

# Introducing Philippians

BI: Between God the church and the believer there is a blessed bond of joyful fellowship because of Christ.

LTS: John 15:1-17

Intro:

This morning we begin a study of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Clearly, this short (4 chapter) epistle has proven to be one of the N.T. church's most beloved texts found in the Bible. Some of our favorite and most often quoted verses of Scripture are found in this letter.

Philippians is commonly known as the epistle of joy. It has been a primary source of comfort, tranquility and peace for beleaguered saints throughout the ages. I have no doubt that every man and woman at Calvary Bible Church who has belonged to Christ for more than a few years has read Paul's letter to the Philippians many times.

To be sure, Philippians is one of the shorter books of the N.T., but its message lands a powerful blow against any and all forms of discouragement, self-pity, pride, disunity and laziness in the Christian life. So many practical issues are touched upon in this brief epistle, it's no wonder people love it so much and come back to it repeatedly for wisdom, comfort and motivation in a world that is broken by sin.

I have been looking forward to studying this book with you for a long time. So, let's jump right in by laying down the historical context.

## I. Historical Context:

1. In 336 BC, the Greek, King Philip II of Macedonia (father of Alexander the Great), captured the city of Crenides and renamed it, rather humbly, after himself; hence, Philippi. This growing city quickly became the capitol of Macedonia. Later, in the time of Emperor Octavian (later known as Ceasar Augustus) the city was taken by Rome and made a Roman colony. Primarily, it was a military settlement of Roman soldiers. As such, it became, as some described it, a "miniature Rome,"

2. Because Philippi was a military outpost there were few Jews living there. As you know, Paul's strategy when he went into a new city was to preach first at the local synagogue because the gospel was to the Jew first. Establishing a synagogue only required the presence of 10 Jewish

men. In Paul's day, however, the city of Philippi didn't meet this simple, basic qualification. So, there was no synagogue to preach in. But that was no deterrent to Paul, for He had been sent as the apostle to the Gentiles.

3. Turn with me for a moment to Acts 16. You will remember that in chapter 9 Saul of Tarsus met the Lord rather abruptly on the road to Damascus. There he was transformed from a persecutor of Christ's church into one of the leaders of the church. In chapter 13 the church of Antioch, led by the H.S. set Barnabas and Saul (Paul) to launch the first ever cross-cultural mission endeavor of the Christian church by which many Gentiles would come to faith in Christ.

4. In chapter 15, however, when it comes time for their second missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas disagree on whether to include John Mark since he had deserted them earlier. In the end, Barnabas takes Mark, Paul chooses Silas, and they go their separate ways. Now let's read what happens from there.

Read Acts 16:6-15

5. This was, no doubt, an unexpectedly warm reception upon their first attempt to bring the gospel to Philippi. But that was about to change in dramatic fashion. As we continue reading in chapter 16, Paul casts a demon out of a possessed girl who was harassing them as they attempted to preach the gospel in that place. Notice what happens.

Read v. 19-24

6. We don't have time to read the rest of the chapter, but this is that famous narrative of Paul and Silas (along with Timothy and Luke) singing praises to God at midnight in prison. You remember what happens: an earthquake hits the city and the prison doors are opened. The jailer, fearing that all had escaped, is about to commit suicide when Paul calls out (28) "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" So the jailer brings them out and asks what is arguably the most famous question in the NT, (30) "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household."

7. This, friends, was the beginning of the church at Philippi and the first Christian church in Europe. From here, Paul and his companions head off to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus and beyond.

8. During his time with them the Philippians developed a deep affection for the Apostle Paul. In the years that followed, the Philippian church maintained their attachment to him. They loved this brother who had nearly lost his life to bring them the gospel. Paul visited Philippi again (Acts 20) on his way back to Jerusalem, and while their personal contact was rare, they kept in touch with

him and supported him financially as he and his companions traveled through eastern Europe and western Asia, preaching the gospel and serving the churches they had planted.

9. When Paul was in Jerusalem he was arrested in the Temple and jailed by the Romans. Having no other choice but to appeal to Cesar as a Roman Citizen, Paul was eventually sent to Rome for his trial. This imprisonment lasted two years. All the while the church of Philippi continued to support him.

10. In fact, when they heard that he was imprisoned in Rome, they sent from their own congregation a man by the name of Epaphroditus to deliver financial support to meet his practical needs. This was not an easy assignment. It was a very long journey (800 miles on foot) from Philippi to Rome (approx. equiv. N.Y to Chicago), and Paul says (Phil. 2:26-27) that Epaphroditus became ill and almost died while he was there. For this, and many other reasons, Paul was eternally grateful to this little church in Philippi.

11. Turn with me now to Philippians 1. With this historical background in mind, listen to how Paul addressed these dear friends in Philippi.

Read Phil. 1:3-21

12. The purpose of Philippians is to convey Paul's love and gratitude for the believers at Philippi. This letter is really an extended Thank You note from Paul for the benefits he has received by knowing them. As we think about Paul's motive for writing this letter we should note that unlike other churches Paul was associated with, the church at Philippi had no major problems to address. Rather than attempting to speak to a church crisis, Paul merely wrote to convey his affection and to encourage them to grow in faithfulness to Christ. They had been so faithful to him as he ministered from place to place. And even though they were a poor people, they alone sent financial support to Paul when they discovered his needs.

## **II. Key Themes:**

1. Over the centuries many have attempted to establish a central theme of the book with neat subdivisions. Some have suggested the central theme is Christ-mindedness. Others have thought it to be Paul's joy in Christ. Unlike other books of the NT, however, Philippians cannot be reduced to a single theme. As Hendriksen observes, "What we have here is a genuine letter from Paul to his

beloved church at Philippi. The writer passes from one subject to another just as we do today in writing to friends.”<sup>1</sup>

2. Given the church’s tangible expressions of love and care for him, he sets down with pen in hand to write a short note of thanksgiving. But Paul is also a faithful pastor who cares deeply and personally for God’s little flock, so he can’t help but take the time to offer them spiritual instruction and encouragement on a number of issues that would benefit them as a church body.

3. For example:

A. Paul was concerned that they interpret his suffering properly.

- 1) Apparently, they were concerned about the potential failure of his ministry. After all, who was going to listen to a man who is incarcerated? When people search for wisdom on spiritual matters they don’t normally go the local prison for answers.
- 2) If you pastor gets arrested and locked up in some prison, our first thought is That’s bad. That’s a bad event. Its unfair and unjust! I mean, what could be worse? But that wasn’t Paul’s perspective. Notice how he interprets the experience in 1:12-14 (Read 1:12-14).
- 3) You see, being incarcerated was no impediment to the gospel. Rather, it gave Paul a new platform for preaching it! And apparently, his ministry in jail was enormously fruitful!
- 4) And historically, isn’t it true that the more Satan hinder the church the more it grows?

B. Paul was concerned that they learn to suffer well.

- 1) It must have been surprising for the church to receive this letter and not read a single line about his personal misfortune. He didn’t complain about how hard it was to live in a dungeon. He didn’t mention how bad the food was or how difficult it was to sleep while chained to two guards. You would think that this much suffering would have entitled him to a little selfishness, a little complaining. But no! His only concern for himself was that (1:20-21) “with full courage now as always Christ would be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”
- 2) In fact, far from complaining about his circumstances, Paul was able to be joyful in the midst of it. He writes (2:17) “Even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faint, I am glad, and rejoice. Likewise, you should be glad and rejoice with me!

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<sup>1</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testaent Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1995), 37

- 3) This is a remarkable response to suffering, isn't it? But Paul wanted them (and us) to learn this. And that brings us to the next theme...

C. Paul was concerned that they learn to be joyful and content in every circumstance.

- 1) In 3:1 Paul famously declares, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord." Again in 4:4 he writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice."
- 2) Joy is the fruit of the Spirit that is sometimes the most evident mark of one who belongs to Jesus Christ. How can you be joyful in suffering? It's unnatural! Unless, of course, you are full of the H.S.
- 3) And one of the ways that joy is expressed is by simple contentment. Regarding the gift the Philippians sent Paul wrote,  
Read 4:11-13
- 4) Few characteristics lend credibility to our gospel proclamation like joy and contentment in the midst of suffering. This is part of what he meant when he wrote (1:27) that we should let our "manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

D. Paul was concerned for unity in the body.

- 1) He has the same concern that Jesus had; namely, that believers would relate to one another in a manner that is radically different from the world. In the world, people put the all-important SELF first, above all. In the church, however, we put CHRIST first and then our brothers and sisters in Christ second.  
Read 2:2-4
- 2) As fellow members of Christ's body we are already unified in Him. Our mutual communion with Christ makes us one whether we like it or not. Our job, however, is to preserve the unity of the Spirit. And whenever we discover disunity in the body, we work together to mend what is broken.
- 3) This is why Paul specifically instructs the brothers to counsel two faithful women in the church who were at odds with one another. Read 4:2-3
- 4) You see, the role of the pastor is not merely to preach sermons. It is also to minister to people personally by bringing the word of God to bear on their broken fellowship, anger, bitterness, pride, and anything else that may disrupt the unity and fellowship in the local church.
- 5) How would they learn to manifest such unity? Well, obviously, the pastors/elders would instruct them from the word. But they would also learn by watching the humility and love of others who are faithful. This brings us to...

E. Paul was concerned that they follow living examples of faithfulness.

Read 3:17

- 1) Someone once said that Christianity is better caught than taught. By that I think he thought to emphasize the power of faithful examples. Here in Philippians Paul doesn't leave that principle to abstract terms. He gets very specific. We are to follow Paul's example. More importantly, if we are going to live in a manner worthy of the gospel we will need to follow the example of Christ – specifically His humility.
- 2) Read v2:4-8
- 3) True unity comes NOT from circumstances but from mutual love of Christ and humility born of Spirit of Christ. If are going to live in a manner worthy of the gospel, we must follow the example of Christ.
- 4) But Paul also points to the example of Timothy (2:19) who is known for faithfully seeking to fulfill the interests and needs of others to his own hurt.
- 5) Then Paul points to Epaphroditus who likewise served the people of God, risking his own life in the process. Paul says (2:29) “Honor such men.”
- 6) I can tell you, beloved, that there are men and women in this church whose lives are worthy of emulation. This is what discipleship is about. Find someone who is further down the road of spiritual growth than you are and spend time with him or her with a view toward growing in Christ.

F. Finally, we can't have a service on Thanks Giving weekend and not point to Paul's concerned that we would learn to be thankful.

- 1) First, Paul models thankfulness in his prayer at the beginning of the letter. He says (1:3) “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy...”
- 2) This is thankfulness for believers who have served you and influenced you for Christ. When was the last time you wrote a thank you note simply to say to someone, “I am thankful for you. I see Jesus in you and it makes a difference in my life. Thank you for being faithful. Thank you for serving well, suffering well, modeling humility and a love for Christ and His word.”
- 3) Paul is showing us how to be thankful for one another. It is a thankfulness that is not complete until it is shared.
- 4) Second, Paul wants us to learn to be thankful as a replacement for anxiety over circumstances. And again, this kind of thankfulness is related to prayer.

Read 4:6-7

- 5) You see, thankfulness is not merely the fruit of will-power. Rather, it is the fruit of dependent, faith-based prayer. There is no better way to be free from your anxiety than to cast it by faith upon the only ONE who has the sovereign power to manage and control the circumstances that provoke it. And when you do, you are free to be thankful... which is one of the marks of a true child of God.

3. Well, this is just a sample of the issues that Paul is concerned about in his letter to the Philippians. He is writing merely as a faithful pastor to the church he loves because he wants to see them be all that they can become for their own joy and for the glory of Christ.