

Philippians: Introduction

When Paul left Philippi there was a small church that included, as members, Lydia, a slave girl that had been set free from demon possession and a Roman jailer. There were others and it appears that Luke remained there to help that new church grow. It was a diverse and truly international Christian community. Lydia represented the wealth, the slave girl the poorest and the Roman jailer of the middle class. In addition, Lydia was an Asian lady, the slave girl undoubtedly Greek and the jailer a Roman. The gospel is for everyone.

Following Paul's ministry in Philippi the church there suffered much (II Cor. 8:2 and Phil. 1: 23-30). Despite that suffering they remained faithful and periodically sent Paul financial help (II Cor. 11:9, Phil. 4:16). About 57AD, on Paul's third missionary journey, he returned for a second visit (II Cor. 1:15-17, 1 Cor. 16:5, 6; Acts 19: 21:1-3). From Philippi he went to Jerusalem where he was arrested and sent to Rome. Word arrived at Philippi of Paul's imprisonment and, according to Philippians 4:18, they sent him a gift. Philippians 4:1 says that Paul loved the church, calling it **"my joy and crown in the Lord."** Paul indeed had a special relationship with that church.

This letter is grouped with three other letters, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, as Paul's prison letters. The Philippian letter was probably written from Rome about 60-62AD. From Philippians we learn there was significant communication between Paul in prison and the church in Philippi. First news was carried to Philippi of Paul's imprisonment. Then the church sent Epaphroditus to assist Paul. News was then carried back to Philippi regarding Epaphroditus's sickness. Finally, news traveled back to Rome of the concern of the church in Philippi about Epaphroditus's sickness. This letter followed.

Philippians is an extremely personal letter. It was primarily a thank you note for their love and the gifts they had sent him. Paul shared in this letter some of the difficult and frustrating circumstances in which he found himself and how he was handling them. Paul also expressed his personal desires for the future and the goals he set for his life. In the end Philippians is a personal letter from a pastor to a church that he was both very fond and proud of. Each aspect of the letter, as is always true of God's Word, has a message and application for us.

An overview of Philippians: Chapter 1: **Jesus as our life.** Chapter 2: **Jesus as our example.** Chapter 3: **Jesus as our goal and purpose.** Chapter 4: **Jesus as our provider and joy.**

In chapter 1 verses 19-26 Paul wrote about the prospects of dying. His statement in 1:21, **"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain,"** sums up what ought to be the attitude of all believers toward life and death. It shows Jesus as our life.

Chapter 2 presents Jesus as our example. In verses 6-11 we have what many believe is one of the oldest hymns of the church, a hymn that speaks of Jesus taking upon Himself our likeness and having been fashioned like a man endured the Cross on our behalf. The end result of that is that Jesus was not only glorified but given a name above all names. Read Philippians 2:10-11. The

challenge Paul presented to the church in Philippi was expressed in verse 5 as, **“have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.** That is a challenge Paul presents to us.

In chapter 3 Jesus is seen as our goal and purpose in living. Paul talked of his early life, telling the readers that he excelled above almost all other Jews of his day in terms of living according to the law. He called himself a Hebrew of Hebrews who had every reason to have confidence in the way he was zealous for God and God’s way of doing things. Paul then declared he gladly gave it all up. Read Philippians 3:7 on why he gave it up. The challenge to the church in Philippi, and to us today, is to determine what really matters most to us in life. Our society values the toys one accumulates over just about anything else. Paul, and hopefully all of us, valued his walk with Jesus over everything else. Paul followed his declaration of what he gave up with a declaration of his goals for whatever life he had left. Verse 11 expressed those goals this way, I **“press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”** Paul was expressing a critical concept that is too easily missed by Christians. Paul reminded his readers that God created us for a purpose and then redeemed us so we could fulfill that purpose. Paul’s imagery of wanting to grab hold of the reason that Jesus grabbed hold of him is very vivid. Too often in the church we think in terms of God’s call for someone to be a pastor or missionary but forget that God has a plan for each of us. Our lives should not be compartmentalized into that which is spiritual and that which is life. The job we have is just as important to God. Read James 4:14-16

To ensure that he stayed on track in his goal of living as Jesus would have him live, he wrote to the Philippians about what he wanted, Read Philippians 3:10. Note two critical factors. First, these were goals set by Paul as a relatively old man, certainly an old man for his day and age. He was probably close to 60. They were goals set by a man who had accomplished so much and suffered so much already that he might very well have said it was time to relax in retirement. He could not do that as long as God gave him strength to carry on.

Second, in setting forth his goals Paul used a special Greek word for **“know.”** That word implied a deep, personal, intimate knowledge, not mere intellectual knowledge. The same word was used to denote the closeness of a relationship between a husband and wife. Paul’s desire was not to know more trivia about God but to know in an even deeper and more personal way Jesus and the power of Jesus in his life day by day. I am sure Paul was not writing this to the Christians in Philippi to brag but was expressing a challenge to them and to us today to commit to the same goals in life.

If Paul were here today his message to us would be the same. What do you want to accomplish in whatever life you have before you?

A commercial on TV for retirement asks, “How much money do you have in your pocket?” The commercial then asks if that little amount can make a real difference in retirement. Then they show a line of oversize dominoes and let the small amount in one’s pocket start the domino effect and in time the big one to fall down. If Paul were to do a similar TV commercial for spiritual

growth he might begin by asking, “How much time can you free up today to spend with Jesus and still meet your other commitment?” He would then ask, “Can that small amount really make a difference?” Then he would then tell us even a few minutes a day over a period of time would result in significant growth in our intimate walk with Jesus.

The final chapter is a reminder that Jesus is the provider of our every need and therefore the source of real joy. Read Philippians 4:4. This is a repeat of 3:1. A key note is that it is a command, not a request or suggestion. Christians ought to be the happiest people on earth. God never intended fun and laughter to be crowded out of our lives.

I Thessalonians 5:16 reads “be joyful always” and here “rejoice.” Joy is one characteristic that should be evident in every Christian. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, when the son returned to the Father, who is God, the Father said, according to Luke 15:23. **“Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.”**

Why should we be joyful? Because Jesus is our life, because He is our example, because He is our goal and purpose in life. We should rejoice because joy is the outward expression of an inner peace that comes from the assurance that Jesus is all in all and God has everything under control. And when we have a legitimate joy in our lives it goes far in convincing the world that Christianity is real. No matter what outward circumstances we might find ourselves in, it is possible to experience the joy of the Lord and make that joy evident to others. Given the situation for Christians to whom this was written in Philippi, there would seem to have been little external reason to have joy but when Jesus is first in our lives, joy is present. It cannot be any other way.

Philippians is a great letter to read and study. Read it through like a letter should be read, in one sitting. See how Paul lived in light of the uncertainty of his situation and see the commitments he made to draw closer to Jesus who was his joy and happiness.