
The Letter of Paul to the Philippians

Introduction and Chapter 1

Introduction

The book of Philippians is one of the most “joyful” books in the Bible. The Apostle Paul expresses the happiness that the Christian has in Christ as he writes to his friends in Philippi. The book can well serve to encourage and uplift our spirits even now, many years later.

The City

The city of Philippi is located in northeastern Macedonia. Originally the city belonged to Thrace, but in 358 BC Philip of Macedonia captured it from the Thracians. (Philip was the father of Alexander the Great.) Philip took the city because it was discovered that there were gold mines in the nearby area. He named it after himself. It was originally called Crenides.

In 42 BC a famous battle was fought near Philippi. Octavius and Mark Anthony defeated Brutus and Cassius. Caesar Augustus (Octavius) later made Philippi a Roman colony and the people living there were given the rights of Roman citizens. In the days of the Apostle Paul, Philippi had become a fairly important city.



Paul Visits Philippi

Around the year 52 AD Paul's second missionary trip took him to the city of Philippi, his first visit to Europe. It happened this way:

Acts 16:9-12 And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A certain man of Macedonia stood, begging him, saying, Come over into Macedonia and help us! And after he saw the vision, we immediately tried to go into Macedonia, gathering that the Lord had called us in order to preach the gospel to them. Then having set sail from Troas, we came with a straight course to Samothracia, and the next day to Neapolis; and from there to Philippi, which is the chief city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we continued spending time in that city some days.

The Gospel of Christ was especially well received by the Jews in Philippi. Although there was not a large Jewish population and there was no synagogue, Paul met a group of worshipers at the river outside the city on the Sabbath (Ac 16:13). God opened the heart of a woman named Lydia as she listened to Paul speak about Jesus. She and the members of her household were baptized, then she invited Paul and Silas to stay at her house while they continued their mission efforts in the area.

There were, however, those who were opposed to these missionaries of Christ and Paul's visit to Philippi was not without incident. In Acts 16:16-18 he encounters a slave girl who was possessed by an evil spirit. The slave girl was engaged in fortune telling for her owners. When Paul drove out the spirit, the owners became angry because the girl could no longer make money for them. They had Paul arrested and thrown in jail.

His time in jail turned into another opportunity to teach about Jesus. As Paul and Silas were in jail singing hymns, there was earthquake and the prison gates were thrown open. The jailer thought his prisoners were gone, but Paul and the others had not escaped even though they could have. The jailer recognized that there was something different about Paul and Silas and he eagerly invited them to his house that night where he and his whole family were baptized. The next morning, when the city leaders found out that Paul was a Roman citizen, he was immediately released and encouraged to leave the city. The officials were afraid they might get into trouble for the way they had been treated.

Paul visited Philippi once more briefly (Ac 20:3-6), but we are not told much about that visit. He was traveling through Macedonia because he was avoiding Jews in Syria who were plotting against him.

The Letter

As a result of his visits and preaching in Philippi, Paul developed a close relationship with the Christians there. They were near and dear to his heart and likewise they loved him much. No doubt he often remembered Lydia and her hospitality as well as the incident with the jailer. The congregation at Philippi frequently sent Paul financial support when he was in need, the only of the Macedonian churches to do so.

Paul was imprisoned in Rome from about 59-61 AD. There he was awaiting trial for his preaching of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. This imprisonment was not a hard confinement, however. It was more of a house arrest as Paul was allowed to have visitors and have some freedom of movement. During this time, the congregation at Philippi sent a man named Epaphroditus to visit Paul and deliver an offering of money the church had collected. Paul was overjoyed to see Epaphroditus and the Philippians' thoughtful gesture moved him to thanksgiving.

While visiting Paul, Epaphroditus became sick. After he had gained strength enough to go back to Philippi, Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians and had Epaphroditus take it back to them. Indications are that Philippians was written near the end of Paul's imprisonment.

Salutation, Thanksgiving, and Prayer

1:1-11

1-2 We generally sign our names at the bottom of our letters, but it makes more sense to do as Paul did and sign at the top! That way you don't have to read through the whole letter to find out who is writing to you. The first two verses of Paul's letter already express the work the Lord Jesus has done among them. Find the following:

- An indication of the forgiveness of sins Jesus had won for them
- An indication of the connection they had to Jesus
- An indication that the Lord would continue to bless them

3-8 Even from prison Paul found excitement and joy when He thought about what God had done among the Philippians. List the things that Paul was thankful for.

How often do you think of the other Christians around you? Especially when you are suffering, facing troubles and hard times, do you think of the joy God gives you by connecting you with other like-minded believers? Too often we think only of ourselves or see the negative sides of our fellow Christians instead of rejoicing in the blessings we share together.

9-11 Paul prayed for his friends in Philippi. Notice that his first priority in prayer was for spiritual things. Certainly they needed material things too as a congregation, but more importantly they needed to continue gaining more knowledge and insight and be strengthened in their faith in Christ Jesus. Do you think it is important to pray for one another? What kinds of things can you pray for? What kinds of things do you usually pray for? Have you ever prayed that God would strengthen the faith of *someone else*?

As you might expect, the Philippians were eager to hear how their brother Paul was really doing since he had been imprisoned. Paul tells them how things have been going and what his thoughts are on being a prisoner because of the Gospel of Jesus.

12-13 What had been the result of Paul's time in prison? Have you ever been in difficult situations that the Lord has worked out for good?

14-18 Not only did all the imperial hear of Christ while Paul was in prison, but the Christians in Rome were becoming bolder to preach the word. Even though some were preaching from poor motives, Paul was still thankful that the word was going out. His time in prison had not stopped the progress of the Gospel, but instead it had advanced it. Paul's imprisonment and public interest it generated made Jesus the subject of "water cooler" conversations.

- How might certain "evangelists" today fit Paul's description in v. 18? How can the Lord of the Church even use these people to spread His word to the benefit of others?
- Discuss Martin Luther's expression "a happy inconsistency."

19-26 What is it that causes Paul truly to rejoice even though he is in prison and unable to continue his mission work personally? Couldn't every Christian express the same thoughts?

Conclusion

Think again about how the Apostle Paul writes in these first 26 verses of his letter to the Philippians. Does this sound like a man who is down in the dumps about the way his life has gone? What are the things that give Paul joy even in the face of imprisonment? Do you think about these same things when you face hard times? The same things that caused Paul to rejoice will cause you to rejoice too! Might you share the first chapter of Philippians with a friend who was depressed? Might you turn to it yourself to find comfort for your soul?

Paul is hoping to see his friends at Philippi again (1:26) but he knows that it is not guaranteed to happen. The Lord may have other plans for him. Whether he sees them again or not, he wants them to remember to conduct themselves *worthy* of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether he comes to visit them in person or only hears about them, he will know that they are remaining true to Jesus.

- **Read 1:27-30**

What do you think it means to “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ”? Does this apply to us today? How?

Paul makes a point of the *unity* they have as Christians. He wants them to “stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.” He will continue this idea of unity into the next chapter. Why do you think unity among Christians is important when fighting against the devil? List some ways you can help encourage the type of unity the Apostle mentions here.

The congregation at Philippi was enduring certain hardships from those in the city who did not believe in Christ. What does Paul say about their struggle against the opposition? See John 15:20. Notice how “sticking together” and supporting one another in the faith (unity) will be important as they face persecution. What types of persecution do you face today as Christians? In what ways is it the same struggle that Christ faced?

You

Christ

The Philippians were united with Christ, members of His own family, just like anyone who trusts in the Son of God for forgiveness of sins and every spiritual blessing. See Gal 4:4-7, Jn 1:12. Being connected with Christ, they could expect help from Him in all their need. Also, being united with Christ, he wants them to consider how they can encourage the bond of unity that exists between them as Christians.

- **Read 2:1-2**

Since they *all* can find for themselves:

Encouragement from being united with Christ

Comfort from His love

Fellowship with the Spirit

Tenderness

Compassion

Then they will also find that they can be like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Paul doesn't want the Philippians to be at odds with each other in their congregation. That's no way to win against the great adversary the devil. He wants them to recognize the common ground they share and to contend together for the faith. Since they all have been encouraged and strengthened by their connection to Christ, they can be one in spirit and purpose with each other.

What things might a Christian congregation be “like minded” about?

What would the members of a Christian congregation agree about concerning the *purpose* and mission of the congregation?

In what ways could you support one another as you fight against persecution from the devil, the world, and your flesh?

You know it's hard to have unity and like-mindedness among people when they all think they are better than the person next to them. Pride and a “puffed up” attitude kills relationships between believers. In this section, the Philippians are taught to remember Jesus who humbled Himself even to death on a cross. If Jesus could so humble Himself to save us from our sins, can't we humble ourselves in the presence of others?

- **Read 2:3-11**

Isn't Jesus' humility amazing? The end result was that He was exalted above all the heavens.

Therefore . . .

2:12-18

In light of all this . . .

- The comfort they received from the gospel of Christ
- The unity they share within their congregation
- The humility that encourages such unity
- The Savior who was humbled and exalted for them

. . . They can continue their work in the Lord with joy. “Working out their own salvation” does not mean they can save themselves without Jesus, but it means they will continue striving to follow the Lord to the end so they do not throw away His good salvation and the promise of heaven. With a new joy and sense of purpose they can continue to obey the word of their Master and conduct themselves in a way that will bring honor and glory to Him.

Timothy and Epaphroditus

2:19-3:1

Why did Paul want to send Timothy to Philippi?

Why did he want to send Epaphroditus back?

Note the concluding call to “rejoice in the Lord”!

Before Jesus was born, God had directed that the Israelites be circumcised (Gen 17). It was an outward sign that God had “marked” them to be His very own. Circumcision was a guarantee for them of the covenant God had made that He would send them a Savior from their sins. It was God's way of “putting it in writing” that He was serious about His promise. In the Old Testament, males who refused to be circumcised were seen as not believing in God's promised Savior and they were cut off from Israel.

Once Jesus came, there was no longer any need for circumcision to remind them of the promise. The promise was fulfilled in Christ's birth! The law of circumcision for the Jews was done away with (Gal 5:6).

There were some in Philippi, though, who were still insisting that all needed to be circumcised or they could not be saved.

- **Read 3:2-6**

In his letter to the Romans, Paul pointed out that circumcision no longer mattered, only faith in one's heart in the Savior Jesus (Rom 2:28-29).

Nobody was counted holy by keeping the old Jewish laws, only through faith in Jesus was anyone saved was a person 'clean' in God's sight (Rom 3:28).

- **Read 3:7-11**

What was the most important thing in Paul's life now? Why?

What was the goal of Paul's faith and ours?

- How was Paul “heavenly minded” and how did it affect the way he lived?
- How does being “heavenly minded” affect the way *you* live?

Paul leaves these final directions with the Philippians:

- Unite: A plea for unity between Euodia and Syntyche. Apparently these two prominent women in the congregation were engaged in some kind of disagreement. It is interesting to note that even in the days of the Apostle Paul congregational life was not always “smooth.” Just as we sinners today get involved in quarrels, disagreements, grudges, and the like, so did they.

On what basis did Paul encourage these women to solve their differences?

Whom did Paul ask to help with their reconciliation?

- Rejoice: The Philippians are urged to “rejoice in the Lord always.” What do you think that means? How do *you* rejoice in the Lord?
- Be Gentle: Of the many virtues Paul could have mentioned, this is the one he singles out. Why do you think that is? What constitutes a “gentle” person? Do you equate gentleness with weakness? Did gentleness mean weakness in Jesus' case? How could you make gentleness more evident in your own life?
- Away with Anxiety: Instead of being anxious about things, take it to the Lord in prayer. What should always go along with prayers of petition (request)? From God then we receive peace. God has made all things well with us and so gives us peace. What is the greatest peace? (Hint: Remember Christmas Eve).

What kind of things can assault our hearts?

How does God's peace guard our hearts from troubles?

What do you think the phrase “passes all understanding” means? Maybe you have misunderstood this verse in the past.

Look at Psalm 73 for an example of relying on one's mind for protection rather than on God's peace.

- Enjoy the Honorable Things: There is so much evil, corruption, and wickedness around us that we are best off just staying away from it. There's nothing wrong with enjoying what is pure and shunning what is not. Movies? Books? Music? Concentrate on what is noble and admirable.

Thanksgivings

4:10-20

Paul rejoices in the way the Philippians have cared for him and he wants to express his thanks before he closes the letter. Consider the following:

What is the secret to being content in every situation?

How did the Philippians help Paul in his need?

What does Paul promise to the Philippians about their needs?

Final Greetings

4:21-23

How does the Bible use the word "saint"?

How could such greetings encourage the Philippians?

How does the letter end?