

# INTRODUCTION TO PHILIPPIANS STUDY - THE SURPASSING WORTH OF KNOWING CHRIST

Philippians

Key Verse: 3:8

**“What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ...”**

## Author, Date and Place of Writing

Paul wrote this letter (1:1), probably around A.D. 62, while in chains (1:7, 13, 14, 17) and in prison in Rome (1:13; 4:22).

## Place in Scripture

Philippians is one of four Prison Epistles, along with Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon. The other three Epistles seem to have been written right around the same time, at the beginning of Paul's imprisonment in Rome. From 1:12-14 and 25 it seems that Philippians was written toward the end of this first imprisonment.

## The Church at Philippi

The first church Paul planted on European soil was in Philippi. It was on his second missionary journey. But initially Paul had no idea to go there. He had been trying to go to Asia Minor, but the Holy Spirit did not allow him to. Then one night he saw a vision of a man from Macedonia, calling, **“Come over to Macedonia and help us!”** (Ac16:6-10) So Paul concluded that God had called Paul and his companions to preach the gospel to the people in Macedonia. So they crossed the Aegean Sea going westward. The first place Paul and his companions encountered was Philippi.

Although it was in Macedonia, Philippi was actually a small Roman colony established in 42 B.C., mainly for military veterans. The city was wealthy and predominantly Gentile, and due to its population and its laws it felt like a miniature Rome.

In starting churches in new places Paul usually went first to a Jewish synagogue. But in Philippi there seems to have been no synagogue, so he went outside the city gate to the river, where they expected to find a place of prayer.

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When Paul sat down and began to speak to the women gathered there, God opened the heart of Lydia, a woman from Thyatira, a worshiper of God and a dealer in purple cloth. She immediately invited Paul and his companions to come and stay at her house. Paul crossed the ethnic and gender barriers and went (Ac16:13-15). It was the beginning of the church in Philippi. Since then, Lydia's house became the center where the new believers met for prayer and fellowship (Ac16:40). Through Lydia's influence it seems that other women were encouraged to become active in this new church (4:2-3).

As soon as Paul's ministry in Philippi began, he encountered persecution. When by the power of the Holy Spirit Paul drove the evil spirit out of a slave girl, her owners who had made a lot of money from her were upset and had Paul and Silas put in prison. Though they were severely beaten, that night, to the other prisoners' surprise, they were praying and singing hymns to God. Then God suddenly sent an earthquake and the prison doors opened. The jailer was about to commit suicide, but Paul stopped him. He asked, **"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"** Paul told him, **"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household."** **At that hour of the night, the jailer took Paul and Silas, washed their wounds, and he and his whole household were baptized."** (Ac16:16-34). In this way the jailer's family was added to the new church at Philippi.

In Philippians 1:5 Paul says that the Philippian believers were his **"partners in the gospel from the first day until now."** In 4:15 Paul says that in their early acquaintance with the gospel, the church at Philippi was the only one that shared with him in the matter of giving and receiving. When he was in Thessalonica they sent him aid more than once when he was in need (4:16). This reveals that Paul had a special, personal love relationship with them (1:4, 5, 7, 8; 4:1). They prayed for Paul, shared in his troubles, were concerned for him, and participated with him in defending and confirming the gospel (1:7, 14, 19; 4:10). It seems the only real problem this church had was two powerful women who had contended at Paul's side and were having some kind of disagreement (4:2-3).

## **Occasion and Purpose of This Letter**

A messenger from Philippi, Epaphroditus, seems to have brought a gift from the Philippians to Paul in prison, and he took care of Paul's needs (2:25; 4:18). But then Epaphroditus became ill and almost died (2:27). The Philippians heard that he

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was ill and became distressed (2:26). After his recovery, Paul was sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi with this letter, to comfort them (2:28). He told them in this letter of his plans to send Timothy to them soon (2:19). He realized that the Philippians had become worried about him being in prison in Rome for so long. So through this letter he wanted them to know that through his presence there the gospel was being heard throughout the whole palace guard (1:13) and among those who belonged to Caesar's household (4:22). Paul wrote to assure them that he was content and full of joy, even though he was in chains, because he was in Christ (1:21). Furthermore, he was defending and confirming the gospel (1:7), and the gospel was advancing (1:12). Paul encouraged them to have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, by imitating Christ's humility (2:2-8). He urged them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, saying, **"...it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose"** (2:12-13). Then, in chapter 3 Paul warned them to watch out for Judaizers, who were insisting that Gentile Christians be circumcised so that they could boast in their flesh (3:2-3). Paul exhorted them to rejoice in the Lord always and think of what is noble and admirable, and to put into practice what they had learned from Paul (3:1; 4:4-9). At the end of the letter he thanks them for their gift and assures them of God's provision for them (4:10-19).

## Characteristics

**Testimonial:** In contrast to his other epistles, which usually consist of a doctrinal part and a practical part, Paul's letter to the Philippians is very personal and testimonial throughout. He first speaks about his personal struggles while he is in chains and his secret of joy (1:18-26, 30). Then he writes of his personal knowledge of Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:17, 20, 22, 27). Next, Paul shares how after meeting Christ his confidence, value system and goals dramatically changed (3:4-14). He puts forth his own example and lifestyle for believers to follow (3:17-18). Finally, he shares his secret of contentment (4:12-13, 18). Paul's teaching in this letter was not formal and doctrinal, but very personal and experiential. This way of teaching is very effective.

**Relational:** Again, in contrast to his other epistles, in Philippians Paul does not mention that he is an apostle; he includes Timothy as co-sender; and, he addresses the overseers and deacons (1:1). In his opening prayer he reveals his special joy and affection for the believers in Philippi (1:3-5, 7-8). Throughout this

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letter he calls them “brothers and sisters” and “dear friends” (1:12a; 2:12; 3:1,13a; 4:1,8a). He also earnestly appeals that their relationships with one another be Christ-like (2:1-5). He and the Philippian believers were co-working because they shared in God’s mission and in the joy of sacrificing for it (2:17-18). He exemplifies a healthy, co-working relationship with two younger men, Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30). He was concerned about the relationship between two women in the Philippian church and its influence on the larger community, so he personally pleaded with them to be of the same mindset (4:1-3). Based on their past personal experience with him, Paul could advise them on how to continue to live (4:9). Finally, the Philippians did not just receive from Paul; they also were concerned about him and shared in his troubles, supporting him financially (4:10,14-16). Paul’s relationship with the Philippians and with his coworkers was one of mutual love and respect, and it was intimate.

**Joy, Glad and Rejoicing:** These words are repeated sixteen times throughout the letter, and in Greek they all are the same root word (khah-: 1:4,18,18,25; 2:2,17,17,18,18,28,29; 3:1; 4:1,4,4,10). It seems that the Philippian church itself had been born in the midst of rejoicing during persecution (Ac16:25,34). Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal5:22). Paul was now in Rome in chains, and the Philippians were concerned about him. But he wanted them to know that he in fact was full of joy. He prayed for them with joy (1:4), he rejoiced that the gospel was being preached (1:18), he rejoiced when they grew spiritually (2:2), he rejoiced during times of sacrifice (2:17-18), they themselves were a source of joy to him (4:1), and he rejoiced that they were concerned for him (4:10). Paul also admonished them to “**rejoice in the Lord always**” (3:1; 4:4). Such joy does not come from our situation or circumstances. The secret of having such joy is to live in a personal relationship with Christ.

**The Hymn of Christ:** Paul includes in his letter to the Philippians a special poem about Christ that many scholars believe was an early Christian hymn (2:5-11). This “hymn of Christ” is rich in theological understandings of the nature of Christ: his incarnation, humiliation, servanthood, obedience, death, resurrection and exaltation. Paul shared this hymn to help the Philippians have the same mindset as Christ so they could build unity among themselves.

**To Advance the Gospel:** Paul repeats the word “gospel” ten times in this letter (1:5,7,12,14,16,27,27; 2:22; 4:3,15). Paul lived a life worthy of the gospel and encouraged the Philippians to do the same. It was the gospel that bound them

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together. In their mutual commitment to the gospel, Paul and the Philippians were partners. Together they defended, confirmed, and proclaimed the gospel. In this way the gospel advanced, even while Paul was in prison. The gospel never retreats; it always advances.

**Press on Toward the Goal:** When Paul wrote this letter he had already completed his three missionary journeys, planting churches throughout the Roman Empire. In the course of doing so, he had grown as a spiritually mature person, regarding everything as a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. However, he was not complacent or gloating over his success and achievements. He was ready to forget everything that was behind and to strain toward what is ahead, pressing on toward the goal to win the prize (3:12-14). He encourages all mature Christians to have this same view of things (3:15). His example inspires all those who have worked hard for the Lord to forget what is behind and press on toward our heavenly goal.

**Do not be Anxious; Pray:** Paul's teaching on prayer in 4:6-7 is another distinctive mark of Philippians. He seems to have written these verses from his personal experience. Though his situation was so uncertain and the demands of his ministry were so great, he was not anxious; he came to God in prayer and found the peace of God. These verses have inspired countless Christians to pray in the midst of life's troubles and find the peace of God that transcends all understanding.

**Think About Such Things:** Another inspiring part of Philippians is Paul's words in 4:8. Paul encourages the believers to think about whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable - and whatever is excellent or praiseworthy. The world we live in is God's good world, reflecting his glory and character, and yet at the same time it has been poisoned by sinful humanity. Instead of passively allowing our minds to be poisoned by the ignoble things of the world, we need to actively engage our minds in thinking about the noble things in it. As we practice this teaching, we grow in Christian character, joy and maturity.

**Contentment:** The final characteristic of Philippians is Paul's sharing his secret of being content. As a gospel worker Paul had experienced both times of need and times of plenty. But he learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. He fully trusted Jesus and drew strength from him to bear all the difficulties involved in gospel ministry, as well as all its blessings (4:11-13).

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## Major Theme

Paul's major theme in this letter seems to be living a Christ-centered life. The words "Jesus" (21 times), "Christ" (36 times), and "Lord" (15 times) are repeated a total of 72 times in this letter, not including the pronouns that refer to him. Paul lived a Christ-centered life; his mind and heart were full of Christ; to him, **"to live is Christ and to die is gain"** (1:21), so he was ready to die for Christ. He realized the surpassing worth of knowing Christ (3:8). His master passion was to know Christ - the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (3:10-11). It was his Christ-centered life that was his source of joy and contentment, even in the midst of hardships. It made him a humble and mature man who was able to build up others.

Paul had a long-standing and close love relationship with the Philippian Christians, which could have caused them to focus only on the man Paul. He also was aware of their natural tendency toward selfish ambition. In addition, he was concerned about the possible influence of Judaizers on them, about their tendency to be complacent in material affluence, and about the possibility of their becoming fearful of persecution related to his own. If they were distracted by these things, they could lose their joy and would not grow. So he wrote this letter with a Christ-centered emphasis to help the Philippian Christians put their focus on Christ himself and to grow in maturity in him.

## Purpose of Our Study

Through this study we want to learn the Christ-centered life and value system of Apostle Paul so that we may grow in Christian maturity: to find the secret of joy, co-working and contentment in the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. In our time of material affluence and selfish individualism, this letter seems especially relevant. Through learning how to be Christ-centered, we can build up our brothers and sisters in Christ. Through this study we also want to avoid the influence of legalistic people and put our full confidence in knowing Christ himself.

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## Outline

1. Greetings, thanks and prayer (1:1-11)
  - a. Greetings (1:1-2)
  - b. Thanks (1:3-8)
  - c. Prayer (1:9-11)
  
2. Living for Christ joyfully, even in chains (1:12-30)
  - a. Paul's chains actually advanced the gospel (1:12-14)
  - b. Rejoice whenever Christ is preached (1:15-18)
  - c. Paul's eager hope to exalt Christ in his body (1:19-21)
  - d. Paul's conviction that he will remain to help the Philippians (1:22-26)
  - e. Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel (1:27-30)
  
3. "Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus" (2:1-30)
  - a. Paul's appeal for unity (2:1-4)
  - b. Christ's humiliation and exaltation (2:5-11)
  - c. Continue to work out your salvation (2:12-18)
  - d. Timothy and Epaphroditus, examples of Christ's mindset (2:19-30)
  
4. "I want to know Christ" (3:1--21)
  - a. Watch out for legalistic, self-righteous influence (3:1-3)
  - b. Paul realized the surpassing worth of knowing Christ (3:4-9)
  - c. Paul's desire to know Christ and pressing toward the goal (3:10-14)
  - d. Follow Paul's example and be aware of enemies of the cross (3:15-21)
  
5. Paul's final exhortations (4:1-9)
  - a. Plead with gospel women to have the same mind in the Lord (4:1-3)
  - b. Rejoicing, gentleness, prayer, peace and noble thinking (4:4-9)
  
6. Thanksgiving and blessing (4:10-23)
  - a. Paul's thanks for their gifts and contentment in Christ (4:10-20)
  - b. Final greetings (4:21-23)