



INTRODUCTION TO PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Introductory material

More than any of his other letters, Paul's priceless writing to the Philippians is a love letter. It lacks the usual formal doctrinal introduction of his other epistles addressed to churches. From the outset, this letter is above all, very personal and practical. Theological doctrine is woven into the fabric of the letter to create a masterpiece of poured out godly love, precious knowledge of Christ, and practical advice for everyday living.

Writer

The apostle Paul is the author of the epistle. His fellow servant of Jesus Christ, Timothy, who was with Paul when he first visited Philippi joined him in sending the letter to the Philippians. However, from Paul's reference to Timothy in Philippians 2:19-24, it is clear that Timothy was not a coauthor.

Paul first preached the gospel at Philippi while on his second missionary journey. About five years later, on his way to Corinth, he visited Philippi a second time to encourage the church there. Three months later he traveled through Philippi again on his way back to Asia Minor (Acts 20:1-6).

Paul's epistle shows a special love and joy in fellowshiping with the Philippians. He had little to write in way of reproof. Words of love flowed freely.

Recipients

The epistle was written to the church at Philippi, the first Christian church to be established on the continent of Europe. The city of Philippi was named for Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. It was a Roman colony governed by Roman law, but functioned in the midst of a Greek culture. It was mainly inhabited by Greeks, although there were some Roman citizens and Jews. Philippi was a wealthy city, the foremost city in that part of Macedonia (Acts 16:12), situated on one of the main trade routes between Europe and Asia. It was best known for its school of medicine, gold mines, and fertile farmland. The attached map shows the location of Philippi in Macedonia.

Paul's first visit to Philippi had been about ten years before this epistle was written. Acts 16:6-40 records the account of Paul's call to Macedonia and his stay in Philippi during his second missionary journey

around 50 A. D. While traveling through Asia Minor, a vision had appeared to Paul calling him to come to Macedonia. Concluding that it was the Lord calling him to preach the gospel there, Paul immediately set sail, landing at Neapolis and traveling inland to Philippi. Apparently there were not enough Jews in the city to form a synagogue, but they did meet for prayer on the Sabbath day by the riverside just outside the city. It was there that Paul spoke the word of the gospel to the assembled women and joyfully received Lydia as the first Christian convert in Europe (Acts 16:14-15).

Philippi was also the place of Paul's first imprisonment. In the jail cell with his co-worker, Silas, both found comfort in praying and singing hymns of praise to God (Acts 16:23-25). It was the prison ordeal which brought the second recorded European convert — the jailer (Acts 16:27-33). Lydia, the jailer, and their families were the beginning and the nucleus of Paul's beloved church at Philippi. Over the years, it became a church consisting mainly of Gentiles. That is most likely the reason that Paul used no Old Testament Scripture references in this letter. Also note that the Philippians to whom Paul refers in the letter have Greek, not Jewish names.

Date

Some believe that Philippians was written during Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea as recorded in Acts 23:23 to 26:32. However, because of his references to the palace guard (Philippians 1:13) and Caesar's household (4:22), most scholars think it more likely that Philippians was written from Rome. If so, it would have been written near the end of his imprisonment there (Acts 28:17-31), probably around A.D. 61. Earlier epistles written during his Roman imprisonment were Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Reasons for writing

Paul wrote this epistle for two reasons. First, he wrote because of his love for the Philippians. In 1:7 and 8, he writes that he has them in his heart and that he longs for them with the affection of Christ Jesus. In 4:1, he calls them, *My beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown.* *beloved.*

Philippians is a love letter to a church which Paul had planted. They had shown their care and concern for him (4:10). They had encouraged him through their willingness to share with him in his affliction (4:14). They had generously supported Paul and his ministry

(4:15-16), and upon hearing of his imprisonment, they had sent Epaphroditus with gifts to minister to him in prison (4:18).

Philippians is also a letter of instruction in practical Christian living. Paul gives the reminder that, *He who has begun a good work in you will complete it* (1:6). Then with love and tenderness, he calls the Philippian believers to, *Let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ* (1:27). He encourages them to share his own mind set and, *Press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus* (3:14-15). He also urges helpfulness, unity, and joy among all the believers (4:2-4).

Theme of Philippians

There are two main themes interwoven through the epistle: joy and unity. Joy comes as we take our eyes off worldly troubles and focus upon Jesus Christ. Unity of believers is established as we learn to see eye to eye through the mind of Christ.

Joy is a prominent theme of the letter. Paul sees joy, not as an option, but as a duty. At least six times he commands his readers to *rejoice*. In spite of being a prisoner in chains, Paul himself is able to rejoice. He rejoices because he is a prisoner in Christ (1:13). *What a triumphant little document this Philippian epistle is! Chains are clanking on the writer's wrists and ankles, but he makes them sound like bells of heaven!* (J. Sidlow Baxter, [Explore the Book](#)). Paul's own attitude sets the background for the theme of joy in Christ.

The unity of believers is also a theme in Philippians. Unity in the church comes through each individual conforming to the mind of Christ. Paul writes, *Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus* (2:5). Believers are to forsake worldly ways and worthless traditions and be united in pursuing the deeper spiritual life, putting their confidence in Christ and not in the flesh (3:3-4). Christ Himself is the deeper life.

Philippians, along with Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, is a Christological epistle, meaning that the emphasis is upon the person of Jesus Christ. In Philippians, Paul emphasizes that Christ is our reason for living, our example, our goal, our sufficiency, our reason for rejoicing, and the essence of our unity as believers. True spiritual life and growth are found only in Christ.

OUTLINE OF PHILIPPIANS

- I. Live For Christ - Philippians 1
- II. Learn From Christ - Philippians 2
- III. Lay Hold Of Christ - Philippians 3
- IV. Let Your Mind Dwell On Christ - Philippians 4

Invitation to Study Philippians

The apostle Paul, along with every other writer of the New Testament, stresses the necessity of the centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ in each individual life. How opposed this is to our modern way of thinking! Perhaps influenced by the modern philosophy of existentialism, the focus of preference in our modern world is "self." The pervasiveness of this way of thinking is evident in all aspects of our society, from politics to television advertising. It even surfaces in religious circles.

After reading and studying Paul's epistle to the Philippians, you will be thoroughly convinced that Paul's personal aim and goal for the church was to steer clear of all self-centeredness and to glory only in Christ. This epistle is a call to find all joy and contentment in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a warm encouragement to those who are already striving to put Him first in a world of many demands and struggles. It is a loving exhortation to those who have found themselves drawn away from the simplicity of their first love into the complicated circumstances of the material world.

The epistle was originally written to a congregation which included an Asian business woman and her household (Acts 16:14) and a jailer and his family. They were working people who faced the same kind of trials and temptations which we face today. No doubt they sometimes grew weary in their struggle to live for Christ. What a blessing Paul's epistle must have been to them! It will also be a blessing for you. Paul's call in this letter is to align your mind to the mind of Christ, to put Him first and foremost in your life so that you may triumph over your circumstances and rejoice in the Lord! Will you open your heart and mind to be taught by the Spirit of God as you read and study in these next few weeks? Will you take this letter as a personal encouragement and exhortation to put your pleasures and priorities in Godly order? Will you open yourself to God's awesome power and invite Him to bring the fullness of joy in Christ into your own life as you study and apply His word and grow deeper and surer in your spiritual walk?