

## STUDY ON THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

### INTRODUCING THE LETTER

Read Philippians 1:1-2, Acts 16

#### **The City of Philippi**

The letter was written to Christians in the Macedonian city of Philippi. Its history goes back to 361 BC, when a number of Greek settlers took over the obscure Thracian village of Krenides ("springs"). Philip II of Macedon, the Father of Alexander the Great, annexed the whole region in 356 BC and formally established Philippi as a city bearing his own name. It was fortified with an extensive city wall, part of which still survives. A garrison stationed there made it a military strong point to guard gold from the nearby mines, which enriched Philip by 1000 talents of gold each year.

The Romans conquered Macedonia in 168-167 BC. Philippi was given the high honor of the "ius Italicum" ("law of Italy"), which meant that it was governed by Roman law, its citizens were Roman citizens, its constitution was modeled after Rome's, its architecture copied Roman styles, its coins bore Roman inscriptions, Latin was widely used, and its citizens wore Roman dress.

In spite of a strong Roman influence, the city's religious life was quite diverse. It included monuments reflecting emperor worship, plus Greek gods, and their Roman counterparts, especially Jupiter (known in the Greek world as Zeus). The local Thracians worshipped the goddess Artemis, while there were also sanctuaries to Egyptian gods, especially Isis and Serapis, and to the Phrygian Cybele, known as the great Mother-goddess. There was a small Jewish community, but probably not a regular synagogue congregation which would have required ten men. Instead, several women met outside the city on the Sabbath for prayer (Acts 16:13).

#### **The Church at Philippi**

The Gospel came to Philippi sometime around 49 to 52 AD. On the Second Missionary Journey, Paul and Silas were "*they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia*" (Acts 16:6). They tried to go into Bithynia, "*but the Spirit did not permit them*" (Acts 16:7). They finally reached the coast at Troas, where Paul had a vision of a Macedonian begging him, "*Come over to Macedonia and help us*" (Acts 16:9). Paul took this as God's call.

In Philippi, Paul and Silas met some women praying on the Sabbath at the river, led by Lydia, "*a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God*" (Acts 16:14). She welcomed Paul's message, was baptized with her household, and invited the missionaries and a cluster of believers into her home, where the tiny church began to grow.

One day they were met by a slave girl who prophesied from an evil spirit. Finally, Paul turned to her and said to the spirit, "*I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.*" With their slave girl no longer able to prophecy, her owners had Paul and Silas flogged and thrown in prison for "*These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe.*" (Acts 16:20-21). At midnight an earthquake opened the prison doors, and the jailer was converted and baptized with his household in the middle of the night. At daylight, Paul and Silas were thrown out of town, but not before a church had been established.

After Paul and Silas left, Luke may have stayed on in Philippi. Paul kept in touch with the Macedonian churches through Timothy (Acts 19:21-23; Philippians 2:19-20) and visited them twice more, probably during the autumn of 54-55 and again in the spring of 55-56 (Acts 20:1-3).

The church at Philippi provided financial and material support several times during Paul's journeys. He bragged to the Corinthians about their generosity:

*"Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God."* (2 **Corinthians 8:1-5**).

They shared with Paul a *"for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now"* (**Philippians 1:5**). Paul recalls, *"Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. For even in Thessalonica, you sent aid once and again for my necessities."* (**4:15-16**). The warm Letter to the Philippians is strong evidence to this deep love between the apostle and some of his dearest converts.

### Author

Paul's authorship of Philippians was unanimously supported among the Church Fathers and has rarely been challenged in our day. Nearly all scholars accept this as a genuine letter of Paul.

### Opposition Mentioned in this Letter:

There are several opponents mentioned in Philippians:

1. Rival Christian preachers (1:15-18),
2. Non-Christians who oppose the Gospel (1:1:27-28; 3:18-19),
3. Euodia and Syntyche, members at Philippi who are feuding with each other (4:2-3),
4. A group who Paul refers to as "those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh" (3:2).

This latter group has spawned a multitude of identifications. It seems pretty clear, however, that these are Judaizers, that is, "Jewish Christian missionaries from outside the congregation who wanted Gentile Christians to become Jews in practice," particularly by having them circumcised.

### Purpose of this Letter:

Paul's immediate concerns in writing this letter are:

1. To recommend to the Philippians one of their number, Epaphroditus, who had come to help him in prison, but had fallen ill and was being sent home.
2. To let the concerned Philippians, know about the current state of Paul's welfare.
3. To prevent the Judaizers from persuading the Philippian Christians to submit to circumcision.
4. To encourage the Philippian believers to quiet their dissention and be united.

Through the letter, however, Paul does much more than this. He provides the inspiration and encouragement of a friend, mentor, and fellow believer who finds Christ's strength and peace while struggling with opponents, anxiety, physical needs, and fear for his life. To see how a man, an apostle, meets obstacles and overcomes them in Christ, makes this letter very relevant for our day, too.

### Themes

Paul develops several themes in Philippians -- joy and fellowship among others.

## Rejoicing

Joy, the Greek noun *chara*, which means "the experience of gladness," "rejoicing, merriness.". Sometimes Christians act as if Christianity were a sorrowful religion. It is not. It is a religion of joy and love. Joy and rejoicing are key and frequent words in Philippians. Examples include:

1:4 - "always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with **joy**...."

1:18 - "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I **rejoice**, yes, and will **rejoice**...."

1:25-26 - "And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and **joy** of faith, that your **rejoicing** for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again."

3:1 - "Finally, my brethren, **rejoice** in the Lord!"

4:1 - "Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my **joy** and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved!"

4:4 - "**Rejoice** in the Lord always. Again, I will say, **rejoice!**"

For Paul, joy is a key component of the Christian life -- a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). "The kingdom of God is ... righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). This is not just a present joy in the midst of trials, but a joy that will reach its completion in the future Kingdom of God.

## Fellowship

*Koinōnia* is another keyword in Philippians. "Partnership" (NIV), "sharing" (NRSV), and "fellowship" (KJV) is the Greek noun *koinōnia*, "close association involving mutual interests and sharing, association, communion, fellowship, close relationship." It is used often to describe relationships with God and with others in the Christian community," as it does here. Examples include:

2:1 - "... if any **fellowship** of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy...."

3:10 - " that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the **fellowship** of His sufferings, being conformed to His death...."

4:14 - "Nevertheless you have done well that you **shared** in my distress."

## Unity and Selflessness

The Philippians, beloved as they are by Paul, have some bickering and dissention going on. You can see this thread going throughout the short letter, sometimes subtly, by inference, and sometimes head-on.

1:27 - Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.

2:2-4 - fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

2:14 - Do all things without complaining and disputing.

## ***In Christ***

One of the characteristic phrases in Paul -- and, incidentally, John's writings too -- is "in Christ" or "in the Lord," the common Greek prepositional phrase "en Christō" or "en kyriō". Here the preposition "en" is used to designate a close personal relation in which the object of the preposition is viewed as the control influence. So, the preposition "en" here means, "under the control of, under the influence of, in close association with." We see this phrase again and again in Philippians. Paul anchors all of the Christian life in one's relationship to Christ.

3:3 - "For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, **rejoice in Christ Jesus....**"

3:8-9 - "I may gain Christ and be found **in him....**"

3:9 - "but that which is through faith **in Christ....**"

3:14 - "I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God **in Christ Jesus.**"

4:1 - "... so stand fast **in the Lord**, beloved"

4:2 - "I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind **in the Lord.**"