

~ An Introduction to Philippians ~

Text: Philippians 4:1

Theme: Joy can be found even amid great difficulty.

Intro:

1. This evening we are going to begin a new study in the book of Philippians. This is a book that has been on my heart and mind for several weeks now and I believe now is a good time to get into the study of this rich Pauline epistle.
2. We won't be getting into the heart of the first chapter this evening as I think it is best that I give you an introduction to the book so that you have an understanding of the historical and cultural significance of the city of Philippi and the background to the writing of this book to the church there.

Main:

I. The Author of the Letter (Vs 1)

A. The identity of the author

1. The Apostle Paul identifies himself as the author of this letter, along with Timotheus, who was Paul's under study and fellow traveller at this point in time.
 - a. The Apostle Paul - "Paul wrote from prison in Rome about A.D. 61, roughly ten years after his establishment of the Philippian church."¹
 - i. It is hard to pinpoint the date of writing to A.D. 61, however, that is the most likely date considering what we know of Paul's imprisonment.
 - ii. In this epistle, Paul gives indication that he expects to come to the Philippians shortly (**Phil 2:24**) indicating that this was toward the end of his 2-year imprisonment.
 - b. As mentioned, the Apostle Paul wrote the book of Philippians from prison. (Philippians 1:7 & 12-16)
 - i. This imprisonment was not in a dungeon somewhere but was more like house arrest.
 - **Acts 28:16** *"And when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard: but Paul was suffered to dwell by himself with a soldier that kept him."*

¹ New Testament Bible History 2008, H. Richard Hester; Pg 183

- **Acts 28:30-31** *“And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.”*
- ii. During this imprisonment, Paul was allowed to have visitors and continue his teaching ministry, although he remained under the constant supervision of a Roman soldier, to whom he was chained. So it wasn't a dungeon, but he wasn't a free man either. It was still imprisonment.
- c. There are four epistles, traditionally called the prison epistles, which are believed to have been written during this imprisonment.
 - i. Ephesians | Philippians | Colossians | Philemon

II. The Recipients of the Letter (Vs 1)

A. The city of Philippi

1. The city of Philippi had a rich history dating back hundreds of years.
 - a. The city of Philippi was a city in Macedonia, in the northern part of modern-day Greece.
 - i. The location of the city meant it commanded the pass through the nearby mountains and was therefore of great strategic importance.
 - ii. “It was originally a Phoenician mining town because of its proximity to gold and silver mines located in the mountains and on the island of Thasos. These mines were exhausted by the Christian era, but they made Philippi a great commercial centre.”²
 - b. In around 368 B.C. Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, took the city from the Thracians and renamed it after himself.
 - i. Philip recognised its strategic importance and that he could effectively use Philippi as a toll gate from those travelling through the mountain pass.
2. In 27 B.C. Octavian officially made Philippi a proud Roman colony.
 - a. Philippi itself was a predominantly military city rather than mercantile, and the inhabitants of Philippi were Roman citizens who had the rights to vote, self-government, and certain tax exemptions.

² New Testament Bible History 2008, H. Richard Hester; Pg 187

- i. Roman citizenship was something the Philippians would have been quite proud of, as it afforded them privileges that the non-roman inhabitants of other cities would not have.
- ii. Tax exemption was a big one as this would naturally make it easier for the locals to accumulate wealth and keep it in local circulation.
- ii. It is no surprise that Paul reminded the Christians that their citizenship is in heaven. (**Phil 3:20**)

B. The church of Philippi

1. Philippians is written to the believers in the church at Philippi.
 - a. As mentioned earlier, the Apostle Paul founded the church at Philippi on his second missionary journey.
 - i. It was at Philippi that Paul met Lydia, the seller of purple, who was the first convert in this city.
 - iii. **“Acts 16:15** *“And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us.”*
 - ii. Shortly afterward, the Philippian jailer and his family were saved also. (**Acts 16:25-34**)
 - iii. Thus, even through persecution, a church began to grow in that city.
 - b. In verse 1 Paul addresses the “saints” with the “bishops and deacons,” which suggests that, by the time of the writing of this book, the church had developed a distinct leadership structure in its ten years since Paul founded it.
 - i. There seems to have been a reasonable number of people in this new church by the time Paul departed from Philippi following his imprisonment there, as reference is made to “the brethren” in Acts 16.
 - iv. **Acts 16:40** *“And they went out of the prison, and entered into the house of Lydia: and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed.”*
2. Paul revisited the church at Philippi on his third missionary journey.
 - a. There isn’t a great deal said in scripture about Paul’s visit on his 3rd missionary journey.
 - i. It is quite likely that Paul passed through Philippi on his way through Macedonia and up into Greece, but we know that he took a ship from Philippi to Troas. (**Acts 20:6**)
 - ii. We know that on this missionary journey, Paul travelled through Macedonia giving the disciple “Much exhortation”

(Acts 20:1-2) It makes sense that he would have visited the church at Philippi at this time.

- b. The timeline seems to follow a pattern of 5-year intervals.
 - i. Paul planted the church ten years prior to the writing of the book of Philippians
 - ii. Paul revisited the church about 5 years on from that.
 - iii. 5 years later, we find Paul in prison and writing to the church at Philippi to encourage them and to reassure them that he plans to come and see them as soon as he can.

III. The Purpose in the Letter (Vs 1-2)

A. There are four topics Paul emphasizes in this letter.

1. Paul's thankfulness to the Philippian Christians for their financial support of his ministry. (**Phil 1:3-6 & 4:10-20**)
 - a. From the very opening of this letter there is a note of thankfulness in the voice of the Apostle for the love and support of the disciples at Philippi.
 - i. Verse 1 opens this letter with a very Pauline greeting, *"Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ."*
 - This type of warm greeting is very typical of the Apostle Paul who had a true love for all the churches of Jesus Christ. His thankfulness for all God's people everywhere is evident in the way he lay himself out in service to them, striving with them for the sake of the gospel.
 - ii. Verse 2 *"I thank my God upon every remembrance of you."*
 - Whenever the Apostle Paul thought of this church at Philippi, and of the believers he knew there, he was thankful to God for their love and support of him as he laboured for Christ in the work of the gospel.
 - I wonder if it could be said of us that others thank God for our Christian love and fellowship?
It has been said, "To dwell above with saints we love, oh that will be glory. To dwell below with those we know, well that's another story."
But it shouldn't be that way between us. We ought to have a fondness and Christian love for one another.

- Do our missionaries think fondly of us or are they out there struggling on the field and wondering if we care about their labours and uphold them in prayer?
- 2. An explanation of Epaphroditus' illness and his return to Philippi. **(Phil 2:25-30)**
 - a. Epaphroditus had brought the financial gift from the church to Paul in Rome.
 - i. During his visit to Rome, Epaphroditus had become very unwell and had narrowly escaped death.
 - **Philippians 2:27** *"For indeed he was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow."*
 - ii. Philippians 2:25 indicates that it was Epaphroditus himself who carried this letter back to the church at Philippi.
 - **Philippians 2:25** *"Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labour, and fellowsoldier, but your messenger, and he that ministered to my wants."*
 - Epaphroditus had been sent to Paul both with the financial gift from the church at Philippi and with the purpose of ministering to the Apostle Paul. During his stay he had become so sick that it had become a worry for the Apostle and for the church at Philippi.
 - Following his recovery, Paul saw fit to send Epaphroditus back to the church at Philippi with this letter of encouragement and explanation.
- 3. Encouragement for the Philippian Christians in their trials and to assure them that, even though Paul was a prisoner, the gospel work was still going forward. **(Phil 1:28-30)**
 - a. The church at Philippi had been worrying about Paul and Epaphroditus, as well as enduring persecution which stemmed from Rome's antagonism toward the Christians.
 - i. A word of encouragement from the Apostle Paul would go a long way to lifting their spirits in a time of grief and uncertainty.
 - ii. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:28 to exhort the brethren that they would be "in nothing terrified by your adversaries."
 - b. Paul also encouraged these believers by explaining that, even though he was in prison, the work of the gospel was still going forward.

- i. **Philippians 1:18** *“What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.”*
 - 4. To encourage unity in the church of Philippi. (**Phil 2:1-11**)
 - a. Paul’s appeal for unity in the church is centred in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ as our great example.
 - i. It is in this book we find one of the great Christological passages in the New Testament.
 - The Apostle Paul uses the example of the Lord Jesus Christ and his humility in coming to earth to die for sinful men to exhort the believers to the same humility and selflessness in serving Christ.
- B. An outline of the letter
 - 1. A simple outline of the book of Philippians could look something like this:
 - I. Joy in Christian Fellowship — 1:1–11
 - II. Joy in Difficult Circumstances — 1:12–30
 - III. Joy Through Humility — 2:1–30
 - IV. Joy in Knowing Christ — 3:1–11
 - V. Joy in the Christian Race — 3:12–21
 - VI. Joy and Christian Unity — 4:1–3
 - VII. Joy Through Prayer — 4:4–9
 - VIII. Joy Through Contentment — 4:10–20

Conclusion:

- 1. As we continue our study through this powerful book, we will notice how much the Apostle emphasizes joy despite the suffering he himself was going through chained to the Roman soldier in his prison.
- 2. And we will learn many practical lessons which will help us grow as Christians if we are willing to take them on board and apply them in a real way in our own lives.