

*Acts 16:11–15 (NIV)*

<sup>11</sup>From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. <sup>12</sup>From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

<sup>13</sup>On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup>One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. <sup>15</sup>When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

*Philippians 1:12–26 (NIV)*

<sup>12</sup>Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. <sup>13</sup>As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. <sup>14</sup>And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

<sup>15</sup>It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. <sup>16</sup>The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. <sup>17</sup>The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. <sup>18</sup>But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, <sup>19</sup>for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. <sup>20</sup>I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. <sup>21</sup>For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup>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! <sup>23</sup>I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; <sup>24</sup>but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

<sup>25</sup>Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, <sup>26</sup>so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

*The question before Paul as he sits in his cell is straightforward:*

*Are you ready for death and hopeful for what comes after?*

One of the FaithSkills our children will be learning in VBS is the importance of navigating the Bible. This is much more than simply learning to recite the 66 books of the Bible, though even that is help. Whether you are young or old, navigating the Bible well requires us to understand the larger biblical story and to have a reasonable idea how the books of the Bible fit into that story. In addition, putting verses and passages into context always benefits our Bible navigation and reading. Good navigation keeps our interpretation of any passage on the map, restraining our imaginative takes on what the Bible means.

*The importance of context*

The Bible is not a book. It is a library of sixty-six books. Even those aren't really all "books." There are short stories, correspondence, essays, gospels, poetry, histories, prophetic oracles, wisdom writings, apocalypses, and more.

The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are often called the Hebrew Bible and were written in Hebrew. It is “the Bible Jesus read,” as Philip Yancey, the popular Christian author, puts it. These books were written, edited, and compiled over many centuries, but by Jesus’ day the content was settled.

The twenty-seven “books” of the New Testament were, on the other hand, written over a period of about fifty years, from AD 50 to AD 100.<sup>1</sup> Thirteen of the “books” are actually letters written by the apostle Paul in the course of his missionary work throughout the eastern Mediterranean. The New Testament was written in Greek.

As you begin to dig into your Bible, it is important to know that the division of the Bible into chapters and verses was done only about 800 years ago by a couple of Englishmen. Having numbered verses is helpful but dangerous, in that they encourage us to handle isolated verses while ignoring the context. Don’t read verses in isolation – read the paragraph or, better, several paragraphs each side of the verse.

As with other writings, there are better and poorer ways to read the Bible. Some will get you closer the author’s intent and, hence, God’s. Some will take you further and further away from the truth of Scripture.

Richard Hays, a prominent New Testament scholar at Duke Divinity School, has suggested a simple method of getting to a sounder interpretation of Scripture.<sup>2</sup> I’ve used the method for years. It will serve you well.

There are four steps:

*Read the text carefully:* Don’t read into it what you expect to find. Read outwardly from it. Try to read it as the first readers would have. After all, the books of the Bible were written with ancient readers in mind.

*Place the text in the context of all the rest of the Bible:* If you arrive at a new angle based on a single piece of the Bible, chances are you are heading down the wrong path. The larger biblical context will help to keep you on track.

*Relate the text to our situation:* This is where you bring the passage forward to our day. This sometimes takes imagination, but imagination that is grounded by and tethered to the biblical story.

*Live it!* This is really the hard one, isn’t it?

Today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the believers in Philippi is a good case in point. He is writing from prison to a community who has always lent him their wholehearted support. Now, he is facing possible execution. Prison cells back then were not generally used for long-term confinement. A person facing charges was either tried and released or tried and executed. Paul clearly believes that he could be executed any day.

Doesn’t that bit of context change your reading of this passage? Knowing that a man confronting the very real possibility of execution penned the words clarifies Paul’s meaning in these sentences and lends a weight and poignancy to our reading. That’s what we mean by learning to navigate the Bible. Here’s a bit more on the background to Paul’s correspondence to Philippi.

*A brief introduction to Paul’s letter – essential to good navigation*

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is one of the brief poignant letters that Paul wrote during his several imprisonments. Other so-called “prison letters” are Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Philippi is in Greece, but in the first century it was no typical Greek town. Having about 10,000 inhabitants, Philippi was on the Via Ignatia, the major highway connecting Asia Minor and the Adriatic Sea. Named for Alexander the Great’s father,

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus was crucified and resurrected in about AD 30.

<sup>2</sup>From Hays’ book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).

Philippi had the status of a Roman colony – its inhabitants were Roman citizens, with all the attendant privileges. City inscriptions were in Latin, not Greek. City government was modeled on Rome, not Athens. Philippi was very “Latinized.”

Paul first came to Philippi on his second missionary journey in about AD 50. The story of his time there is told in Acts 16:16-40. Luke tells us the story of a devout and wealthy woman named Lydia, as well as the story of Paul and Silas being tossed into prison and miraculously released by God. The prison story is dramatic and detailed; you might take a few minutes and read it before going on. It sheds some light on Paul’s feelings for the believers in Philippi.

Eugene Peterson calls Philippians “Paul’s happiest letter.” Most commentators would agree. Perhaps this is because we read the letter knowing that Paul wrote it from prison, in circumstances that most of us will never face. Yet, in his adversity, Paul finds reason to celebrate everywhere he turns and he prays that the Philippians will themselves find the joy that God has given him. Indeed, Paul writes that the Philippians themselves bring him great joy – they occupy a special place in his heart.<sup>3</sup>

### *An undying hope*

But now, the apostle Paul is in a difficult spot as he writes a letter to his friends. Every morning he wakes up not knowing whether death would be served him for breakfast.

Here’s the amazing thing. He seems nearly indifferent between life and death! Indeed, he rather straightforwardly states his preference for “passing on,” as we sometimes express it. Read his words for yourself:

“For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.”

His desire is to depart (yes, die!) and be with Christ – for that is far better. How clearly must this man have seen the future? How confident must he have been in the resurrected Christ? How sure must he have been that Christ was waiting for him on the other side? Such clear vision must surely have sustained Paul, who experienced great suffering and hardship in the course of his ministry to the Gentiles.

Reading Paul’s letters, one can’t escape his confidence that there is a life with Christ after death (what you and I typically refer to as “heaven”) and a life after this “life after death” when all are resurrected just as Jesus was resurrected so that we might all enjoy God’s renewed and restored “heavens and earth.” All that tests our imagination, but as those who have placed their trust in Christ, our hope for this life and the next is grounded in our sure hope that nothing, but nothing, can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39).

But Paul’s hope is not limited to his confidence in his life after death, he also sees hope in the chains that bind him:

“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.”

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<sup>3</sup> I urge you to find an easy-to-read version of Philippians (such as the New Living Translation or The Good News) and read the letter through in one sitting. Do this several times over the coming weeks. Take the time to read slowly, even prayerfully.

Whether merely in chains or walking to the chopping block, Paul trusts completely and utterly in his Lord, whom he had met on the road to Damascus<sup>4</sup> nearly three decades before. Paul trusts Jesus not only with his life but with his work, confident that, as he wrote to the believers in Rome, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Such is a genuinely undying hope, the sort of hope that God desires for us all and can be ours if we will just throw ourselves on him and learn genuine God-reliance half as well as we learned the lessons of self-reliance.

### A Public Gospel of Hope

The word “gospel” translates the Greek, *evangelion*. It is sometimes translated “good news” or “glad tidings.”

In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus’ day, *evangelion* was not a church word, nor it did it have particularly religious connotations. It was simply a word of public proclamation for a big joyous event, such as the birth of the emperor’s heir, the enthroning of a new emperor, or a great military victory. This proclamation of good news, this *evangelion*, would be carried out to the provinces by messengers and heralds. The messengers of Caesar carried the gospel of Caesar throughout the empire.

Paul, of course, speaks of the gospel of Christ. This proclamation is the good news from God (not Caesar) that salvation has come, that Jesus (not Caesar) is Lord. It is a proclamation brought to shepherds on a hillside by God’s herald angels (*ángelos* is the Greek word for a “messenger” from the gods).

Christians are those who believe that Jesus is Lord *already*. If you read these studies regularly you know that I often write about the Christian claim that the kingdom of God has come *already*, but *not yet*.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is Lord of all creation and all persons now. Jesus’ Lordship is not something we are waiting for.

There are people who have not heard of Jesus and countless more who refuse to acknowledge Jesus at all. But their refusal doesn’t diminish our claim that the “gospel of Christ” is true. It is a bit like an American who says, “Barack Obama is not my President.” The truth is that Obama is the president, whether everyone acknowledges it or not, whether they like it or not.

God’s proclamation, this *evangelion* of Christ, is public. It is for the whole world. Even for those who refuse to hear, whose hearts blind them to the truth. Paul’s point in 1:27 is that we are to live lives that are worthy of this proclamation. It is a public proclamation that we are to live out in public lives. How else could we ever be the light to the world? (See Matthew 5:14-16)

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Imagine that you are sitting in a prison cell and that any day or any time a guard could come to escort you the executioner. Do you think that you could honestly say with Paul, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ”? I don’t know that if I said the words I’d actually mean them. Do you think our reluctance to echo Paul stems from a lack of faith? Are we too tightly tied to this world? Do you think Paul would have felt differently he had had a family? Of course, I suppose if we asked him about his family, he would speak of his brothers and sisters in Christ.
2. I’ve met many adult, well-educated Christians who are just not very good at navigating the Bible any better than can many elementary age children. Why do you think this is so? What has been lacking in our education? How can we go about remedying our ignorance? Of course, who important do you think navigating the Bible well really is to most Christians?

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 9 tells the story of Paul’s journey from Jerusalem to Damascus. At the time, he was known as Saul and was busy actively persecuting the believers. As Saul headed north to round up more of them, the risen Christ met him. Jesus confronted him and called him to a new life. For his Christ-given mission to the Gentiles, Saul would become known as Paul, a Greek name.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Jeremiah 31:31-34</b> Jeremiah's promise of hope to the exiles in Babylon</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Luke 22:15-20</b> The meal of hope</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, 1 Peter 1:1-12</b> Peter's message of hope to Christians who are suffering persecution for their faith</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Isaiah 43</b> This is a lengthy passage, but try to imagine you are reading this as you sit exiled a thousand miles away from your home.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Psalm 121</b> A song of hope</p>	<p><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

