

# The Epistle of Philippians

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## The Epistle of Christian Experience

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### I. The Author

The author is the Apostle Paul (1:1). Clement of Rome in the first century wrote to the believers in Corinth and mentioned Paul's letter to the Philippians. Polycarp in the second century wrote to the believers at Philippi and mentioned Paul's letter.

**His Circumstances:** The Epistle is written from prison. At first he was bound in chains and placed in stocks and then later placed under house arrest, which afforded him much liberty while guarded by a Roman soldier (Acts 28:16-31). He was arrested for preaching the Gospel and yet his imprisonment allowed him many more opportunities to reach people (1:12-18). As a result of his arrest, he led many guards, magistrates, and even political leaders in Rome to Christ.

Paul recognized God's providence in his life through all the circumstances. He did not rebel at God because of his arrest. He counted it a privilege to suffer for the name of Christ (1:28-30) and was even willing to die for Christ if that was God's will (2:17).

Philippians is one of the most intimate of Paul's epistles and is intensely personal as Paul reveals his own soul. ***That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death*** (Philippians 3:10). His personal character is clearly revealed in his attitude as a prisoner, his tenderness toward others, his commitment to Christ as a bond-slave and his contentment in the midst of it all.

### II. The Date

Paul visited the town of Philippi on his second missionary journey, around AD 52 (Acts 16). The Epistle is written about ten years later – AD 61- 63.

### III. The Place

Philippi was a Roman colony, a city of some importance in the ancient world. The city was set in the midst of Greek culture, much like the church is a colony of Heaven here on planet earth. The location was a fertile plain about nine miles from the Aegean Sea. In New Testament times it was regarded as a chief city of Macedonia (Acts 16:12).

### IV. The Church

Philippi was the place of the first Christian congregation to gather in Europe. Paul came to the city in response to the *Macedonian Call* to ***come over and help us*** (Acts 16:9), during his second missionary journey. After a successful campaign there, Paul and Silas were falsely accused of subversive activities and were cast into prison after severe beatings. They were released the next day but their wounds bore witness of their labors there.

During his short stay there, the Apostle Paul led a number of people to the Lord and baptized them. 1) Lydia and her household, 2) a demon possessed damsel and 3) a Philippian jailor and his household. These made up the first members of the church in Philippi. Ten years later, Paul writes to a church that is well organized with bishops (pastors) and deacons. The fact that they supported Paul's ministry financially speaks well of their growth and resources.

### V. The Letter

The letter is written about ten years after Paul's initial visit there. Upon hearing of Paul's circumstances in prison, the church at Philippi sent their pastor, Epaphroditus, to minister to Paul's needs with gifts, aid, and other expressions of love and concern (4:18). The trip almost cost him his life as he became sick nearly unto death. When he was restored to health, Paul sent him back to the church (about a month's journey) along with the letter. Paul's purposes in writing were:

- A. To thank them for their gifts and expressions of love (2:25; 4:10, 14).
- B. To explain his circumstances to friends who were concerned.
- C. To explain the long absence of Pastor Epaphroditus.

- D. To encourage them in their Christian walk.
- E. To emphasize the importance of unity among the saints in the church.
- F. To encourage the saints to seek to have the mind of Christ (2:5).
- G. To warn them against false teachers.
- H. To encourage them in the face of affliction and persecution.

The letter is very personal, indicating the intimate relationship that existed between Paul and the saints at Philippi. This is evident in the use of the first person singular personal pronoun – I, me and my. Philippians is the most personal epistle Paul wrote to churches.

## VI. The Theme

A number of scholars designate the theme to be **JOY IN CHRIST**. Indeed, there is a joyful overtone in the short epistle. Sixteen times Paul encourages the believers to rejoice in the joy of the Lord he is experiencing in his relationship with Christ. Keep in mind that this is coming from a man being kept in a dark, vermin-infested, dirt-floor, putrid prison cell. However, we must recognize the reason for Paul's joy. It is because of his relationship IN CHRIST (1:1, 8, 13, 26; 2:1, 5; 3:3, 9, 14; 4:21).

Another strong emphasis in the book is on the word **GOSPEL**, which appears nine times (1:5, 7, 12, 16, 27; 2:22; 4:3, 15). Paul originally went to Philippi to preach the gospel.

The main theme of the book must by nature of its writing be **THE MIND OF CHRIST**. It is in having the mind of Christ that joy will be accomplished and the gospel will be shared by the saints to the lost. As the saints imitate Jesus Christ, they will automatically model humility which will lead to unity and service to others.

Christ is recognized in Philippians as: The Source of spiritual fruit (1:11), Theme of preaching (1:18), Motive for Christian service (1:20-21), Example of humility (2:5-8), Height of character (2:9-11), Object of fellowship (3:7-14), Desire of Heaven and glory (3:20, 21), Strength of the believer (4:13), and Channel of divine supplies for every need (4:19). [From World's Bible Handbook, p. 570, 571).

## VII. Keys for Understanding

- A. **Key Verses:** 1) Philippians 2:5 – *Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.* 2) Philippians 1:21 – *For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*
- B. **Key People:** Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus, Euodias and Syntyche.
- C. **Key Words:** 1) Rejoice, 2) In Christ, 3) Mind, 4) Righteousness and 5) Gospel.
- D. **Keys in the four chapters:**
  - 1) Jesus Christ our Life
  - 2) Jesus Christ our Example
  - 3) Jesus Christ our Goal.
  - 4) Jesus Christ our Provision.
- E. Do not miss the emphasis on **Reciprocal Living**. This is how believers will live with each other when they have the mind of Christ.
- F. **Key Thought:** *To live is Christ* (Philippians 1:21).

## VIII. Personal Illustration

Christ was the central focus of Paul's life. He encouraged the saints at Philippi to follow his own example as he followed Christ in order to have the mind of Christ.

- 1) It was necessary for those who were spiritually mature to recognize that there were stages of maturity to which they needed to aspire (3:15).
- 2) In order to achieve these stages, Paul asks them to mimic his example (3:17). Those who chose not to follow Paul's example were enemies of the cross (3:18).
- 3) Paul asked them to do the things which they had learned from his preaching and lifestyle (3:9). Paul lived what he preached and his life spoke more eloquently than his lips.