

# Philippians: Rejoicing in Christ

## TITLE

The Book of Philippians is named after the recipients. Specifically, the book is addressed to the Christians who lived in the city of Philippi (1:1).

## BACKGROUND

On his second missionary journey, in response to “the Macedonian call” (Acts 16:9, 10), Paul and his company sailed to Philippi, a Roman colony which was an important city in Macedonia (now the northern part of Greece). Though not large, Philippi was a city with historical significance. Most of us know of it because Paul went there with the gospel. Acts 16 tells of some of Paul’s work there: the conversion of Lydia and her household, the cure of a demon-possessed girl, and the conversion of a jailer.

After Paul left Philippi, he maintained a close tie with the new Christians there. They sent support to Paul wherever he traveled (1:5; 4:15, 16). He made a special effort to visit them whenever he could; he loved this church (4:1). When Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he wrote several “prison epistles” (see notes in the article “Ephesians: Christ and His Church”). One was to the struggling congregation at Philippi (1:1, 7, 13, 14; 4:22) in about A.D. 60-62.

This letter was not written to present a closely-reasoned treatise on basic Christian truth, like Romans. Nor was it written primarily to correct doctrinal and moral errors, as were the letters to the Corinthians. Rather, it is a *personal letter*.

Paul mentions at least four reasons for writing. First, they had sent help to him at Rome (1:5; 2:25ff.; 4:10, 14, 18), and he wanted to thank them. Second, since help had been brought by Epaphroditus (2:25; 4:18), who had become deathly ill (2:25-30), Paul wanted to ease their minds about the matter. Third, he wanted them to know of his plans to send Timothy soon and of his long-range plans to visit (2:19-23; 1:26; 2:24; see Philem. 22). Fourth, he wanted to send them a message of love, encouragement, and edification.

Several themes run through the book. A prominent one is the theme of *joy* (4:4-7). The words “joy” and “rejoice” are found at least sixteen times in the book. This is not joy because of “a positive mental attitude.” Rather, this is joy *in Christ*. The phrase “in Christ” or its equivalent is found nineteen times in the

book. As you read the book, look for the many references to “Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

## OUTLINE

Since Philippians is a personal letter, any attempt to outline it must, of necessity, be artificial. One classic outline centers on Christ: Chap. 1: Christ is our *purpose* (1:21). Chap. 2: Christ is our *pattern* (2:5). Chap. 3: Christ is our *prize* (3:13, 14). Chap. 4: Christ is our *provision* (4:13, 19). Here is a list of the contents:

- I. PAUL’S SALUTATION (1:1, 2).
- II. THANKSGIVING and prayer for the Philippians (1:3-11).
- III. INSIGHT on Paul’s imprisonment and on suffering in general (1:12-30).
- IV. ENCOURAGEMENT to unity by being humble and obedient, as Christ was (2:1-18).
- V. A FUTURE PLAN to send Timothy and an immediate plan to send Epaphroditus (2:19-30).
- VI. WARNINGS against false teachers; Paul himself held up as the proper example to follow (3).
- VII. MISCELLANEOUS EXHORTATIONS for unity, joy, right thinking (4:1-9).
- VIII. GRATITUDE for their gift, with teaching on contentment (4:10-19).
- IX. CONCLUSION: personal greetings and blessing (4:20-23).

## LESSONS FROM PHILIPPIANS

Even though the joy emphasized in the book is not a result *merely* of “a positive mental attitude,” Philippians does contain some of the finest material on the positive attitude that should characterize a Christian (2:5; 3:13, 14; 4:4-8).

Most of us have often heard the words “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (4:13). This can be used as a general truth, but Paul had in mind something *specific* when he penned the words: Through Jesus, he had learned to be *content* regard-

less of his financial or physical condition (4:11, 12). We can learn to be content through Jesus.

Scholars have struggled with the implications of the phrase “in Christ.” Some translations expand it to read “union with Christ” or “in Christ’s body.” Probably it is better to leave it as it reads. This relationship with Jesus is so close and so intimate that the only

way it can be expressed is to say one is “in Christ.”

Although the letter is not a doctrinal treatise, it contains a beautiful Christological passage: 2:5-11. Some think this was an early Christian hymn. It is a deep passage, but Paul uses it for a simple purpose: to teach us to give ourselves unselfishly for others. If we will, someday God will reward us!

## ===== *How to Be Happy in Chains (Philippians 1:3-11)* =====

Paul was imprisoned in chains at Rome. He could have spent his time in self-pity and complaint. Instead, he rejoiced and encouraged others to do the same (4:4-7). We may not be physically imprisoned, but we wear chains of varying sizes and lengths: failing health, a marriage going sour, job-related stress, children breaking our hearts. How could Paul be happy in his chains? How can we be happy in ours? Paul tells us in the “thanksgiving” section of his letter to the Philippians (1:3-11).

### I. LOOK AT THE PAST WITH THANKSGIVING TO GOD (1:3-5).

A. When Paul thought about his ten-year association with the church at Philippi, he had nothing but fond memories!

1. He thanked his God for *all his* remembrance of them (v. 3)!
2. He could offer prayers for *all* of them with joy (v. 4; note also “you *all*” in vv. 7, 8).

B. Does this mean nothing but good things had happened when Paul was at Philippi—that the church at Philippi was perfect? No (4:2; Acts 16:16ff.).

1. It must mean that when Paul looked back on the unpleasant things, he could see the *good* that came from them (Rom. 8:28).

- a. His mistreatment at Philippi resulted in the conversion of the jailer (Acts 16:16-34).
- b. His leaving resulted in the gospel being preached in other places (Acts 16:39).

2. It certainly meant that Paul *chose* to remember good things about them.

a. Their “participation” in the gospel from the first to the present (v. 5).

(1) The word translated “participation” [*koinonia*] was an important word to Paul (1:7; 2:1; 3:10; 4:15). It means “to have in common” and refers to “a joint sharing.”

(2) Because of their common faith, the Philippians shared what they had with Paul (4:10, 15, 16). When we support missionaries, we *participate* in their efforts!

b. We can concentrate on bad things that have happened and end up embittered men and women, or we can remember the good things, give thanks to God, and be happy.

### II. LOOK AT THE PRESENT WITH CONFIDENCE IN GOD (1:6-8).

A. When Paul thought about the Philippian Christians, he was filled with love (vv. 7, 8) and confidence (v. 6a)! *Confidence* is a theme running through the book (the Greek word for “confident” occurs six times). *Why* was Paul confident?

1. First, because of who God is: God is One who works in us (v. 6b)!

a. Paul did not take credit for the beginning of the church in Philippi; he says *God* began that good work!

b. He said, “Whatever God starts, He finishes!”

2. Second, because of who the Philippians were: God was *able* to work in their lives because of their perseverance (vv. 7, 8).

a. God does not look for perfect people in whom to work; He looks for those who will *let* Him work in their lives.

b. Specifically, Paul mentioned their fellowship regarding him, the gospel, and grace (v. 7).

(1) When the gospel was attacked, they loved and defended it.

(2) When Paul was in prison, they did not turn their backs (2 Tim. 1:8), but aided him.

B. Whatever our task, if we are faithful Christians and that task is right, we do not face it alone. God is always working in our lives (2:13; see Eph. 3:20).

### III. LOOK AT THE FUTURE WITH PRAYER TOWARD GOD (1:9, 10).

A. “One can look at the future optimistically or misty-optimally.” Paul was not one who ignored the realities of life. He knew the Philippians would continue to face challenges. His solution was *prayer*! Specifically, he prayed that the Philippians would continue to *mature* in the Lord:

1. Grow in *agape* love (v. 9a).
2. Grow in a knowledge of God’s Word (v. 9b).
3. Grow in the ability to decide between right and wrong (vv. 9b, 10a; see Heb. 5:14).
4. Grow in Christian character (v. 10b).
5. Grow in living “fruitful” lives (v. 11a; see Jn. 15:8; Gal. 5:22, 23).

B. If we would face the future with confidence, let us determine, to the best of our ability:

1. To live closer to God each day (v. 11b). Abide in Him. Jesus said, “He who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5b).
2. To glorify God in all things (v. 11b). Mt. 5:15, 16 says, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”
3. To leave the future in God’s hands, knowing that when Christ returns (vv. 6, 10), everything will turn out right!

CONCLUSION

We can look at the past with misgivings or with thanksgiving. We can look at the present with tearfulness or with confidence. We can look at the future with

apprehension or with prayer. We can rely on our own strength, or we can learn to rely on God. One is a sure formula for unhappiness; the other is God's formula for *happiness*.

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