

Following God's Direction

Press On, September 12/13, 2020 | Philippians 1:1-2, Acts 16:6-15
Senior Pastor Rob O'Neal

PAUL'S MESSAGE IN PHILIPPIANS FITS US TODAY.

We face constant pressure to quit.

It's **easier** to quit. Let's be honest. Following Jesus isn't always easy. I learned that during the early stages of the coronavirus stay-at-home phase. I would tape my sermon during the week, so when Sunday came around, I was participating in the worship service online in my living room in my pajamas with a cup of coffee. I kind of liked it!

It's easier to quit, because we're **busier** when we follow Jesus. There are things we do as followers of Jesus that other people don't do. Quitting would simplify our lives.

It's easier to quit, because following Jesus is **costlier** than quitting. I heard a lecture on the radio recently that argued that Christian pastors are a danger to society. It was chilling to be singled out like that. But it reminded me that, as our students start school, they will frequently hear arguments that religious beliefs like ours are based on myths and that they reinforce dangerous patterns of behavior. Quitting would mean we don't face ridicule.

We face lots of pressure to quit.

A 2016 article in *The Atlantic* explored why graduate students feel pressure to quit.

The article was written because half of all students who start doctoral graduate programs leave without their degrees.

The assumption could be that the students who left weren't capable of doing the work, but a major study of graduate students showed that most students who enter graduate school are capable of doing the work. So what produces the high dropout rate? The theories won't surprise you:

- Ph.D. programs are based on a culture of critique by one's peers and professors.
- Hence, Ph.D. programs can tend to be lonely places.
- And Ph.D. programs tend to involve so much work that students become isolated from friends and outside interests.

Sound familiar? These are the days we're living in!

We're isolated.

We all feel a need to critique one another.

Consequently, we're lonely.

We're like graduate students in the school of life, and we're feeling the pressure to quit.

That pressure to quit means these are days when we need to be encouraged to "press on."

Paul's message in Philippians fits us today.

Paul was living through a period of intense pressure when it would have been too easy to quit.

He was writing to the church in the city of Philippi that also faced intense pressure to quit.

Then in Philippians 3:14 Paul made this bold declaration,

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul said that he was going to press on no matter how high the pressure got.

He called the church in Philippi to do the same thing, to press on.

It's like Paul is speaking straight to us. Philippians is like a roadmap that will guide us as we press on together.

PAUL CALLED HIMSELF A SERVANT OF CHRIST JESUS.

Let's look at the beginning of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi in Philippians 1:1-2.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul started by identifying the senders.

Paul was the primary sender. He wrote this letter from prison, likely in Rome.

For Paul to be in prison meant that he was responsible for his own care and expenses. For his needs to be taken care of and for things like food to be provided for him, he needed the help of outside supporters. But to come to the aid of a prisoner accused of capital crimes could be dangerous. That role was filled in part by **Timothy**, the co-author of this letter. We'll say more about him in weeks to come.

Paul addressed this letter to the "saints" in Philippi.

This is kind of a surprising way to address a bunch of people who probably appeared ordinary in almost every way, except for the fact that they were followers of Jesus.

We typically think of saints as people who do or accomplish extraordinarily faithful things, people like the apostle Paul himself.

However, Paul addressed everyone in the church in Philippi as saints.

To be a saint simply means to be a holy one—one who possesses or is given holiness.

And that's where the clarifier "in Christ" is so important here.

To be a saint is to be holy or to have holiness not because we are so inherently good.

Instead, the righteousness and holiness of Jesus have been given to us by God.

That's why we're "holy ones" or saints. It's because we're "in Christ."

And now we are all saints--everyone in Philippi who followed Jesus and every one of us who follows Jesus. You're a saint if you follow Jesus!

Philippi was an extraordinary city that produced an extraordinary church.

Philippi was a city of 10-15,000 people in Paul's day.

It sat at the eastern edge of a fertile plain just north of the northern coast of the Aegean Sea in the Roman province of Macedonia.

We'll say much more about the city of Philippi over the next few weeks.

For now it's only important that we know that the extraordinary city of Philippi was home to an extraordinary church that generously supported Paul.

He addressed not only the people of this church, but her leaders, the overseers or elders, and her deacons or servants.

It's fascinating that Paul identified himself and Timothy as "servants" of Christ Jesus.

In fact, Paul used an almost shocking term here.

Paul used a term that's usually translated "slave."

And while we know that being a slave in the ancient world was not always as onerous as slavery has been in the modern world, it wasn't a thing most people aspired to!

To be a slave meant to be owned by and subservient to the master of a household.

Paul meant what he said! He was a servant or slave of God. So was Timothy.

They belonged to God and did what God told them to do.

Following God's directions actually led Paul to start the church in Philippi years earlier.

PAUL FOLLOWED GOD'S DIRECTIONS CONSISTENTLY.

Paul followed God's directions on his **second** missionary voyage.

After recovering from his first missionary journey, Paul was ready to set out again from his home base of Antioch in Syria.

He left behind his former partner, Barnabas, after a disagreement.

Instead, he took Silas and headed north into Asia Minor, back to the churches he had helped to start at the end of his first missionary journey.

When they reached the town of Lystra, which we studied last week, Paul got to know a young man named Timothy better. Paul invited Timothy to join the team. Timothy went on to be a co-author of the book of Philippians!

After the team visited the churches Paul had helped to start in central Asia, they headed north. One could say that the team started to wander like they didn't know what they were doing.

The team certainly felt confused, but it was simply because God was speaking to them, and they were listening consistently, but God had not yet made his will clear to them.

Paul listened to the Spirit in Acts 16:6-8.

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

As Paul and the team made their way north, the Holy Spirit stopped them consistently.

In verse six we read that the Holy Spirit would not allow them to speak in the province of Asia.

Then, in verse seven we read that the Spirit would not even allow them to go into Bithynia. (The phrase "Spirit of Jesus" is probably still a reference to the Holy Spirit who is given to us by Jesus.)

Finally, Paul and the team arrived in the port city of Troas on the northwest coast of Asia Minor looking across the Aegean Sea toward Europe.

What may have looked like chaos was really Paul and the team's obeying God's direction. This was where God wanted them to be.

Paul obeyed a summons in Acts 16:9-10.

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

In Troas, Paul had a vision. It's unclear whether Paul was dreaming or not.

The vision was clear, though. A man from Macedonia was standing before him.

He urged or called Paul to come over to Macedonia to help.

When Paul shared this vision with the team, they knew together that God had called them to go to Europe and proclaim the Gospel, the first known Christian missionaries to Europe.

Paul took the trip and then settled in Philippi in Acts 16:11-12.

So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days.

It seems like this is a point where Luke joined the team, because Luke (who wrote Acts) starts writing in the first person, using the pronoun "we."

The team set sail from Troas and crossed to Samothrace where they stayed for a night.

Then the team made it to the port city of Neapolis on the Macedonian coast the second day.

From Neapolis, Paul and the team walked around ten miles inland to Philippi.

They did all of this under God's direction. Then they did one more thing under God's direction: they took a few days to rest, settle in, and get to know the city.

Then Paul and the team went to a Sabbath prayer gathering Acts 16:13-15.

And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

Here's where the church in Philippi began! And it happened as they followed God's direction.

God directed Paul and the team to look for a Jewish population. There was no synagogue in town, so Paul knew that any small band of Jewish worshippers would likely meet for prayer outside the city gates on the Sabbath.

It turns out, probably a mile and a quarter outside of town along the Gangites river, Paul found a small group of women gathered for prayer.

One of the women, Lydia, listened intently. The Bible says that the Lord opened her heart.

She was from the city of Thyatira in the region of Lydia in the province of Asia, one of those places Paul had been stopped from preaching in by the Holy Spirit. But now, Paul was speaking to her in Philippi.

Lydia was very likely a wealthy businesswoman. She was a dealer in purple cloth. Her hometown of Thyatira was known for the trade in purple dye and cloth.

Lydia was also probably the first convert and first member of the church in Philippi.

She turned out to be a catalytic leader. When she decided to follow Jesus, she shared the Gospel with everyone in her household, and they all accepted Jesus.

She was baptized along with her whole household.

After she was baptized, she urged or called Paul one more time. She wanted the team to stay in her house. They had room. The team accepted.

And that seems to be where the church in Philippi started. In Lydia's house.

Every step of the way Paul followed God's directions. How do we get God's direction?

FIVE WAYS GOD DIRECTS US

First and most clearly, God directs us through The Bible.

The Bible is the Word of God. It is God revealing himself and his will to us.

The Bible tells us who God is and who we are. It also tells us what God wants from us and how he expects us to think and live.

It's the first and clearest way that God directs us.

God will never speak to us and contradict the Bible. If we think we're hearing a message from God that is different from what we've seen in the Bible, then we're mistaken about what we're hearing. It's not from God.

God also directs us frequently through Ordinary Means.

One of the ordinary means God uses to speak to us is common sense. God gives us common sense and expects us to use it. Common sense tells us that jumping off a tall building is going to hurt and that we shouldn't do it. We don't need a special message from God to tell us to step back from the edge of a tall building.

Another ordinary means God uses to speak to us is the advice of other followers of Jesus. Other followers of Jesus who are wise can help us to know what God expects from us.

Pay attention to the ordinary ways that God speaks to us.

Sometimes God directs us through Extraordinary Events.

Sometimes God speaks to us through visions, dreams, and voices. Paul experienced THIS in Troas.

God also speaks at times through miracles, big events, and displays of his power.

We can't demand that God speak to us in extraordinary ways.

Nor can we wait for extraordinary messages from God before we obey the Bible and the ordinary ways that God speaks.

And we should never allow anything we hear by an extraordinary event to contradict the Bible.

But when God speaks in extraordinary ways (as he did to Paul), the message is unforgettable!

God the Holy Spirit speaks to us in a voice that feels like A Whisper.

The prophet Elijah in the Old Testament experienced a voice like a low whisper from God.

Like most of us, he was expecting God to speak in big ways. He had already experienced some of those big ways that God speaks. But then God spoke clearly to him through a whisper!

God frequently speaks to us quietly, through insights into the Bible and how it applies directly to us, through prayer and through promptings.

We must listen carefully to God.

God also directs us In Jesus.

That will be the case Paul will make later in his letter to the church in Philippi.

He will point us to Jesus. He will call us to see him, imitate him, and try to adopt Jesus' mindset.

He will remind us that we are followers of Jesus. Our job is to imitate our Lord and Savior!

God directs us by showing us Jesus and calling us to be like him.

God directs us in so many ways. I don't pretend that this list is exhaustive. Rather, it's just meant to remind us that God directs us daily. And it leaves us with our own calling:

FOLLOW GOD'S DIRECTIONS.

Follow God's directions.

Hearing God's direction in all the ways that he gives it is one of our central jobs as Christians. It's part one of one of the most important rhythms in our lives.

We hear God's voice, and then we obey him.

Once we know what God is directing us to do, we must do what he is directing us to do.

Paul showed us how to do it. Follow God's directions.

Follow God's directions one after the other.

I'm not a huge fan of romantic comedies, but I loved *Sleepless in Seattle*.

It's a story about Sam who had recently lost his wife.

His son called into a radio talk show trying to find his father a new wife.

Ironically, it worked. Eventually. Because in the end Sam met Annie, they fell in love, and we assume they lived happily ever after. But that's not the point.

When Sam got on the radio he talked about meeting his wife and about his grief.

When the radio talk show host asked him what he was going to do, he gave a great answer, "Well, I'm gonna get out of bed every morning... breathe in and out all day long. Then, after a while I won't have to remind myself to get out of bed every morning and breathe in and out... and, then after a while, I won't have to think about how I had it great and perfect for a while."

That's an answer we want to pay attention to as followers of Jesus, because it's how we follow God's directions.

We make one decision to follow God's directions.

Then we're faced with another decision: Will we follow? Or won't we? We still have to answer the question.

But the miraculous, wonderful thing is that when we make one decision and another after another, we start to establish a pattern.

It never gets easy. But it gets familiar. And easier.

Follow God's directions one after the other, and you *will* press on.