

# The Birth of a Church

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[ 0 : 00 ] For those of you who are just joining us, maybe have not been a part of our community before, what is happening here is really the culmination of something that started close to three years ago in prayer and dreaming.

It's a collaboration between three churches, Church of the Resurrection, Church of the Advent, Church of the Ascension, three other churches in the D.C. area who have a dream to start new worshipping communities together.

And when this whole thing started over 10 years ago, we had the hope that one day we would look at a neighborhood like Brooklyn and that we would see a worshipping community birthed here that would come alongside the other churches that are doing great work to serve the city and to bring glory to God.

And so we're here. This is our inaugural gathering. Some of us have been meeting and working and planning this for, as I said, two and a half, three years now.

But this is our first time gathering here as a church to worship, to hear the word of God and to share in the Lord's Supper. So it's a great time to be here.

[ 1 : 05 ] And as I was thinking about this and praying about it, I was realizing that one of the things that we need to think about as we're gathering together for the first time is our expectations.

You know, what are we expecting of this? And now that it's here, now that we're here, what should we expect of this community? And as we go forward, what will it look like?

So we have to do a little expectation management. For me, that's very important in my life to make sure that my expectations align with reality.

Reality. And in the vein of that, one of the things that's central to the life of all of our communities, including this one, is that we want to allow God's word to shape how we think about these things.

We want to pattern our lives as a community after scripture. And so that's what we're going to do.

And we're going to do that by looking at the book of Acts today. Acts is written by Luke, who was a physician and a historian.

[ 2 : 08 ] And it's wonderful because it gives us some eyewitness accounts of the very first churches as they were being born. And so if we want to understand and have a sense of what to expect here, it's great that we're able to look there.

And in particular, we're going to look at chapter 16 and the beginning of the church in a place called Philippi. And what's really cool is that we're going to look at the birth of this church this week in Acts chapter 16.

And then beginning next week, we're actually going to be able to look at a letter that Paul wrote to this church 10 years after it began. And then we're going to do an in-depth study and try to understand some of the things that Paul had to say to this church 10 years after it began.

But today the focus is Acts chapter 16, the birth of the church in Philippi. While there's a lot in this passage that we're not going to be able to cover in depth and a lot that is unique to that culture, there are some things that we can glean in terms of our central question, which is what should we expect?

And this is for people who have been laboring for this long and hard. And this is also for people who maybe you just kind of wandered in the door because you smelled coffee. And you're here wondering what this is all about.

[ 3 : 26 ] For all of us here, there is a need to understand what is this about? What should we expect out of our time together as we continue to meet? And so we're going to first look at a couple of things that we should not expect.

A couple of things that we should not expect. And then we're going to look at a couple of things that we should expect. Acts chapter 16. Let's pray together. Our Heavenly Father, all of our planning, all of our striving, all of our strategizing, all of our effort, all of the setup, all the coordinating, Lord, all of that is mere human effort.

And if our hope was based on that alone, we would have no hope. But we know that somewhere in all of this, you are here and that you're at work and that you speak.

And so, God, we pray that you would speak to us now through your word because we need desperately to hear from you. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So Acts chapter 16. What should we expect? A couple of things that we should not expect here in Brooklyn as we look at the church in Philippi. First thing is this. We should not expect that everything will go according to plan.

[ 4 : 37 ] We should not expect that everything will go according to plan. I think that we've learned that. But it's good to be reminded of that. Right? If you look at verses 6 through 10 of Acts 16, what does it say?

It says Paul wanted to go to where? Asia. I don't know if we can bring it up here. I don't know if that's possible. That's okay. We'll figure that out. Hopefully, maybe you have a Bible or an iPhone or something that you can look at if you'd like.

But it says that Paul wants to go to Asia and to Bithynia. But then what does it say? The spirit of Jesus prevented it. Now, I wish I could say, you know, well, according to the commentaries, this is what that actually means.

But that's really all we're given. Paul wanted to go there and Jesus said, no. And instead, Paul is given this vision of a man calling them to come into Europe and to preach the gospel there. And when we say the gospel, we mean the good news about Jesus. And this man says, come. We need the gospel here. And so that's where they go. And there's no reason given. We have no reason why.

[ 5 : 42 ] But Paul obediently goes. And it's good to be reminded right off the bat that God is the one calling the shots, not us. Right?

That life in the church, life in God's community is like this dance. And it's a dance between us and God, between human striving and divine sovereignty.

And God is the one leading the dance. And, you know, anytime you see, you know, if you watch Dancing with the Stars or anything like that, you know, the one leading the dance has to be very tuned in with and aware of their partner.

And yet they initiate the movement and the partner has to be very tuned into and aware of the lead. And they need to be able to respond in a way where their movement looks fluid and unified.

So Paul has a sense, God is not leading me here. He's leading me here. And so Paul immediately yields to that. And the dance goes on. So God is always inviting us into the dance.

[ 6 : 45 ] He's always inviting us to be a part of what he's doing. And the question that we always have to ask is, how do we respond? Do we respond? How much do we struggle before we allow him to lead the dance?

We had three meeting spaces fall through over two years before our fourth attempt. And we came here. It felt in many ways like we were wrestling and struggling with God during that time.

And yet as I look at this, I cannot believe that we have such a wonderful space. I'm actually more excited about the people we get to work with here than the space. I mean, the stage is nice and all, but the people that are hosting us, if you haven't had a chance to meet them, Beth and Royale and all of the team that they're going to be working with us, they're amazing.

And I look at that and I look at God and I just say thank you. Thank you for this blessing. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. If this is your life and these are the terms, then where's the invitation?

[ 8 : 19 ] because the one thing we know for sure is this, that God is always continually inviting us into the dance. If this is your life and these are the terms, where's the invitation?

So we should not always expect that things will go according to our plans. Often they don't because we are not the ones leading the dance. The second thing we should not expect is this.

We should not expect this to be easy all the time. You know, Philippi was a proud Roman city. There was a kind of a noble military heritage here. Latin was the official language.

It's a European Roman city. So if you're a Greek speaker, you're lower class. If you're a Jew, there are hardly any Jews here. So you're considered lower class.

So Paul, a Greek-speaking Jew, and his team would have been looked down upon as soon as they crossed the threshold of the city. And so you see, even though Paul and Silas are Roman citizens, once they begin to do ministry, and once people begin to see the kind of work that they're doing, they're treated horribly.

[ 9 : 27 ] And you can read about it in verses 19 to 37. They're dragged into the marketplace to face the authorities. They're stripped. They're severely flogged. They're thrown into prison without a trial.

They're sent into the maximum security inner cell. And their feet are put in the stocks. And the persecution only got worse for this church over time.

Things only got worse for a while before they got better. So the question becomes, why does this happen? Why does it happen? You know, when things get hard for us, a lot of times we will say, well, this is probably a sign that we shouldn't be doing it.

But not so here. See, there are surface reasons why they face these issues, probably cultural reasons. But Jesus did say plainly that people, you know, Jesus said, people treated me this way, and they're going to treat you this way.

And yet, they persevere, Paul and Silas in this church persevere, and it's amazing to look in another of Paul's letters, 2 Corinthians chapter 8, he actually references this church in Philippi.

[ 10 : 38 ] And he says this, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in what? Their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

So, not only did the hardship not overcome the church, but rather it produced in them a joy and a generosity and a gratitude and a worshipfulness.

It's a mystery. How could persecution and hardship and suffering make people more joyful, more generous, more worshipful? We'll get more into that next week.

That's the question as we look at Philippians. Now, let's look at some things that we should expect. Those are some things that we shouldn't expect. It's not going to go according to plan. It's not always going to be easy.

But here's what we should expect as we move on in the passage. First thing is this. We should expect this, friends, that hearts would be open to God's Word. That hearts would be opened to God's Word.

[ 11 : 43 ] The first person we meet here in Philippi is a woman named Lydia. She's a dealer in purple goods, which is the Bible's way of saying she's a very successful businesswoman. And she's probably fairly wealthy, fairly well off, fairly prominent member of society.

We know that. We know that she wants a relationship with God. And the reason we know that is because, as I said before, there are not enough Jews in Philippi to have quorum for a synagogue. You had to have ten. They don't have that many.

They have somehow less than that, less Jewish men anyway. And so what they did instead, because they didn't have a synagogue, is on the Sabbath they would go and they would essentially have a time of prayer and Bible study.

So on the Sabbath, Paul and Silas, as they always did, they say, you know, where are the Jews worshipping? And they find a small group of people, sounds like it was mostly women, reading the Bible together.

And they join in, and they begin to talk, and they begin to tell them about Jesus. And we know that they were talking about Jesus in the gospel because of the very beginning, the vision, the man says to Paul, come and preach the gospel.

[ 12 : 47 ] So this is what Paul does. He comes and ostensibly finds Lydia, finds this group, and begins to tell them the gospel about Jesus. And it says, it's this amazing thing. It doesn't say, Paul made a really compelling case.

Paul's apologetics were watertight. You know, Paul gave them Tim Keller's reason for God, and they all believed. It doesn't say that. Great book, by the way. That's not a nox.

And God opens her heart to these words. And this is a great image because it's the exact same image that the Bible uses. The same language is used when God opens a womb.

It's the same phrasing. You know, in the Bible, God opens a womb so that life can be sort of implanted and grow there. In the very same language is used.

God opens Lydia's heart so that life can be implanted and grow there. And it's this great image of what God does in Lydia's heart. And what we see in Lydia is this.

[ 13 : 47 ] Lydia already knew about God. She already had a desire to know God. She had an interest, a curiosity. She was drawn, and yet she didn't know how to actually have a relationship with God.

And that's the missing piece that Paul gives her when he talks about Jesus. And God opens her heart to receive this truth and it says immediately she believes, immediately she gets baptized, and immediately her whole household gets baptized.

And she becomes a huge part of the church. At the end of the chapter, we see that she's actually hosting a church meeting in her home. And this is something that we should expect to see in this community, friends.

We should expect to see hearts opened. You know, this is a community where we can ask questions, we can share doubts, we can explore ideas, and I'll tell you this right now.

Nobody's going to tell you what to think here. So if you're here, if you're new, if you're not sure what you believe, if you're checking things out, nobody will ever tell you, hopefully, I hope nobody will ever tell you what to think here.

[ 14 : 52 ] I don't think Christians should ever tell people what to think. But we will encourage one another to think, and to think well, and to ask good questions, and to ask questions hoping for answers.

We'll encourage one another to do the due diligence of trying to make sure that our thinking is intellectually consistent. And we do want to encourage one another to learn more about Jesus. We want to create a space where people can read and also come to understand God's Word. and we do that hoping and expecting that God will open some people's hearts to the truth of His Word. So when we come here and when we gather here, we should expect that to happen. We should hope for that. We should pray for that when we pray for this community. That's what happened to me when I was 22. Some of you know my story.

I was very much against the church and against the institutional church and against Christians and had a lot of my own rhetoric about how they were all hypocrites. And it wasn't until somebody said, have you ever actually read the Bible and read about Jesus?

[ 15 : 56 ] And I said, no. And it was because I sat down and began to read the Bible with this guy who was very patient with me that I came to really begin to understand what Jesus was all about.

And it was as though it just began to come alive, just jump off the page against my struggle. It began to become real for me. And we should expect that this will happen here.

So that's the first thing. We should expect that God will open hearts to His Word. The second thing as we move forward in the passage is this. We should expect that the oppressed would be liberated. That people who are oppressed, that God would liberate them.

I, as a pastor, you'll see why in a second, I particularly love this little vignette. Paul and Silas begin to be harassed by this young girl who's oppressed by a demon. And people have recognized that she has this condition and so they've taken her as a slave.

They've taken advantage of her vulnerability. They've made her a slave and they're actually making money off of her. And we think, well, that's kind of weird, a demon-possessed girl, slave, and how do I relate to that?

[ 17 : 03 ] Well, we do have all kinds of examples of people in the very same condition. People who are oppressed or enslaved or addicted and that makes them vulnerable and people know that and they exploit them.

Right? So there are the major examples like sex trafficking, like drugs, like porn, like the lottery, like predatory lending practices. All of these are examples of people who are taking advantage of and exploiting other people.

And they're able to do it because those people are oppressed. They're oppressed by addiction.

They're oppressed by debt. They're oppressed by any number of things. And then many more of us are enslaved to things in our lives, I think probably more than we realize.

Right? So what does it mean to be a slave? It means you can't say no. Right? If you're, if you're, if a slave master tells you to do something, you can't say no. If an employer tells you to do something, you can say no.

You may lose your job. But if you're a slave, you may lose your life. You can't say no. So if you can't stop overeating, you may be a slave to food. Right?

[18:11] I mean, if you, if you gave something up for Lent, those of you who know what Lent is, it's a time when Christians typically try to fast from certain things. If you gave it up for like a week, you know, and you're like, 40 days is way too long.

You may be more a slave to that thing than you realize. If you can't stop overspending, then maybe you're a slave to shopping or consumerism or materialism. If you hold grudges, if you just kind of hold on to things, then maybe you're a slave to anger.

You know, if you, if you, if you can't say no to people and you feel like people are constantly walking all over you and taking advantage of you, then maybe you're a slave to people's approval if you can't set healthy boundaries.

But chances are, if you look at your life, we probably have things that come very close to being slave masters. So what's needed here? What do we need?

What does this woman need? Here's an interesting difference between Lydia, the first woman, the business woman. She just needs the truth of God explained to her. But this woman needs something different.

[19:17] Lydia needed truth. She needs Paul to explain the truth of the gospel to her. But here's the interesting thing. And I remember reading this years ago and really trying to get into it. And it is fascinating because this woman, this demon-possessed girl, she knows the truth about Jesus.

I mean, if you read what it says, she knows her theology is correct. Isn't that fascinating? She's got the right theology, but that's not enough. What's more, here's why I'm comforted by this as a pastor. Paul doesn't exactly handle this situation well. There's no way to get around what it says, you know? Like when the Greek says annoyed, what it really means is pastorally concerned.

I've been trying to convince people that that's true for years. And, you know, no, I wasn't angry. I was just really passionate, you know? Paul's annoyed. He's ticked off. She's following them for days, harassing them, screaming at them, drawing huge, unwanted attention to them.

And finally, he's like, I can't take it, Silas. And he turns around and he's like, no of her, you know? And you can imagine him just kind of blowing up. But God doesn't.

[20:31] So it's not the right theology. It's not the right pastoral response. I think Paul misfires here. You know? He doesn't do, he doesn't handle it well.

The power of God, the power of God was still at work. You know, we think so often that it's about getting the right theology or having the right pastoral response that we forget it's not actually about us.

That our entire faith is based on amazing things that God does in our lives. Things that we can't predict, things that we don't deserve, but God entering in, breaking it, and doing incredible things. Liberating people. Liberating people who don't have it all together, who don't even really fully understand who he is. He comes in and says, be free. And that's what he does for this woman. And it's incredible to see. So we should expect the power of God to be at work in this church. Sometimes in, in, in step with us, oftentimes in spite of us, right?

[21:33] We should expect to see people be freed from addiction here. We should expect to see people be freed from resentment and anger and all the things that we've come to depend on and love more than God.

We should see people liberated. And we should come every week thinking when we gather together and when we sing and when we pray and when we share this meal and when we read from this word and when we do all the things that we're doing, that the power and the presence of God are at work here.

And we should expect that regularly people will come and their hearts will be released. What we're doing here, invoking the very presence of God, hearing him in the word, proclaiming and experiencing him in the bread and the wine, we believe in the real presence of Christ in this meal, that somehow as we receive this meal in faith, we are receiving the very presence of Christ into our being.

I can't explain that. I don't know how it happens, but I know that it's the power of God at work. So this is the second thing that we should expect that as we gather every week that people would be liberated from oppression.

Hearts would be open, people would be liberated. The third thing is this, that we should expect that relationships in this community would be marked by mercy and compassion.

[ 22 : 51 ] Mercy and compassion. So Paul and Silas, a little later in the story, they've been beaten because of this interaction with this woman, because she's no longer financially valuable to her owners.

They're beaten, they're stripped, they're wrongfully accused, they're put in prison without a trial, feet in the stocks, it's incredibly uncomfortable, they undoubtedly had stripes and scars across their back.

God miraculously rescues them. Earthquake, doors swing open, right? The jailer comes down, what happened, what happened, sees all the doors open, immediately assumes that all the prisoners have escaped, right?

Immediately thinks, oh my goodness, I failed in my duty, this guy's a civil servant, we know that because, and we know that he was a former soldier because all of these kinds of jobs, like being a jailer, those were only given to former soldiers.

So we know that he's a man who really cares about duty, he really cares about doing his job well, and he sees I failed, so what does he do? He draws his sword deeper, because he knows he's going to be killed when they find out that he's failed, so he wants to do the honorable thing and take his own life.

[ 24 : 00 ] He's about to commit suicide, Paul comes out and says, no, no, no, wait, stop! And he says, look, we're all here, nobody left. What's Paul's concern here?

His primary concern is the welfare of the jailer. Can you believe that? So this is the man who's responsible for all of the suffering that they've endured. He's responsible for all of this wrongful, undeserved suffering that has come upon Paul and his team.

And yet when they come face to face, and Paul sees the sword in the guy's hand, getting ready to kill himself, I mean, most people would say, here, I'll do that for you. Take the sword, you know, do it yourself.

Paul says, no, no, no, no need for that. We're all here. We stayed here to make sure that you were okay. It's an amazing act of mercy and compassion. And it says that this man is so struck by the mercy and compassion that he just cries out.

And how does he know to cry this out? Well, it says that Paul and Silas have been singing and praising God and singing hymns and psalms all night, and it says that everybody was listening to them. They're singing about Jesus.

[ 25 : 09 ] They're singing about salvation. They're singing about mercy, all the things that we sing about. And the jailers heard all this. And when he sees this act of mercy and compassion, he says, what do I have to do to be a part of this?

What hope is there for me? Right now, I'm at the end of my rope. I'm about to kill myself. How do, how do, where do I go from here? Paul tells him about Jesus. And it says, he and his entire household become followers of Jesus.

And they're so excited about this that it says that the passage ends with him praising God that they had believed in him. You know, yesterday we were coming back from a conference that we had to be at, some of us, Dan and Josh and I.

And we were driving through Pennsylvania. And as we were driving through, I was thinking about the events roughly 10 years ago. I think in October it'll be 10 years. The events in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, when a man named Charles Carl Roberts IV walked into an Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County and he was armed to the teeth and he shot eight girls and he killed five and then he took his own life before anybody could intervene.

You know, you read a story like this and it's just, it's the worst kind of tragedy you can possibly imagine. One room schoolhouse, you know, armed to the teeth man against these unarmed kids. Girls, nonetheless.

[ 26 : 25 ] Within hours, you know the story, within hours, the Amish, not just the Amish community but the parents of the victims, the families of the victims, within hours the same day were reaching out to Charles' family.

They came to make sure, Charles' family said, we gotta get out of here. They said, no, we want you to stay. There are stories of, within an hour of the events, the word of the events that one grandfather of one of the girls who died was overheard saying, well, we mustn't harbor anger

against this family.

There are stories of one of the other fathers of one of the girls who died holding Charles' father as he sobbed for an hour. They began to serve and to care for Charles' family, the killer's family. And the Amish community even set up a fund to make sure that they would be okay. And it radically, you can read the stories in the news, it radically changed, radically transformed the Shooters' family.

So you read stories like this, it's the amazing impact of the gospel. It's the same pattern. These people come face to face with the family of a man who caused them tremendous undeserved suffering, and yet they respond not with anger, but with mercy and compassion.

[ 27 : 49 ] And here's the thing, friends, Christian communities should be marked by mercy and compassion. They aren't always. Some of you bear scars from communities that aren't, or weren't.

But they should always be marked by mercy and compassion. And the reason is simple, it's because at the very core of our faith is a God who prayed for, cared for, attended to our deepest needs, and even gave His life for us as we were actively causing Him to suffer.

Right? And so this is the pattern of our God, and so it becomes the pattern of God's people. So we should hope and expect this to be true of us.

We should hope and expect that every week when we gather, this liturgy, all the words, that may be totally new to you. Do you know what we're doing? We are embodying and enacting the story of the gospel together. The story of our sin, the story of our creation, the story of our sin, the story of God's forgiveness, and the story that God is restoring and renewing this place and us right now. And we are embodying that story together, and as we do that, the hope is it shapes us, and it shapes our hearts, and that we become more and more merciful and compassionate as our God is merciful and compassionate.

[ 29 : 11 ] So we should expect this. And the last thing really quickly is this. The fourth thing, the last thing that we should expect as we gather every week, friends, is that this would be a community where strangers become family.

Where strangers become family. At the very end, verse 40, it says, Paul and Silas are getting ready to leave, and it says, they go to visit Lydia again, and then it says, they went to see thee, and in the Greek, it's adelphous.

It comes from adelphos, and it's a word that in this context means the brothers and sisters. The brothers and sisters. In other words, they went to see the family.

And you've got to check this out. At the beginning of the chapter, you have three incredibly different people. Successful businesswoman, oppressed slave girl, now a former slave girl, and then a civil servant, former soldier.

In Roman society, these people would have never commingled. Totally different social circles. Totally different socioeconomic status. And yet here, here, at the end of the chapter, this is the amazing impact of the gospel.

[ 30 : 22 ] By the end, they and many others have become brothers and sisters. They've become a family. Total strangers who turn to Jesus for forgiveness, what happens?

They become, as the Bible says, spiritually adopted by God. They become God's children, which means they become brothers and sisters. And I believe that the early church recognized the significance of this.

As people came to know Jesus in their community, and you can read about this, the early historians and people like, people have written and tried to explain people like Rodney Stark.

As people came to know Jesus, they took in all kinds of people who didn't have nuclear families, people who, for whatever reason, didn't have immediate biological families. And the church again and again and again said, we will be your family now because God has already made us into one great family.

So Psalm 68, 6 says, God sets the lonely in families. Who in the world is he talking about if not the church? We are that family.

[ 31 : 25 ] And if we're not that family, I wonder if we're failing in our calling to be the church. So if you're here and you're lonely, if you're here and you don't know anybody, if you're here and you don't have a family, and I mean this as sincerely as I possibly can, we want to be a family for you.

We want to be that kind of family. Even if you do have a family and you're here, you can't cut it alone. Your family needs to be a part of a larger family.

Your marriage needs support. Your parenting needs support. You need friends in that. It's a very recent modern invention that we do all of this alone as siloed off nuclear families.

It does not reflect most of human history. So as we begin this community together, as we begin this church worship gathering together, what are we expecting?

Well, we shouldn't expect everything to go according to plan. We know that very well. We shouldn't expect it to be easy and at times it's going to be really hard. But we should expect that people's hearts would be open to God's word.

[ 32 : 30 ] We should expect that people who are oppressed would be liberated week after week after week. We should expect that our relationships would be marked with the same mercy and compassion that Jesus has shown us.

And we should expect that ours would be a community where strangers are able to come in and to belong and to become family. So I hope and pray as we gather together week after week that we would come each week with a sense of expectancy and hope and excitement over what God might do in our midst.

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father,