



Philippians

This remarkable letter, written while Paul was in prison, reveals a vision of life in Christ which takes seriously the example of living that Christ modelled, interwoven with the importance of rejoicing at all times and in all things. The vision of a life focussed on Christ that Paul held up focusses on two key themes: Christ as servant and Lord (2.5-11) and Christ as Lord and Saviour (3.20-21), from these two flow the vision of how the Philippians should live.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 14 mins
Short of time? Just read 1.1-11; 2.1-11; 4.1-9



Genre

Epistle



Anything tricky?

Very little, Philippians is quite an easy letter to read!



Inspiring quotes

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.
(Philippians 2.5-8)

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.
(Philippians 4.4)

¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.
(Philippians 4.12-13)



About the Author

The authorship of Philippians is attributed to Paul and Timothy and is one of the undisputed letters of Paul.

What do we know about him?

Paul is probably the best known of all the early Christians. Before encountering Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, he was a zealous Pharisee who sought to maintain the purity of Judaism. After his experience on the Damascus road, he turned his zeal to proclaiming Jesus Christ among the Gentiles. This brought him into conflict with some other early Christians, not least Peter, who thought that followers of Jesus Christ should convert to Judaism. He travelled around the Roman Empire (though primarily in Asia Minor – modern-day Turkey – and Greece) proclaiming the good

news of Jesus Christ and founding communities of Christians as he went. He also wrote a large number of letters, 13 of which are preserved in the New Testament. Philippians is one of these.

Timothy was born in Lystra in Asia Minor of a Jewish mother and Greek father. Acts 16.1-3 recounts his meeting of Paul in Lystra and of Paul's desire to take him with him on his journeys. Paul often sent Timothy to communities that he had founded to take letters to them and so that he could report to Paul about what was going on, as indeed he did with the Thessalonians (see 1 Thessalonians 3.2 and 6). Two letters in the New Testament (1 and 2 Timothy) are reputed to be letters of encouragement from Paul to Timothy in Ephesus. Christian tradition identifies Timothy as the first Bishop of Ephesus.



About the times

Philippians was written while Paul was in prison. Its date depends on which prison you think Paul was in when he wrote it. If he was in prison in Ephesus the letter would date to around ad 52-54; if in Caesarea the letter would date to around ad 58-60 and if in Rome it would date to around ad 62-64.

There are a variety of views on the location of Paul's imprisonment. Many scholars opt for Rome as the place where Philippians was written, but those who disagree do so vehemently!

What were people feeling?

We can tell by reading between the lines of Philippians that the Philippians were very anxious both about Paul, who was in prison, and about Epaphroditus, who had been sent to visit him in prison by the Philippians, but who had then become very ill. The message of Philippians focuses on the ability to rejoice no matter how difficult the circumstances.



What kind of Book is it?

A letter – Philippians offers guidance for Christian living focused around two key statements, one about Jesus as servant and Lord (2.5-11) and one about Jesus as Lord and Saviour (3.20-21).



How is it structured?

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| 1.1-2 | Introduction and greeting |
| 1.3-11 | Prayers giving thanks and interceding for the Philippians |
| 1.12-2.30 | A life focused on Jesus, servant and Lord |
| 3.1-4.9 | A life focused on Jesus, Lord and Saviour |
| 4.10-20 | Prayers, giving thanks and interceding for the Philippians |
| 4.21-23 | Farewell greetings |



Look out for...

Notice the theme of preparing for suffering, persecution and even death in Philippians and rejoicing anyway.

There were clearly some issues facing the community at Philippi, as you read see if you can work out what some of them were.

Paul clearly expresses his love for Timothy, for Epaphroditus and for the whole Philippian community in this letter – look out for signs of his affection as you read.



What could this mean for me?

Philippians 3.2-19 warns against self-centeredness. Look at the warnings Paul gives there and ask yourself whether you are in danger of falling into any of those traps.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Joy and rejoicing are themes that recur throughout the letter. What is the difference between being truly joyful and being superficially and insincerely cheerful?
- Discuss the Christ-hymn from 2.5-11 – what did you think about it? What do you think it is trying to communicate to us about Christ and about us?
- Paul talks to the Philippians about imitating him (3.17). Which Christians do you try and imitate and why?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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