

TO LIVE IS CHRIST

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

The Birth of the Church at Philippi

Today, we begin a study in the book of Philippians. Philippians has been called the ‘sweetest book’ of the New Testament. Paul the author of this letter is not addressing problems. His letter to the Philippians is about rejoicing and possibly that is why people love his words so much!

Vernon Caruthers, a pastor on Sermon Central says, “When Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians he was not on some royal cruise ship enjoying a vacation, he wasn’t at some easy job making more money than ever before,Many people’s JOY and PEACE is hinged upon "WHERE" they are and "WHAT" is taking place around them. When all is well, then they are well. Where was Paul? Paul was in PRISON. He knew that before very long he would die for what he believed and for ‘in whom he believed.’ However Paul’s JOY and PEACE of MIND was anchored in Jesus Christ who lived within him. He rejoiced ‘in Christ’ and not in things.”

The psalmist wrote in *Psalm 37:23 (ESV)* ²³ *The steps of a man are established by the LORD, when he delights in his way.* Someone has said that God not only lovingly orders our **steps** but He also orders our **stops**. That is why scripture tells us to wait on the Lord to bring about His perfect will. God ordered both the steps and stops of Paul which led to the birth of the church at Philippi. Philippi in modern-day Greece was the first European city to receive the gospel of Christ from Paul. It should not be confused with Caesarea Philippi in Israel. Years after his time there, Paul would write a letter to the Philippians that speaks of his joy and hope in the midst of everything life throws at us.

The first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas had ended and they were preparing to make a second one. Paul felt strongly that they should make a return visit to the churches that they had already established. Barnabas agreed, but wanted to take John Mark along with them. The problem was that Mark had deserted them on their first missionary journey (*Acts 13:13*). Paul was not willing to risk Mark bowing out again, so he refused to take him. Barnabas, ever the encourager, insisted on Mark going. Their disagreement was so strong that Barnabas and Paul decided to go different ways. Barnabas took Mark to Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas and went to Syria and Cilicia (modern-day Turkey). The capital of Cilicia was Tarsus (Saul’s birthplace).

Paul and Barnabas’ difference of opinion reveals that conflict is not always bad. This is a perfect example where a difference of opinion turned into a catalyst for spiritual growth and Christian unity. I won’t go into the details but as Paul and Silas advanced on their missionary trip they experienced some ‘divine stops’ along the way. Remember this: God’s gifts put man’s best dreams to shame. We will pick up where Paul had a vision from the Lord.

Read Acts 16:8-10 (ESV) ⁸ So, passing by Mysia, [present day Turkey] they went down to Troas [a city in Turkey]. ⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia [Greece] was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Suddenly the stops Paul had been experiencing made sense! They were being directed to God’s destination rather than the destinations they had planned. Paul’s response to the Macedonian call was immediate and the results were life-changing!

It is interesting that the first person (Lydia) recorded as being brought to Christ as a result of the Macedonian call was not actually from Macedonia. Lydia was from the area Paul originally intended to visit. She was a seller of purple dye from Thyatira in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) about 250 miles away. Paul and Silas first met Lydia and a group of other women who were assembled for prayers along the Gangites River.

As with so many of the places that Paul preached, persecution followed close behind. He and Silas were thrown in jail there. In the dark of the night, bound and beaten, they began singing to God and after the songs in the night something joyful happened.

Read Acts 16:25-28 (ESV) ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶ and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”

You know the Philippian jailer story. He took Paul and Silas home with him after the earthquake, treated their wounds and he and his family accepted Christ that very night and were baptized. A decade later when Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he undoubtedly remembered the joy that came from his suffering and imprisonment while in Philippi. He had learned to focus on celebrating the Christian's joy even in the midst of suffering, He wrote to the church at Philippi in **Philippians 4:4 (ESV)** ⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. And he also wrote in **Philippians 4:11 (ESV)** ¹¹ ... for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.

Joy is the dominant theme of Philippians. Even while Paul was in prison, under threat of execution, joy was possible because Paul had learned to maintain a proper perspective.

Read Philippians 1:1-2 (ESV) ¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul began his letter according to the pattern of ancient letter-writing, signing the names of the writer and recipient along with a greeting at the beginning. And most often in Paul's greetings, he includes the name of his Lord – Jesus. You could say that everything Paul touched he turned to the gospel! He mentions Timothy. It appears that Timothy was not imprisoned with Paul but only his companion and helper there since later he mentions that he wants to send Timothy to Philippi.

Paul calls himself and Timothy *servants*, literally slaves of Christ Jesus. To be a slave of Christ is to be **abiding with Christ** like the slaves used to abide or live with their master. It means we submit our will to His will. It means we own nothing except that which He has given us. It means we are His possessions.

Read Philippians 1:3-5 (ESV) ³ *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,* ⁴ *always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy,* ⁵ *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

Once again we find Paul turning his thankfulness into the gospel. He says: *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you*, He is showing a pastor's joy in his people. Paul wanted to communicate to this church family the love and devotion he had for them. The intent of his letter is to remind his readers that our partnership with fellow believers in Christ is a call to be joyful.

Many kinds of joy are found in the Bible. Even the wicked are said to experience joy in their triumphs over the righteous. Many levels of joy are also described, including gladness, contentment, and cheerfulness. But the joy that the people of God should have is holy and pure. This joy rises above circumstances and focuses on the very character of God. **Psalm 31:7 (ESV)** ⁷ *I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul.*

Remembering our blessings brings joy! Paul is not thinking about himself. He is remembering other people rather than remembering his own problems. He dwells on the joyful times! Aren't the people we can relate to the best, those folks who are joyful people? They don't monopolize conversations giving us a list of their problems and complaints. Joyful people focus on the positive – lighting up a room when they come in!

Paul had a lot of bad experiences during his work for the Lord but he did not dwell on those. Some people can 'go on and on' going into great detail about problems and wrongs they experienced 20 years ago just as if it happened today. Paul had been illegally arrested, beaten, thrown in prison and humiliated before the Philippians but he did not dwell on that. He didn't say, 'I never got over those beatings which I received in Philippi. No! He focused on rejoicing and thankfulness for his loved ones there. He remembered the good times at Philippi where the jailer was converted, Lydia was converted, the demon possessed girl was converted. The

memories of these believers in Philippi brings him a great source of joy. And the folks in Philippi mirrored Paul's joy and thankfulness.

What do people think of when they think of you or me? "That man is a complainer. I'd just as soon avoid him." "She's a gripe, look at her face." Let's 'work at' not allowing negativity to overtake our walk for Christ. When Paul recollected those believers in the first European church and prayed for them, it brought him great joy. We reflect Christ best when we bring joy to others even long after we are separated from one another!

Read Philippians 1:6-7 (ESV) ⁶ *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* ⁷ *It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.*

Let's consider the mention of Christ beginning a good work in us. The Life Application Bible explains this way, "God's work *for* us began when Christ died on the cross in our place. His work *within* us began when we first believed. Now the Holy Spirit lives in us, enabling us to be more like Christ every day." Each of us is a 'work in progress' in our walk with our Savior and we all have our ups and downs. But, when we see Jesus face-to-face His work in us will be completed.

Paul not only had the Philippians in his thoughts. He told them: *I hold you in my heart*. We have brothers and sisters in Christ in our thoughts, they may even be in our prayers but are they in our hearts? I believe that the most joyful Christian 'heart relationships' often come from the common bond of shared service for the Lord and bonding together through times of trials and sickness and distress. Bearing one another's burdens gives us a 'heart connection'. We have a 'blood connection' within the family of God but our Christian fellowship grows when we are 'joined at the heart'.

Paul is overflowing with love for his brothers and sisters in Christ, and it overflows in the great joy that he has as he prays for them, as he thinks about them, and now as he expresses to them the love that is deep down in his heart.

Joy is the dominant theme of the letter to the Philippians. Paul is focusing on what the Christian experience should be – that is joyful.

The story is told of a conference at a Presbyterian church in Omaha. People were given helium filled balloons and told to release them at some point in the service when they felt like expressing the joy in their hearts. All through the service balloons ascended, but when it was over 1/3 of the balloons were unreleased.

Let your balloon go! Be joyful!