

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN LIFE GETS REAL

PHILIPPIANS INTRODUCTION ACTS 9 & 16

Every now and then life becomes real. Something happens to remind you that in the real world, as opposed to television, problems aren't always solved in 60 minutes. Maybe that's why you picked up this book. The very title made you wonder, "Is there any way to deal with the reality of living?"

Maybe for you life is too real at home. Far from the covers of *Real Simple* magazine and the home improvement commercials from Lowe's, you're realizing that life isn't always "Home Sweet Home" as the bills pile up and your patience wears down. Parenting is proving to be a bigger job than you expected, and you can't seem to find the manual that came with your kids. At night after everyone else has fallen asleep, you find yourself wide awake, thinking, "How did it get like this?"

Maybe for you life is too real at work. Your career has begun to dominate your life. You try to juggle job and family, but somehow it's always your family that drops. One more sale . . . one more deal . . . one more promotion.

You wonder when you let your priorities get so upside down, and you say, "Have I always been like this?"

Maybe for you life is too real . . . in your very soul. You have a hunger that you can't satisfy—a gnawing within that tells you there must be something more. You've stuffed yourself with religion, good

How did it get like this? Have I always been like this? Does anyone else feel like this?

deeds, and self-help books, yet you still feel empty inside. You search for another solution and wonder, “Does anyone else feel like this?”

As we’ll discover, the believers in Philippi needed a break, too. They were facing the realities of life and faith, and Paul’s letter to their church was just what they needed. In the following chapters, we will learn from Paul’s “reality check letter” to the Philippians as he taught them the necessary adjustments they needed to make in order to not just survive but thrive in real life.

If this is you—if you are ready to make some changes to improve your life—this book is for you. So let’s just stop the madness around us for a moment and take a time-out. Let’s regroup and prepare for the *rest* of your life. It’s time to take a break and make some adjustments before life gets any more real!

Meet the Philippians

Luke, the author of one of the Gospel accounts, gives us some insight into the Philippians and the real life they faced in his account of the establishing of the church in the book of Acts.¹

Acts 9: Around AD 40, Paul was called Saul. He was adamantly against Jesus and anyone who followed Him. Saul made it his life’s work to pursue and kill Christians. But Saul “saw the light” on the road to Damascus. The resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus stopped him in his tracks and set him on a different path. He gave Saul a new name and a new purpose. Now, instead of traveling around killing Christians, Paul traveled everywhere spreading the gospel. Instead of trying to put an end to the Body of Christ, Paul planted churches and dedicated his life to them.

Acts 16:6-10: Philippi was one such church plant. Paul arrived there in a rather roundabout way to establish the church. During his missionary journey in AD 49 or 50,

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. (Acts 16:6-8)

Good intentions aren’t always God’s intentions! Paul wanted to preach the gospel, but twice the very Spirit of God refrained him. Obviously, God had something else in mind, and soon, He gave His vision to Paul.

During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After Paul

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had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:9-10)

Paul's sensitivity and submission to the Spirit led him into Macedonia . . . and to the seaside city and Roman colony of Philippi. Philippi's close proximity to the ocean made it alive with travelers, commerce, and retired military families. Yet as busy and big as it was, Philippi had so few religious people that they didn't have a church. This is right where God wanted Paul.

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This is where Paul encountered three people who would become his first "small group," and eventually his first church members.

Acts 16:11-15: Lydia was a businesswoman in Philippi. She managed both career and home, but she could not manage her soul's thirst for something more. Religious practices left her empty, yet she still longed to worship God. As a Greek, Lydia was not allowed in the local synagogue, so she spent her Sabbaths at the river instead—praying with a group of non-Jewish women. "Maybe this way I can connect with the true God," she thought. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home" (Acts 16:14-15). Lydia's thirst was quenched—filled to overflowing—by the gospel that Paul shared. Notice that Lydia's conversion immediately resulted in outreach and service: the evangelism of her household and hospitality to Paul's team. A natural response for a heart satisfied with Jesus! Lydia, her friends, and family became the first members of this new church work.

Maybe you can relate to Lydia. Maybe you find that business and family, friends and fun don't satisfy your deepest longings. You're pursuing something more; you just don't know what. Or maybe you already love God and sincerely want to follow Him, but religion has left you dry. You've given up your traditions—maybe even your family—in order to connect with God. Do you see yourself in Lydia? Then you're in good company. God knows who you are, and He longs to satisfy you.

Acts 16:16-18: Paul's second encounter was with a slave girl. She was a priestess of Python, who, according to Greek mythology, had been slain by the god Apollos. Believing she could predict the future as an oracle of the Python, the girl sold her abilities. However, she got in over her head, and the businessmen of the city used her for their own profit. She thought she had a talent, but she discovered the talent had her. She was controlled not only by a demon but also by her owners. She longed for unattainable freedom.

As with other demons in the Bible, the demon inside her knew exactly in whose name these missionaries came. And thus the girl made quite a spectacle of them, following Paul and his friends around for days and shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved!” (Acts 16:17). Paul didn’t exactly want such press, nor did he want to see this young girl enslaved, so he cast out the demon in Jesus’ name.

Many of us can relate to the slave girl. We know the feeling of being controlled by something bigger than ourselves. A substance, an impulse, a thought life, a temper. If you’ve ever cried out in desperation, “I want to stop, but I just can’t,” then you’re in good company. God knows who you are, and He longs to free you.

Acts 16:19-34: Ironically, freeing the slave girl led to Paul’s imprisonment. The girl’s owners were none too pleased with losing their lucrative business. They took Paul and Silas before the magistrates, who “ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison” (Acts 16:22-23). And it was in jail that Paul’s third encounter with a soon-to-be church member occurred.

Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy had all been present when Paul freed the girl from the demon. However, only Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned. Why? Luke and Timothy were Gentiles; Paul and Silas were Jewish. The racist government employed racist, abusive, and power-hungry jailers . . . and they would much rather punish Jews. One such jailer was “commanded to guard them carefully,” so he secured Paul and Silas in stocks in the inner cell.

Close watch over the prisoners made the jailer privy to a late-night praise session. God sent an earthquake to rattle the prisoners free—and rattle the jailer’s nerves. Thinking that all the prisoners had escaped, the jailer knew he’d be put to death for his failure. He drew his sword to kill himself before his employers could. “Don’t harm yourself!” Paul broke in to stop the suicide, “We are all here!”

Immediately, this emotionally broken and spiritually seeking guard fell to his knees. Paul didn’t even have to extend an invitation. Whether from fear or faith, the jailer was motivated to make a change. “You guys aren’t like anyone I’ve ever met. You’ve got something bigger going on.”

The jailer was ready to accept what Paul offered; he just needed someone to guide him. “What must I do to be saved?” Paul proclaimed Jesus, and the jailer’s entire family believed. The hardened, searching soldier on the verge of suicide was now “filled with joy because he had come to believe in God.” And the church in Philippi grew again!

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Maybe you can relate to the jailer. Something huge happened in your life to shake you up—a threat of divorce, rebellious kids, the loss of a job. Your eyes are suddenly open to a deeper reality, and you echo the jailer as you cry out to God, “What must I do?” You don’t have to come to God in an orthodox way. You don’t have to come with all the answers. You just have to come. Do you see yourself in the jailer? You’re in good company. God knows who you are, and He longs to save you.

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And so, these three encounters led to the establishment of the church in Philippi. A businesswoman, a fortuneteller, and a jailer . . . God can use anyone! He wants everyone to join His family. Even me. Even you. And even the people we don’t like. Paul gathered the new believers together, they grew in numbers and in faith, and Europe’s first church began.

Enter Real Life

Paul continued on his journey, and everyone at PCC lived happily ever after, right? Not exactly. They found that conversion did not make them immune to conflict. Real life set in. Kids were still rebellious, bosses were still mean, bills still had to be paid, and spouses still had bad breath. The Philippians faced fears, sickness, and unanswered prayers. They felt disillusioned—“I thought it was supposed to be different.”

Maybe you can relate to their confusion. You came to Christ or to church or even to this small group thinking things would improve. But it doesn’t look like the brochure. “Why has the depression come back?” “Why did my marriage still fail?” “Is God like a CD program that I just installed wrong on my computer? What’s the deal?”

That’s just where the Philippians were. About ten years after they started following Jesus, they heard that Paul was back in prison in Rome. Though their church had grown since Paul left, they had not forgotten him. Paul was imprisoned under the reign of Nero, and the Philippian Christians feared the worst for him. They took up an offering and sent it to their founding minister through a man named Epaphroditus. Epaphroditus traveled over 700 miles to help Paul. He brought Paul their gifts and support, but he also brought Paul their problems.

Epaphroditus told Paul about the disillusionment and confusion the young church was facing. Paul responded with a letter—the book of Philippians. “Okay,” wrote Paul, “It’s time to take a break and make some adjustments. Let’s talk about how to deal with real life.” 3:16

¹Tony Ash, *Philippians, Colossians, & Philemon*, The College Press NIV Commentary Series (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2000) 10–11.

Finding Real Life

1. Tell about a time you walked or drove in the wrong direction. How long did you go? Where did you end up? How did you get back on the right path?
2. According to Acts 16:6-34, what were some of the reasons for Paul to travel to and then remain in Philippi?
3. Lydia wanted satisfaction. The slave girl wanted freedom. The jailer wanted to be saved. What are the “wants” of the people in your neighborhood? Your office? Your community? Are they this noble, or less noble and more selfish?
4. Think about your time . . . your money . . . your career. What “wants” are you actively pursuing with your life? Do you think they will lead to true happiness?
5. What changes would you need to make in your schedule to receive the satisfaction, freedom, and salvation Paul offered to Lydia, the slave girl, and the jailer? What is keeping you from making those changes?
6. What one specific thing can you change in your schedule this week to live the Real Life God offers in Acts 16? Tell your group members what that one thing is so they can pray for you and hold you accountable.



“They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.’”