter.

But you have to stand outside the church – see what life in the city is like – to grasp some of the powerful references in the letter.

12 From there we traveled to Philippi, a **Roman colony** and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

Don't miss that phrase – Roman colony. That is key. That is the vital background to much that is in the letter.

About 100 years before Paul came to this area – Philippi was the setting for one of the great battles in the Roman civil war that broke out after the death of Julius

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Caesar. After the war – two victorious Roman generals found themselves with a lot of Roman soldiers in this Greek region with nothing to do. It would be dangerous to send them back to the capital Rome. So they gave them land in and around Philippi. They established a Roman colony – and other veterans from other battles came to join them. These colonists were proud of being Romans – and so they did all they could copy how life was lived in Rome. Roman customs, dress, language, ideas, culture shaped social life in this Greek city – You lived in Philippi with the same rights, the same privileges as though you lived in Rome – you were free from extra taxation – Philippi was like a piece of Rome. The city kept the names of its Roman inhabitants in its city register. When you called for help – it would come from the emperor – who would be the savior of the city. This is what the city was like.

The final and perhaps most important duplication of Roman life was in the worship of Caesar – Caesar was Lord – as a city they gave allegiance to the name of Caesar who was exalted to be Lord. . They bowed their knee to worship and honor imperial Rome.

A special word was used to describe such a colony – the word was *politeuma* (it gives us our word = politics) – it described a colony of foreigners whose community/social life reflected in miniature the life in their homeland.

With all that we could take from Philippians – here is a hinge on which the book turns --

Phil 3:20-21

20 But our citizenship [politeuma] is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, - get the point – Caesar does not come to save us – Jesus does --

21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Our closest word is the idea of embassy – Paul says to these Philippian Christians – and to us – you are an embassy of your homeland heaven while here on earth – so the manners the lifestyle, the customs, the ideas of your homeland are to be copied.

\This brings the church into creative tension with its culture – on the one hand – we are to be relevant to the culture of our city – understanding with insight and wisdom what our city is all about – but on the other hand we are called to be truly counter-cultural – in the very best sense of the phrase – being heavenly minded – walking to the beat of a different drummer – or we could say – a different lord.

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The church that seeks not only to survive in the city – but also prevails – will not only think in terms of the future – but will also be an eschatological colony of heaven on earth. Eschatology – related to the return of Jesus Christ.

So when our city looks at the church – they should not think – there’s a bunch of people living in the past – rather they should be thinking – there’s a bunch of people so far ahead of the rest of us that we wonder where they are getting their ideas. The church is to be a colony/ an embassy of heaven that brings the ideas – the culture – the lifestyle of heaven back from the future into the present.

The only place we are going to find these essential qualities to live like a spiritual colony on heaven on earth – is to discover them in the courts of heaven where they are already practiced – and then carry them gently back to earth.

Can you imagine what the church would be like if we took what we read about heaven – sung about heaven – what we can only find in heaven - and began to allow that to wash back from the future over us today.

Here are some examples of this embassy of heaven might look like – ideas are all drawn from Philippians.

### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN EMBASSY OF HUMILITY IN A CITY OF SELF-INTEREST?**

Somehow it seems that selfishness is not far from most of us – it is the drive to be ahead of the other person – whether in traffic or the supermarket lineup. Selfishness is about power – drawing power to ourselves and away from others. Selfishness is about winning.

People play these kinds of games every day – and because the church is people – sometimes we play these games in the church.

Phil 2:1 – begins with 4 IF statements – and the structure of the grammar suggests that the answer to each question is a strong YES.

1. If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ,
2. if any comfort from his love,
3. if any fellowship with the Spirit,
4. if any tenderness and compassion,

Then if this is the case – here’s what you do –

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2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

So in a city that says – look out for #1 – here exists a colony of people who live in a truly counter-cultural fashion – which is to surrender personal agendas in how they act – ask and act in a way that is for the good of other person and for the colony – because one day we are going to have to live like that in heaven – and we can start now.

It seems that for most of us humility is far from our hearts – we lean instead towards pride – we have a bent towards power and selfishness – so we have to look far into the courts of heaven – and we see that this kind of humility is an attitude practiced by the Son – he is our example.

5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

The humility that Jesus displayed in his life and on the cross was not an act – it was part of his essential nature – what he already was in heaven he became on earth. That is why it was easy for Jesus to take off his robe – reach for a towel and a basin – and wash feet. That is his attitude in heaven. He had dealt with the issue of ego.

Heaven is not about self-power – it is about worship and humility from everyone except the Father.

So when we start to think about that attitude of heaven – and when we bow the knee to the Christ who thought and lived like that – Paul says – meditate on that – let your mind start to think like that – and you will start to live like that. Bring that thought from the court of heaven – and start to practice it in the colony of heaven on earth.

Another embassy characteristic –

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### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN EMBASSY OF LIGHT IN A CITY OF DARKNESS?**

One of the most common symbols of Christian truth is LIGHT – God said let there be light – He said that he was light – Jesus said he was the light of the world. The darkness is within us until the light of God comes - We are called the children of light – sons and daughters of the day – in heaven there will be no need for light – the darkness around us and the darkness within us will be finally gone.

When you begin to think about this – and when you begin to worship that idea of God being the light – we realize afresh that the church is to be a fragment of that truth – broken off by God and placed in the darkness of our world – into the gloom and nighttime of our cities.

So Paul says to this embassy of light –

14. Do everything without complaining or arguing,  
 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe  
 16 as you hold out the word of life—

verse 15 – the NIV gets it right when it says STARS – it means we are to be stars set against the blackness of a darkening moral sky. The light of heaven is not just for tomorrow – the light of heaven is for today.

The church is to lift up its hands and to catch the light that streams for heaven – and like a small child who tries to carry too much – some if it falls off – but we clutch whatever we can – and we bring it gently back from heaven to earth – and we drop it into the lap of the church.

This is what enables the church to live in the world as the embassy of heaven – we are a shaft of light broken off to help people see in the darkness – so that people can navigate back to the truth and find their way back to God.

Paul was in a storm in Acts 27 – on way back to Rome – in serious danger – they jettison all their cargo over the side – and Luke writes – when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days – all hope of our being saved was abandoned.

First Baptist Church is to be a star in Vancouver – not in the sense of attracting glory to itself – but a star in the sense of being a beacon that people who are lost can navigate back and find their way back to the truth.

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We are called to be an embassy of hope - who offer hope to people who are lost in the darkness of hopelessness.

### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN EMBASSY OF PEACE IN A CITY THAT IS STRESSED OUT?**

Our city is a place of noise – hurry and stress. These three things are the trinity of our modern city. Many of us would have to confess that they are the gods we follow. We worship at their altars.

Noise – worry and stress come in the middle of the night and they rape us when we are asleep. They rob us of sleep and stillness. I confess that I am often the victim of these silent intruders – perhaps you are also.

Yet this is not how God intended His colony to live on earth.

When we look into the courts of heaven – and we find that peace is a gift of heaven. Jesus is the one who holds the gift of peace in his hand – and he holds it out to us.

John 14:27 “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

John 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble [pressure] But take heart! I have overcome the world."

If anyone tells you – just come to Jesus and all your struggles will disappear – don't believe them – we will continue to face the pressure of life as Christians – but Jesus says that he has taken a gift from the altar of heaven – he holds it in his hands – and he is willing to give it to us. It is a gift for the colony of heaven – it is the peace of God.

So Philippians picks this theme up --

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Every Christian in Philippi would instantly have known what that meant – stand guard painted the picture of a Roman soldier in full battle dress – keeping every unwanted intruder and unwelcome person at bay – his sword at the ready.

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They would also remember that what the Roman armies brought to every country was law and order – peace Roman style – it came with the sword and the spear – and cities that would not accept it paid a very heavy price for their rebellion. Eventually and without exception – you submitted to that forced Roman version of peace.

But the peace of Jesus was different – Jesus gently opens his hands and invites us to come and receive the gift of His peace – without force – without coercion – it means for us that we can face and accept life's tragedies in the peace of Christ.

Jesus says to us – I come and I give you peace – and let my kind of peace stand like a sentry on guard duty at the door of your heart and mind.

Can you imagine a church that is known in its city as a place of peace – where the church is made up of peace-makers and peace-givers? That is why when churches squabble and fight – and it turns ugly and gets into the public eye – it plays into the hands of Screwtape.

But when the church sees itself as a colony of heaven – and becomes the custodian of the peace of heaven – hardly anything could make the church more relevant and also more counter-cultural.

### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN EMBASSY OF JOY IN A CITY THAT IS LOOKING FOR HAPPINESS**

This theme JOY appears some 16 times in the letter. My definition of joy – joy comes when we connect life's struggles to the purposes of God. Joy comes from looking ahead – and being able to connect what we are going through to the purposes of God. Jesus understood that – Hebrews – who for the joy that was before him – endured the cross.

Can you connect something you are facing right now – struggling with – and ask God to give you joy?

That is just a heading – so much more needs to be said.

So as we take a quick glance back through Philippians

- whatever God has started in your life – he has promised to finish – that is his work of grace. 1:6
- Are we thinking with the mind/attitude of Christ - -
- How do we need to let go of the things of the past? – past failures and also past successes

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- How do we need to stretch forward for what lies ahead –
- How do we need to be pressing on for the race that lies ahead us if – straining to reach the finishing line – for the prize that is before us – going flat out –

**But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,**

So in a city that declared Caesar was Lord – in a city that declared that the name of Caesar was to be held high – in a city that bowed the knee to Caesar – Paul reverses those ideas in a new hymn – a powerful hymn – an anthem for those who wear the badge of eternity – and whose names are written in the book of life – for those who bow their knee to Jesus and not to the lord of the city.

[stand]

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,  
10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.