

Enjoying Life

A Study of Philippians

About the Author

The letter to the Philippians was written by the Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Before becoming a Christian, Paul was known as Saul. Born in Tarsus, a city in eastern Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), he was born near the same year as Jesus. Unlike most Jews living in this area, somehow Paul's family obtained Roman citizenship. However, he grew up in Jerusalem and was a strict Jew.

In the third chapter of Philippians, he makes the point that he is a "Hebrew of Hebrews." This meant that he was Jewish in every aspect and tried to keep the letter of the Jewish law. He was instructed in the Old Testament and in Jewish tradition by the greatest teacher of his day, Gamaliel. Saul himself became a teacher and a Pharisee in the strictest tradition.

Like most Pharisees of his day, Saul hated Christians. After Jesus was crucified, he led the movement to persecute the church. Under his leadership, Christians were imprisoned and killed. It was while on a journey to oppress the church that Saul had a miraculous encounter with Christ.

In Acts 9, we learn that Saul was on his way to Damascus when Christ appeared to him. Saul was made physically blind for a time, but his spiritual eyes were open. His name was then changed from Saul to Paul. From that day on, he followed Christ and became the greatest missionary of the church, traveling all over the Roman Empire preaching the good news about Jesus Christ.

Paul suffered many hardships for the sake of the gospel. He was beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, and imprisoned. It was during his first imprisonment at Rome as recorded in Acts 28:30 that Paul wrote this letter.

About the Philippians

Philippi was a Roman colony in northern Greece. It was the most important city in its region. While Philippi was in Greece, it was very proud of its Roman heritage. It was at Philippi that Mark Anthony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar, in 42 BC. Many of the people living in Philippi were descendants of the Roman soldiers and others who migrated to Philippi later on. So, the city had a heavy Roman influence. Latin, rather than Greek, was commonly spoken and the architecture

was clearly modeled on Rome. Worship of the emperor was an important aspect of the cultural and religious life of Philippi.¹

There were some Jews living in Philippi, but not many. It seems that there were not even enough Jewish men to establish a synagogue.

Paul's first visit to Philippi was only for a few days, but it was quite adventurous. Acts 16 gives the account of his visit. On the Sabbath, Paul led Lydia, a wealthy merchant, to Christ. Later, a demon-possessed girl stirred up trouble for them. She was a slave and made money for her masters by predicting the future. When Paul cast the demon out of her, she no longer could tell the future. This angered her owners, so they had Paul beaten and thrown in jail.

While in jail, an earthquake freed Paul and his friends from their chains. The jailer, seeing the doors open and the chains on the floor, thought that Paul had escaped. He readied himself for suicide. Paul stopped him and then told him the good news about Jesus Christ. That night the jailer received Christ and was baptized.

From these experiences, the church grew quickly in Philippi. By the next day when Paul is let out of jail, Lydia's house is filled with Christians.

The Purpose of Philippians

While Paul was imprisoned in Rome, the Philippians sent him a generous gift by way of one of their members, Epaphroditus.² While in Rome, Epaphroditus became so sick that he almost died. The Philippians heard about this and were very concerned.

Paul sent Epaphroditus back with this letter not only to let the Philippians know that Epaphroditus was fine, but also that he deserved a hero's welcome home. He also is writing them to let them know that he is fairing well while in prison and to thank them for their gift.

The main purpose of his letter seems to be to provide them with instruction. Already, false teachers were creeping in, seeking to lead them away from the true faith. Paul warns them to beware of these false teachers and to continue in the faith. He also is instructing them in how to live a joyous life in service to God.

The Theme of Philippians

The words joy and rejoice occur 14 times in the book of Philippians which has led some to call it "The Epistle of Joy." While Paul deals with several themes throughout the book (servanthood, unity in the church, false teachers, etc...), the primary theme is **the joy of knowing Christ**.

¹ Thielman, Frank. "Philippi and Its Church" In *NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: Philippians*. By Frank Thielman, 16. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 1995. Cf. Motyer, Alec, Philippians, in *The Bible Speaks Today* series and *New Testament Introduction*, by Donald Guthrie.

² There is some debate regarding where Paul was in prison. Since the book does not say, it is quite possible that it was Ephesus and not Rome.

Outline

- 1:1-11 The Joy of the Journey
 - 1:1-2 Greeting
 - 1:3-8 Prayer of Thanksgiving
 - 1:9-11 Prayer for maturity
- 1:12-18 A Joy Worth Suffering
- 1:19-26 A Joy Better than Life
- 1:27-30 A Joy in Troubled Times
- 2:1-4 The Joy of Loving Others
- 2:5-11 The Joy of Christ
- 2:12-18 The Joy of Pleasing God
- 2:19-30 The Joy of Being a Messenger
- 3:1-11 The Secret of Joy
- 3:12-16 A Joy Worth Striving For
- 3:17-4:1 Threats to Joy
- 4:2-9 The Joy of Trusting God
- 4:10-13 The Joy That Brings Contentment
- 4:14-23 The Joy of Sacrificial Giving