

Philippians Introduction



Philippians is often called the “Joy Book” of the New Testament. Though Paul wrote from prison, he uses the word *joy* or *rejoice* 16 times. He did not depend on his surroundings to be joyful, but on his Savior. Paul lifts Christ up. He lets us look at His beauty and claim His power. In this letter to his friends at Philippi, Paul reports on his circumstances, thanks them for their continuing financial support, and encourages the Philippian believers to live victoriously.

God chose Paul to take the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles. A Jew with rabbinic training, Paul spoke Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. His meeting with the risen Christ (Acts 9) changed his life, and he became the greatest missionary the world has ever known. Paul received good news by divine revelation, and his job was to tell others. The word *gospel* (Greek *evangelion*, “good news”) is used here seven times. He also speaks repeatedly of fellowship.

Paul wrote his letters from A.D. 50 to A.D. 62. Scholars date this letter at around A.D. 60. Paul does not say from which prison he writes, but the best evidence pinpoints his house arrest in Rome. He apparently felt his martyrdom might be coming soon as he awaited Caesar’s decision on his fate. He did not know what his future held when he wrote, but he faced life or death victoriously “in Christ.”

On Paul’s first missionary journey for the early church, Barnabas and John Mark accompanied him. At the start of Paul’s second journey, he and Barnabas disagreed and went their separate ways (Acts 15:36-40). Barnabas and John Mark traveled to Cyprus; Paul took Silas with him through Syria, Cilicia, Derbe, and then Lystra. Timothy joined them at Lystra (Acts 16:1-3). Following two unsuccessful attempts to go into Asia Minor, Paul had a vision: a Macedonian man begged him to “come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:6-10). At Troas, Luke (a Greek medical doctor who later wrote both the gospel that bears his name, and Acts, the historical record of the church’s birth and early growth) joined the group. From Troas, they sailed to Philippi, “a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia” (Acts 16:11-12).

After some days in Philippi, Paul and his group went on the Sabbath out to the riverside. Roman law required all religious groups not officially recognized by the government to meet outside the city gates. The group there included Lydia, a successful businesswoman from Thyatira. She and her household were Paul’s first converts in Philippi. Women figured prominently in the early church. In his final remarks in his letter to Rome, Paul mentions Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Persis, Julia, and Nereus’s sister (Romans 16). Paul eagerly accepted them as fellow workers in God’s kingdom. The Christian church, and Paul in particular, elevated and dignified the position of women.

Check It Out:

Think about how God loves us unconditionally and offers us unearned, undeserved favor — grace. God alone gives real peace — peace not found apart from Him. May you receive “grace and peace ... from God ... and ... Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:2).

Paul begins not with the title *apostle* but with *servant (doulos)*, acknowledging that he belongs to Jesus Christ as a slave bought with His blood. Paul calls his readers "all the saints [hagioi] in Christ Jesus at Philippi" (1:1). The Greek word *hagioi*, saints, is from the word *hagios*, holy. The Hebrew *kadosh* and the Greek *hagios* mean "to set apart for a specific purpose." In both the Old and the New Testaments, the words mean something set apart for God's specific purpose.

Paul's greeting to the Philippian Christians is one he often used: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:2). The word *grace* (Greek *charis*) means joy, beauty, pleasure. God's grace makes it possible for every Christian to have these traits. The word *peace*, from the Greek word *eirene* (Hebrew *shalom*), implies the total well-being of a person, community, or nation. The biblical idea of "peace" is more than the mere cessation of war; it means harmony, stability, and serenity. It is God's intense desire that Christians live healthy, happy lives in harmony with Him, with other people, and within themselves.

Paul's joy is based on knowing God will continue to work in and through the Philippians until what He began is completed. He could write joyful prayers for he has learned to trust God. During his imprisonment in Rome, the Philippians sent help; they were kind to Paul and his helpers from the beginning. Paul's first convert, Lydia, welcomed his team into her home (Acts 16:15). When Paul exorcised a Greek girl, her owners incited a riot and Paul and Silas were jailed. At midnight, they were singing hymns when an earthquake shook the prison and freed them from their chains. The jailer was about to take his own life because the Romans would kill him if any prisoner escaped. Paul reassured him that the prisoners were still there, and before morning, the jailer's entire family was baptized.

The magistrates learned Paul was a Roman citizen, came to the prison, apologized, and asked Paul and Silas to leave the city. After a visit to Lydia's house to encourage the new Christians, they went to Thessalonica (see Acts 16). After such troubles, some new converts might have been tempted to draw back. But these new converts stood firm; they sent funds to Paul twice when he was in Thessalonica (Philippians 4:16) and likely joined other Macedonian churches in contributing to the common fund for relief of the Jerusalem Christians.

The ties between Paul and the church at Philippi were close. During his long stay at Ephesus, he sent Timothy to the Macedonian churches. Acts 20:1-2 reports that Paul visited these churches, including Philippi, on his way to Corinth. After Corinth and a journey north, he again visited Philippi and spent the Passover season there before his last journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20:6). Paul had confidence in the Philippians ability to endure and mature because he had confidence that God would complete every good work the Philippian believers began.

In 1:9-11, Paul tells the Philippians he wants their love to keep growing, along with reasonable knowledge (*epignosis*) and keen perception (*aisthesis*), so they might discover the highest and best for their lives. This prayer gives profound insight into what the Philippians needed in their lives, and what is needed in the lives of all believers. Love without knowledge and insight can be mere sentimentality, while knowledge and insight without love can be arrogant and harsh.



Even in prison, Paul was full of joy — joy founded in Christ alone. We may think if the circumstances in our lives were ideal — if we were better looking, starred on a sports team, had more money, and our parents always understood — that we would be happy. Paul shows us that real joy comes from Christ; therefore, it does not depend on outward conditions. As Paul looked past the misery of his prison walls, we can look past our negative circumstances. Paul knew and trusted Christ; we can know and trust Him. Christ abides in our hearts; when we trust and abide in Him, His joy becomes our joy.