

# Philippians

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- Author:** Paul.
- Date:** Written from prison in Rome about AD 60-62.  
Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon were written about the same time, and form a little group in Paul's writings called the Captivity Epistles.
- Theme:** "To live is Christ". 1:21
- Purposes:** To encourage the Philippian believers to pursue intimacy with Christ.  
To thank the Philippians for their generous gift.  
To report on Paul's circumstances.  
To encourage the Philippians to live joyfully regardless of the circumstances.  
To commend Timothy and Epaphroditus.  
To warn the Philippians against false teachers.

Philippians is probably the most personal, loving and joyful of all of Paul's epistles.

## Key verses:

*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.* 1:21

*At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* 2:11

*I can do everything through him who gives me strength.* 4:13

Philippi was a town about 18km inland from the Aegean Sea in the Roman province of Macedonia. It was named after Philip II, King of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. Luke describes Philippi as a "leading city of the district of Macedonia" (Acts 16:12). The Via Egnatia, the main highway from Rome to the east, ran through Philippi so it was a centre of trade and commerce.



Paul visited Philippi on his second and third missionary journeys. Acts 16 describes how the Church in Philippi was founded. Paul and Silas were thrown into jail after preaching the gospel, and seeing a slave girl delivered from evil spirits. The Lord miraculously released them from the jail, and this led to the jailer and his household becoming Christians and being baptized.

## Introduction 1:1-11

### Greetings 1:1-2

Paul and Timothy greet the *saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons*. 1:2

### Thanksgiving and prayer for the Philippians 1:3-8

Paul thanks God for the Philippians.

- for their partnership in the gospel
- because he is confident that *He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ*. 1:6
- because, regardless of the circumstances, they share God's grace with him.

Paul prays that:

- their love would abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight
- that they may be able to discern what is best
- that they may be pure and blameless till the day of Christ
- that they may be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.

All of this is for *the glory and praise of God*. 1:11

These opening verses clearly show Paul's love for the Philippians, and the special partnership relationship that he shared with them.

This greeting shows that the Church at Philippi was well established with overseers (or bishops/elders), and deacons.

Paul calls the Christians *saints in Christ Jesus*. This recognizes that the Philippian Christians were set apart for God and secure in their position in Christ.

Paul provides a wonderful example here for all Pastors and Church leaders. He really loved the Philippians; wanted the best for them; showed them how much he cared; laid down his life for their good, and worked with them in a partnership. His focus was on helping them come to maturity so that all the glory would go to the Lord. All Pastors take note!

## Paul's circumstances advance the gospel 1:12-26

### Paul's present imprisonment 1:12-18

Paul was under house arrest in Rome. This enabled him to meet with his supporters and also gave him opportunities to share the gospel with those in the palace guard. Thus his imprisonment was helping to advance the gospel, and this was encouraging the Christians to *speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly*. 1:14. Some were preaching out of envy and rivalry, others out of love. Paul rejoices in this because, regardless, Christ was being preached.

### Paul's anticipated deliverance 1:19-26

Paul will continue to rejoice because, through the prayers of the Philippians and with the help of the Holy Spirit, what has happened to him will lead to his deliverance. He knows he will have courage to face whatever happens because regardless of whether he lives or dies, Christ will be exalted. *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain*. 1:21. He wants to depart and be with Christ, (which is better by far!) but recognizes that it is necessary for him to live on so he can help them progress in their faith. *So that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me*. 1:26.

## Partnership in the gospel 1:27-4:9

Paul now gives the Philippians instructions and advice on how to conduct themselves *in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*. 1:27. This is done in partnership with him so that *whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one for the faith of the gospel*. 1:27.

## Live worthy of the Lord 1:27-2:4

Conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel includes:

- standing firm in one spirit (ie. being united)
- contending together for the gospel
- not being frightened by those who oppose the ministry
- believing in Christ
- suffering for Christ
- imitating Christ
- being like-minded
- loving each other
- not acting out of selfishness or conceit
- being humble
- looking to other peoples' interests as well as your own.

This is a description of a Church that is united in its purpose: to share the gospel. Everyone is honouring the Lord in the way that they live out their faith, and is working together so that those outside of Christ may know Him.

Is your Church like this?

## Imitate Christ's humility 2:5-11

Paul now explains that the qualities he has been advocating were demonstrated by the Lord Jesus Christ. We should have the same attitude that He had. Paul describes how Jesus willingly emptied Himself of His "Godness" at the incarnation when He became a man, and became a servant of us all.

The verses may have been an early hymn. They are so important it is worthwhile looking at them word by word.

*Who, being in very nature God....*

Jesus had (and has!) the very nature of God. The word for 'nature' is *morphe*. It means *form* or *essential character* so Jesus was God in His character and nature. The word 'being' is in the present continuous tense so it indicates that Jesus was, is, and always will be God in His nature. The word *morphe* does not relate to how the inner nature is expressed outwardly in terms of appearance. So before He was born Jesus had the nature of God; while He was a man He had the nature of God, and now that He is in heaven He has the nature of God. Jesus is God!

*did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing....*

Jesus always had *equality with God*. He did not seek to retain this but laid it down when He became a man. He willingly adopted a manner of existence that was different from His Father's, ie. that of both God and man. This is the *kenosis* of Christ. *Kenosis* is the act of emptying, making nothing, or making void.

*taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*

Jesus took on (*labon* - added to) *human likeness*. In doing so He did not lay aside His "Godness" but added to it. He added the *very nature* (*morphe* - essential character) of a man and was made in *human likeness* (*schema* - outward appearance or status). So Jesus who was (and is) God took on the external appearance and status of a man and in His essential nature became a servant. The word for servant is *doulos* - a slave; or one who serves others. Wow! The Almighty God willingly became a servant of us all!

Jesus was made in the likeness (*homoiomati*) of sinful men, Romans 8:3. While He was fully human in His nature, He was not exactly like us humans because He was without sin Hebrews 4:15. (If Jesus was exactly like us the word *eikon* - exactly like, would have been used rather than *homoiomati* - likeness). Jesus had a fully divine nature and a fully human nature - yet was without sin.

*And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.*

Jesus, as a man, humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the Father's will. Hebrews 5:8. This humbling was even to the point of laying down His life and dying on the Cross. To die on a cross was the ultimate shame in Roman society yet Jesus willingly did this for us. It showed just how much He loves us, and how submissive He was to the Father's will.



Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

God can exalt whoever He wishes. 1 Samuel 2:7. and humility is always the way to greatness! Matthew 18:4, 23:12.

God exalted Jesus because He willingly humbled Himself and became obedient to the Father's will. The word for exalted is *hyperypsosen*. It means super-exalted. God super-exalted Jesus through His resurrection and His ascension into heaven. He is now glorified, honoured, worshipped and loved. He has been given all authority and now has the name that is above any other name. He is Lord of everything in heaven and earth, and every knee must bow before Him and every tongue acknowledge that He is Lord.

What a privilege to know Him, and to spend our lives on earth and in eternity exalting and honouring Him!

### Work out your salvation 2:12-18

Jesus has given us the greatest example of humility by laying down His life for us and becoming our servant. We are, therefore, to work out our salvation by following His example. We are to do this with *fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.* 2:11,12.

When we are doing God's will we will shine out as stars in the midst of a wicked generation. We will:

- do everything without complaining or arguing
- be blameless and pure
- live without fault
- share the word of life with others.

Paul explains that, even though his life is about to end, he can rejoice because he knows that his work with the Philippians has brought forth fruit and he did not *run or labour for nothing.* 2:16. As a result he can rejoice, and they can rejoice along with him.

### Commendation of Timothy and Epaphroditus 2:19-30

Paul hopes to send Timothy to the Philippians and to hear news from them. He commends Timothy because *I have no-one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare.* 2:20 Timothy has proved himself in the way he has served with Paul in sharing the gospel. Paul was also confident that he would be able to accompany Timothy. (But that didn't happen and Paul died in Rome soon after this epistle was written).

Paul also commends Epaphroditus whom the Philippians had sent to help take care of him. Epaphroditus had been sick and almost died but God spared him. Paul was eager to send him back to the Philippians so they would not be anxious about him any more. They are to welcome and honour Epaphroditus back because he almost died for the work of Christ and risked his life to help Paul.

### Put no confidence in the flesh 3:1-11

Paul now encourages the Philippians to *rejoice in the Lord* 3:1 and *put no confidence in the flesh.* 3:3 This refers to teaching that had emerged in the early Church which required believers to become circumcised (as part of keeping the Jewish Law). Paul calls those who teach this *evil, and mutilators of the flesh.* 3:2. There is no requirement for Christians to be circumcised or keep the Jewish Law because we worship by the Spirit of God; we glory in Christ Jesus, and we put no confidence in the flesh. We are not under the Law, but under grace!

#### The name of Jesus

Lord - *kurios* means owner, master, sovereign

Jesus - *Iesous* means Jehovah is salvation

Christ - *Christos* means anointed. It is the same as the Hebrew word for Messiah *masiah*.

So Jesus' title is *Lord*, His name is *Jesus*, indicating that He is both God and Saviour, and His role is to be the anointed *Messiah* or *Christ*.

Jesus willingly obeyed the Father and did His will. We are to do the same. When we do God's will He works in us and through us to bring about His purposes. That's the way to have real meaning and purpose in your life.

Paul is very generous in his commendation of Timothy and Epaphroditus.

How do think he would describe you and your service for the Lord?

Paul explains that he could have been one who put his confidence in the flesh because he was a leading teacher of the Law before he came to Jesus. He was circumcised, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew, a Pharisee and “faultless” in legalistic righteousness, even to the point of persecuting the Church. But everything that he counted important became nothing when he met Jesus. *I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.* 3:8 Instead he wants to *gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.*

Righteousness comes by faith in Jesus Christ, not by keeping the Jewish Law.  
This is a common theme in many of Paul's letters. See especially, Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians.  
*God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of Christ.* 2 Corinthians 5:23

Paul then states his purpose for living: *I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.* 3:10,11. To know Jesus, become like Him, and spend eternity with Him. What a purpose for living!

### **Press on to maturity 3:12-4:1**

Paul recognizes that he has *not already attained all this* or has *already been made perfect.* 3:12. His approach is to:

- *Press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.* 3:12.
- *Forgetting what is behind, and straining to what is ahead I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.* 3:13,14.

In these verses Paul shows us how we can come to maturity in Christ. Building on the foundation of what God has achieved for us in Christ we are to live our lives focused on serving Him and doing His will. As this happens we will be gradually transformed into His likeness and be prepared for eternal life with Jesus in heaven.

Those who are mature should have a similar view and should live up to what they have already attained. They should follow Paul's example and live according to the pattern that he had shared with them. Some were living as enemies of the cross of Christ focusing on food and other earthly things, and their end is destruction.

*But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies, so that they will be like His glorious body.* 3:20,21.

### **Restore unity 4:2-3**

Two women in the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche were having a dispute. They had worked with Paul previously, and now Paul pleads with them to *agree with each other in the Lord.* 4:2. He asks his loyal friend Syzygus to help these women restore their unity in Christ because they had worked with Paul, Clement, and others in the cause of the gospel.

### **Rejoice in the Lord 4:4-9**

Paul now gives some final exhortations:

- Rejoice in the Lord always.
- Let your gentleness be evident to all.
- Don't be anxious about anything. Rather, present requests to God by prayer, petition and thanksgiving.
- Think about and focus on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.
- Put into practice what you have learned, received or heard from Paul's teachings.

If you do this *The peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.* 4:7 *And the God of peace will be with you.* 4:9

## Thanksgiving for their gifts 4:10-20

### The recent gift 4:10-14

Paul rejoices because the gift he had received recently from the Philippians showed that they still cared for him. He explains that he did not need the gift because he has learned to be content in all circumstances. *I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.* 4:13. It was still good of them, though, to share with him in his troubles.

### The previous gifts 4:15-20

In the early days of his ministry when Paul set out from Macedonia the Philippians were the only Church that supported him, and they were consistent in their giving when he was in need. Paul explains that he isn't looking for gifts from them, as the gifts he has already received fully meet his needs. *They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.* 4:18. As a result *My God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.* 4:19

These verses are a demonstration of the 'law of sowing and reaping'. Jesus said *Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.* Luke 6:38,39. *Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* 2 Corinthians 9:6. The Philippians gave generously to Paul, and all their needs were met.

## Greetings and benediction 4:21-23

Paul, the brothers, and all the saints send their greetings to the Philippians. It is interesting is that Paul specially mentions *those who belong to Caesar's household.* v22. This shows that some of the Romans had become Christians, and they must have known other Romans who now lived in Philippi.

The letter to the Philippians concludes with *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*

## Discussion questions

1. "Philippians is probably the most personal, loving and joyful of all of Paul's epistles". Paul's tone in Philippians is quite different to his tone in Galatians, for example (where he is not very personal, loving or joyful!). This may have been due to factors in Paul's personal life and his circumstances, and to factors in the Churches he was writing to. Identify possible factors that may have led to the tone Paul used in his letter to the Philippians. For each explain how they influenced the way he wrote and how it related to his purpose for writing.
2. In most of his letters Paul reminds his readers that he is an apostle. In Philippians he doesn't mention the word 'apostle' at all. Instead he calls himself a 'servant'. Identify ways that Paul's servant leadership is demonstrated throughout the letter to the Philippians. What implications does this have for leadership in today's churches?
3. A major theme in Philippians is '*partnership in the gospel*' 1:5. What does 'partnership in the gospel' mean? Who are the partners in the partnership? How is their partnership expressed? What are the implications of this partnership for effective spreading of the gospel in today's world?
4. In Philippians Paul describes a major tension that he felt and that many Christians feel today. This is the tension between wanting to fulfill God's purposes for our lives during our time on earth, and wanting to be with Jesus in heaven (which is *better by far.* 1:23). How did Paul deal with this issue? How do you deal with it?
5. In Philippians 2:5-11 Paul states that our attitude should be like that of Jesus when He willingly humbled Himself, became a man, and died on the Cross for our salvation. Explain how the kenosis of Christ led to His exaltation. What attitudes did He demonstrate? What actions did He take? What were the implications of these actions? What does having *the name that is above every name* mean? Then explain how you can demonstrate this kind of attitude and how this relates to Jesus' statement in Matthew 23:11,12 that *whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*

6. There are many different interpretations of the kenosis of Christ. Some say, for example, that Jesus added humanity to His divinity. Others say He gave up His divinity in becoming a man. Explain your understanding of Philippians 2:5-11. Then explain how Jesus was able to do miraculous things while He was on earth. Was it because He was God or was it by the power of the Holy Spirit, or some other way?
7. In Philippians 2:19-30 Paul commends Timothy and Epaphroditus. Why did Paul need to commend these men to the Philippians? What qualities did they demonstrate that led to Paul's commendation? How does this inform the way that you serve the Lord?
8. Paul's says his purpose for living is: *I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. 3:10,11.* What is your purpose for living?
9. In Philippians 3:1- 4:9 Paul exhorts the Philippians to move on to greater maturity in Christ. List all of the actions that Paul requires in these verses. For each of the actions evaluate your maturity in Christ. Are you doing what is required? Are there areas where you need to grow or change? Use this to evaluate whether you are growing in your maturity in Christ.
10. Read Philippians 4:10-19. What do you learn from these verses about Christian giving?
11. Re-read the whole of the letter to the Philippians, then put the message of the letter in your own words. What are the most important things that God is saying to you from this letter?