

The Backdrop to Philippians

Sunday 1 June

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Philippi was originally a Greek village but was captured by Phillip 2 of Macedon in 360 BC. He was best known for the son born to him who became Alexander the Great.

The Romans captured Philippi in 168 BC and made it part of their province of Macedonia.

Philippi was now a Roman colony.

Many retired soldiers were settled there, but there were few Jews.

Its citizens spoke Latin, were governed by Roman law and enjoyed the same rights, as though living in Rome itself. They enjoyed the full rights of Roman citizenship, including exemption from taxes. They were free from scourging or being arrested, and could appeal to Caesar for justice.

So Paul's words ([Phil. 1:27](#)) "conduct yourselves" (lit., "live as citizens") and "our citizenship is in heaven" (3:20) had special meaning to the Christians at Philippi.

In AD 49 or 50 Philippi was visited by [Paul](#) who was guided there by a vision ([Acts 16:9-10](#)).

Accompanied by [Silas](#), [Timothy](#) and possibly [Luke](#), he preached for the first time on European soil in Philippi ([Acts 16:12-40](#)) and baptized [Lydia](#), a [purple](#) dye merchant, in a river to the west of the city.

Thus began the church at Philippi. Paul visited the city at least on two other occasions, in 56 and 57. The [Epistle to the Philippians](#) dates from around 61-62 and shows the immediate impact of Paul's instruction.

We have to go back a bit to get the full backdrop of the surrounding culture and influences in order to understand why Paul writes the way he does in Philippians. So we start in Acts 16.

While in Philippi, his exorcism of a demon from a slave girl caused a great uproar in the city,

ACTS 16

¹⁶ Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." ¹⁸ She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

V 16 -a female slave possessed with a spirit of divination, met us; in the Greek text it is named as, "the spirit of Python".

The problem in Philippi and the area surrounding it was that there was a great network and mix of mythologies and pagan worship of idols, highlighted for us in this description where Paul casts out the spirit of python or divination from the slave girl.

Was this just a minor demon, an isolated, insignificant incident displaying God's power over the demonic world? No I don't think so.

To understand this we need to understand the culture a little.

In Greek mythology, Apollo, who was called Pythius killed the serpent Python.



Gaea, mother earth and main goddess in Greece owned the oracle at Delphi (also called Puthon). It was guarded by her child Python, the serpent. But he was killed by Apollo. The mythology is that when Apollo slew Python, its body fell into this fissure and fumes arose from its decomposing body. Intoxicated by these fumes, the prophetess or pythia (sibyl) would go into a trance, allowing Apollo to possess her spirit and spoke, with the priests translating or interpreting what she was saying.

The python was mythically slain but the snake demon now had a reason and right to remain at Delphi and thus established himself as a divine guide through the fame of the snake shrine. It became infamous in Greece and abroad and governments consulted it. The mythological snake became the demonic medium because of the beliefs attached to it. In other words it is simply a convenient gateway or fissure for Satan to spew out lies, to trap and snare and influence everyone and everything.

It did this by playing on the fascination that humans have with the supernatural, our desperation for divine revelation and divination birthed out of idolatry. All the ancient civilizations had false gods and practiced divination.

Divination is the seeking of answers, guidance or revelation through supernatural means. It was practiced everywhere in all sorts of forms. According to Sumerian myth, humans were created to serve their gods. But how were they to know what the gods expected of them. This necessitated the arts of divination through which mankind could communicate with their gods. Each culture has their own form of idolatry and techniques.

The Etruscians for example practiced Alectryomancy... the observation of birds. The diviner placed a circle on the ground with letters of the alphabet on the ground and piece of grain next to each one. Then they'd ask a question and let a rooster or hen loose to eat the grain. The letter was written down as the bird ate the grain. Personal enlightenment or for leading the people... these methods are still used today.

We don't do this though do we?

Ouiji boards, palm readings, tea cups...what about the animal that predicts who will win the soccer world cup?

Paul the Octopus (hatched in 2008, died October 2010) was a [common octopus](#) living in a tank at a [Sea Life Centre](#) in [Oberhausen](#), Germany, who was used as an [animal oracle](#) to predict the results of football matches, usually international matches in which [Germany](#) was playing. He came to worldwide attention with his accurate predictions in the [2010 World Cup](#).

During a [divination](#), Paul was presented with two boxes containing food, each marked with the flag of a national [football](#) team in an upcoming match. He chose the box with the flag of the winning team in several of Germany's six [Euro 2008](#) matches, and all seven of their matches in the 2010 World Cup—with Germany's third place playoff win over Uruguay on 10 July. His success rate rose to 85 percent, with 11 out of 13 matches correctly predicted. He predicted a win for Spain against the Netherlands in the World Cup final on 11 July by eating the mussel in the box with the Spanish flag on it.¹

Satan relies on mankind creating a platform, a medium through which his supernatural kingdom can manifest in our realm. Every god and belief around a mythology gives him a place to rule.

So in the Philippians time, this was concentrated into a shrine in Ancient Greece, where an oracle spoke, like a medium or psychic, spewing out rubbish which people believed. It's a real place and still exists, but the origin and some of the history are mythological.

"The town still attracts a million visitors a year. Many people who come to Delphi claim they have felt 'something'. But there are those who believe that the spirit of Apollo still resides in Delphi and just as he was thousands of years ago, he is still available now, to answer questions and give personal advice or affairs of the state."

Consequently "Pythian spirit" came to be the generic title of the supposed source of inspiration of diviners, including the slave-girl of the account in Acts. When Paul went after it it was much more than a minion of Satan that was afflicting her, it was a major demonic stronghold that held power in major ways.

I believe it set out to destroy Paul's ministry there from the very beginning. Its intent is to constrict the life of God in prayer and worship, to squeeze the life out of the church, to shut it down. And Paul and the believers were teaching about true salvation in Jesus Christ, a citizenship that cannot be a compromise with Rome or Caesar or with divination or any evil thing. It demands a radical lifestyle transformation which would inevitably challenge the python stronghold, because the effect of a belief in divination is to utterly quench the life and power of the Holy Spirit. The two can never find a home together. If people will look for signs and wonders in nature, in the power of sorcery and voodoo, in anything but the power of Jesus Christ they will become enslaved to false spirituality and all manner of religious spirits rather than relationship to the one true God. The deepest agenda of the python spirit is to cause humans to put their trust in something that looks supernatural, pretends to have answers but in fact pollutes the truth, renders the church powerless and stifled and prevents the power of God being released.

The effect of Paul casting out the spirit was to cause a riot. They were beaten and thrown in prison. But 16: ²⁵ *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.* ²⁶ *Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose.*

The jailer became a Christian, he and his whole household. He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God.

The demon was routed by praise and worship in the jail. Paul and Silas were not deterred from their fundamental belief that God is the true bringer of salvation and deliverance and that this was not a setback in God's economy but a cause for rejoicing.

This early episode launches us into Phil 1 where I believe we see Paul telling them what they need to do to preserve their life and their church.

v27 is the key verse in Phil 1.

Live your lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If you are going to survive in the culture and milieu that I have described, you have to be radically saved and rooted in an environment where you are able to grow in Christ, as a citizen of heaven and live your lives in such a manner that brings glory to God and doesn't belittle or corrupt the gospel.

Over and over Paul will describe how utterly he is immersed into the matrix or womb of being *in Christ* and how this is the text with which his life is written.

It has no compromise, so that he can say:

Whether I live or die, it is Christ.

In the context of imperial imprisonment, the prisoner's body becomes the text on which the empire's power is inscribed. But Christ will be magnified by the way in which Paul handles himself, whether he lives or dies, Paul's body will be, as always, Christ's text rather than the empire's. S. Fowl

Caesar may kill Paul, but because his life is offered to God, the empire cannot take Paul's life, nor compel his worship. He situates his life in the larger drama of God's purposes. Now that he is in Christ his circumstances are part of an ongoing story. Paul's circumstances advance the Gospel and displace him as the one who is guiding and directing his own life. Christ is the central point.

This is how it ought to be for the Philippians as well. And for us.

In this passage we recognize Paul's struggle:

²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

To live is to further manifest Christ and engage in fruitful labour. To die is to be with the greatest friend he has.

Paul is torn apart by these two options. His personal preference is to be with Christ, but he will choose the other for the benefit of the Philippians and this is a consistent theme in the letter. As Phil 2 will make clear, it is this activity of seeking the benefit of others, which God displays to the world in Christ. So Paul opts for life, not because it is superior to death, but because seeking the benefit of others is how you do Christian life.

In 1:25 it will advance their progress and joy in the faith.

He goes on to claim in v30 that he and the Philippians are engaged in the same struggle, they are in similar circumstances and therefore they ought also to act for others as he does for them.

In 3: 17 they are to be fellow imitators of Paul.

Paul is in a Roman prison *for the sake of Christ* (1:13).

The opponents (1:28) are Roman citizens of Philippi. Christianity was seen as a threat to political harmony and stability (Acts 16:20, 2 Cor 8:1-2) because belief in Christ joined Christians to a **contrast** society where the interests and aims of being the church are vastly different to the interests and aims of the Roman empire. To be a Christian is to have a counter-citizenship, where there is one Lord– a heavenly seat of power and guarantee. (see Phil 3:20) It is **not** a dual citizenship which may lead to accommodation to the state.

Thus opposition was to be expected.

But Paul sees their suffering as a gracious gift from God. It is not the result of failure – rather it results from faithfulness to the Gospel. The world is threatened by the presence of those who find their security in God. If they live in a manner worthy of Christ in the midst of suffering it will promote and testify to the power of the Gospel.

Maybe we do not find ourselves generating opposition. Perhaps this is because the church as we know it has become a religion, too insipid to stand out.

In fact in the very grip of the kind of pythonic deception that engulfs the world, just is a different disguise.

Our very private set of beliefs and convictions, disconnected from public practices is no threat to anyone.

This is not the picture that Paul is painting of the Christian life.

Being a Christian is a change of citizenship.

It is participating in a new kingdom and a new way of being.

It is about participating in Christ and reflecting Christ, living in a worthy manner.

This in Philippians time was an affront to Caesar and an affront to evil.

Opposition was to be expected.

But the church has a destiny, not a fate. Its end point is the climax of the day of Jesus Christ, when we will see all things under His rule.

1. Critical for this and one of the primary tasks of the church is the '**formation of saints**' – not the haloed variety but ones who through reading scripture, worshipping and doing faithful life together become mature in Christ.

Paul will stress over and over again in Philippians that we must learn how to have a Christian disposition, so that thinking, feeling and behaving all reflect Christ.

Our Christian formation is critical.

Christian formation is the active process of inward restructuring by which the Gospel reshapes the personality –the feelings, ideas, mental processes and images, and the deep readiness of our soul and body under the direction and energising of the Holy Spirit. It is as described in Ephesians 4, the *putting off the old person and putting on the new*.

We are to learn how to think and feel and behave in a pattern that reflects Jesus. This involves a love that has added knowledge and understanding so that we make correct judgment and actions, we are not led astray by the things that are around in the culture and in the way that Satan deceives us into believing that God has deserted us or is not hearing us.

If we will apply ourselves to careful formation by the Word, by prayer and worship and by exercising holy, disciplined lives we will live lives of absolute integrity.

Participation in the gospel is a process through which we are transformed and drawn into ever deeper community with God and others.

2. In this community our life **together** is to be '**worthy** of the Gospel of Jesus Christ'. (1:27) This necessitates a ruthless purge of everything that is unholy and tolerated as such in our lives.

What guise does python take in our culture?

I think it is learned apathy and compromise to what is unholy, which then constricts the flow of the Holy Spirit in us. Maybe we have open gateways where we or our ancestors have flirted with evil things thinking they were harmless or fun. We must be careful of what pollutes our spiritual life and shut those doors, for we live in a society that is more and more tolerant and sucks us in.

The actual python snake kills its prey by constricting the breath out of its victim. Loosed on the world the python spirit's intent is to choke the breath and power of the church...the Holy Spirit and to enslave us in religion and futility.

Praise and worship, thankfulness, strident belief in the goodness of God and His plan and attention to the becoming like Christ in every manner is the best way to deal with that demonic entity.