



Philippians

Lesson 1: Joyful Thanks and Prayer for a Beloved Church

“It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (Philippians 1:7).

Doctrinal Focus: *The grace that we share through the gospel binds believers’ hearts to each other, enabling us to join in joyful thanks and prayer, confident in God’s faithfulness, which will keep us growing in love and purity until Christ returns.*

Read Acts 16:6-40 and Philippians 1:1-11.

Paul’s epistle to the church at Philippi is a pastor’s passionate love letter to a congregation that he treasured as his “*joy and crown*,” his beloved brothers and sisters whom he loved and longed for (Philippians 4:1).

The Philippian church had its problems, like all churches. It suffered persecution from outside forces (Philippians 1:29-30). Believers’ self-focused priorities jeopardized the church’s unity (Philippians 2:1-4; 4:2). False teachers lurked nearby, eager to lure believers away from Jesus and into trusting in their own righteousness (Philippians 3:1-11).

Nevertheless, we immediately sense the contrast between Paul’s affectionate and joyful tone in this epistle and the fatherly alarm of his letters to the Galatians and the Corinthians.

To set the context for our study of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, this first lesson will introduce the city of Philippi, the planting of the church there, and the circumstances from which Paul wrote this epistle. Then we will explore Paul’s opening address and greeting, his thanksgiving for his dear Philippian fellow-believers, and his prayer for their growth in love and discernment.

Philippi was the first Macedonian city in which Paul and Silas preached the gospel. In Troas (on the northwest coast of Asia Minor), Paul had received a vision, imploring him to “*come over to Macedonia and help us*” (Acts 16:9). Crossing the Aegean Sea, they traveled west on the Via Egnatia, a major Roman highway that stretched across Macedonia from the Aegean Sea on the east to the Adriatic on the west, and they soon reached Philippi, “*a leading city of the district of Macedonia*” (Acts 16:12). In the fourth century B.C. King Philip of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great, had named the city after himself. In the first century B.C., as Roman power expanded eastward, Philippi was granted the status of a Roman “*colony*.” This meant that citizens of Philippi were considered citizens of the city of Rome itself. (Unlike many modern nations, the Roman Empire did not confer citizenship on everyone born within its boundaries. Citizenship was a rare privilege, which conferred special legal rights, exemption from taxation, and other benefits.) Despite Philippi’s political status in the region, when Paul and Silas arrived, the Jewish community of Philippi was so small that the city had no synagogue but only an open-air “*place of prayer*” outside the city gate (Acts 16:13).

Acts 16 describes the planting of the church

in Philippi. Luke's account focuses on three individuals whose lives were changed by the power of Jesus and his gospel. First was Lydia, a businesswoman who imported purple cloth from her home city, Thyatira, in Asia Minor. Lydia and other women who had become worshipers of God would gather each Sabbath on a riverbank to pray to the God of Israel. There Paul told them the good news of the Lord Jesus, and "*the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul*" (Acts 16:14). Lydia immediately expressed her newfound faith by giving lodging to the missionaries, and it seems that her home became the church's meeting place as well (Acts 16:40).

Secondly, a demon-possessed slave girl whose owners used her to tell fortunes was set free from the evil spirit when Paul invoked the name of Jesus Christ. Her owners, angry over their loss of revenue, accused Paul and Silas of advocating "*customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice*" (Acts 16:21). (Note their pride in Roman citizenship!) They provoked an unruly mob, who pressured the city officers to beat and imprison Paul and Silas.

Their arrest introduced them to the third Philippian whose life was turned rightside-up by Christ: after a midnight earthquake that shattered the prisoners' shackles, the jailer and his family believed in Jesus. They washed the missionaries' wounds and fed them, rejoicing in God's saving grace.

These incidents were in Paul's mind as he mentioned "*your partnership in the gospel from the first day*" (Philippians 1:5) and "*the . . . conflict that you saw I had and now heard that I still have*" (Philippians 1:30).

A dozen years had passed from that "first day" to the time when Paul wrote this epistle. He had revisited Philippi and other Macedonian cities, especially to collect their contributions for needy Christians in Judea (Acts 20:1-2; 2 Corinthians 2:12-13; 8:1-5). When Paul reached Jerusalem to deliver these gifts, he was attacked in the temple, taken into Roman custody, and finally forced to invoke his privilege as a Roman citizen, appealing to the emperor to review the accusations against him. The voyage to Rome had been harrowing, ending in shipwreck. But, true to his promise, the Lord Jesus preserved Paul alive to bear witness

before Caesar himself. In Rome Paul was chained to Roman soldiers day and night, but his Roman captors put him in private accommodations for which he paid rent and board. As he awaited the emperor's review of his appeal, Paul wrote this letter.

The Philippian church had sent one of its own, Epaphroditus, to bring a gift to help defray Paul's expenses (Philippians 2:25-30; 4:10-19). Now Paul was about to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi, bearing this epistle. Paul seized the opportunity to thank the Philippians for their love and donation and to calm their concerns for his own situation. More central to Paul's purpose than expressing thanks and exchanging news, however, was his pastoral desire to show them, through his own example and those of Epaphroditus and his colleague Timothy, how centering their hearts on Christ and his glory would inject joy into suffering and replace competition with humble compassion.

Paul opened this epistle as he typically did, identifying himself as author and the readers to whom he wrote (Philippians 1:1-2); then expressing thanks to God for his grace in the readers' lives (Philippians 1:3-8); and finally summarizing his prayers for them (Philippians 1:9-11). Yet, although Paul's letter openings regularly included these elements, he adapted each to fit the individual church.

In his opening address and greeting (Philippians 1:1-2), Paul linked Timothy's name with his own and characterized them both as "*servants of Christ Jesus.*" As soon as the outcome of Paul's appeal was decided, Paul planned to send the news with Timothy, his trusted apprentice who served with him "*as a son with a father*" (Philippians 2:21). Timothy had been present when the church was established and had a genuine concern for these believers' welfare. Even more important, in Timothy the believers would see the mindset of Christ Jesus, who humbled himself and "*took the form of a servant*" (Philippians 2:5-7). This attitude, which shows more concern for others' needs than one's own interests, was a much-needed antidote to the selfish competition that was disrupting the Philippians' unity (Philippians 2:1-4).

Paul wrote "*to all the saints.*" In the following thanksgiving he would assure them of his prayers

for “*you all*,” his confidence about “*you all*,” his conviction that “*you are all partakers with me of grace*,” and his yearning “*for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 1:4, 7, 8). Since self-centered rivalry was hindering his friends’ willingness to regard each other warmly, Paul’s repeated “*you all*” embraced them all and drew them together.

In all of Paul’s letters this is the only greeting that mentions the church’s leaders, “*the overseers and the deacons*.” In his epistles to Timothy and Titus, Paul would list the qualifications to be sought in men called to be elders, who oversee the church’s spiritual health (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9), and in those who serve as deacons, seeing to material needs (1 Timothy 3:8-13). Perhaps Paul mentioned the church’s officers in this greeting to lend his support to their authority and example, or to remind them that, as leaders, they set the pace for selfless humility as “*servants of Christ Jesus*.”

Paul’s opening blessing, “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*,” appears in most of his epistles, but it is not a meaningless formula! The Christians to whom he wrote (including the jailer) could be called “*saints*” only because they were “*in Christ Jesus*,” and they were united to Christ only because they were “*partakers of grace*” (Philippians 1:7). God’s grace in the gospel had given them peace (Romans 5:1), so Paul could assure them that God’s peace would guard their hearts and the God of peace would be with them (Philippians 4:7, 9). Such rich gifts, bestowed by God’s amazing grace through Christ Jesus, should sustain their joy amid suffering and fill them with humble compassion for each other.

In the next paragraph Paul blended his thanksgiving and his prayer for the Philippians. He opened with a mention of his constant thanks in joyful prayer (Philippians 1:3-4), then explored the reasons for his joy (that is, his thanksgiving) over God’s work in these dear believers (Philippians 1:5-8), and closed with his specific petitions to God for their growth in love and discernment (Philippians 1:9-11). In the seamless movement from thanks to petition of his own prayer life, Paul modeled the cure for worry that he would later prescribe for his Christian brothers and sisters: “*Do not be anxious*

about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6).

Paul introduced a central theme of the epistle when he wrote of “*making my prayer with joy*” (Philippians 1:4). In this brief letter the noun “*joy*” appears five times, and the verb “*rejoice*” (in two forms) appears a total of eleven times. As we shall see, Paul injected the theme of joy especially when he wrote about suffering (for example, Philippians 1:18; 2:17-18) and about interpersonal relationships (as in Philippians 1:25; 2:2; 4:1). The heart that is focused on Christ and his glory finds joy even amid persecution and trouble, and finds greater joy in others’ spiritual progress than in one’s own comfort or convenience.

Paul’s thanksgiving and joy in prayer were prompted by “*all my remembrance of you*,” as he recalled their “*partnership in the gospel from the first day until now*” (Philippians 1:5), held them in his heart (Philippians 1:7), and yearned for them (Philippians 1:8). The Philippians’ “*partnership*” or fellowship (Greek *koinōnia*) with Paul included their readiness to share (*koinōneō*) their material resources to support his ministry (Philippians 4:10-19). But the origin of their generosity was the fact that they had first become partakers (*synkoinōnous*) with Paul in God’s grace by trusting in Christ (Philippians 1:7).

Although the Philippians’ faith, love, and generosity were the *occasion* for Paul’s joy, its *source* lay deeper, in the God who had begun in them a lifelong process of rescue from sin’s guilt, sin’s penalty, sin’s power, and (finally) sin’s presence: “*I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*” (Philippians 1:6). Paul had written to the Roman Christians that those whom God predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son “*he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified*” (Romans 8:29-30). When God draws people out of spiritual death into life in his Son, his saving power never stops short of its goal, which is not only to bestow forgiveness but also to give victory over temptation and, in the end, to transform them fully to reflect Christ’s perfect purity and love. Only because God is at work in

us, we can “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*” (Philippians 2:12-13).

Paul’s prayer for the Philippians (Philippians 1:9-11) was for overflowing love, combined with knowledge and discernment. In the Bible, love is not merely warm affection toward others (although it includes this, Philippians 1:8). Rather, love moves us to care so deeply for others that we are eager to give of ourselves to provide for their needs. Christ loved us and gave himself for us (Galatians 2:20), and his self-giving love stimulates our love for others (Ephesians 5:2). “*By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.*” (1 John 3:16). Those who have received comfort from God’s love must have the same love toward each other, putting others’ needs before their own (Philippians 2:1-4).

Yet Christ-like love is not naïve or weak. Because it is combined with God-given discernment, it does not confuse others’ sinful whims with their true needs. Paul asked God to bestow the wise love that would enable his friends to “*approve what is excellent*” and so to further each other’s growth in godliness, so that on “*the day of Christ,*” when Jesus returns in glory, they may be pure and blameless.

Paul’s prayer implied the responsibility of believers to love others sacrificially, to make wise decisions, and to pursue purity both in hidden motives and outward behavior. Yet here he stressed even more strongly that it is fitting for *God* to receive “*the glory and praise*” for their spiritual growth, for only he could produce it. God alone can instill in us love that abounds more and more (Philippians 1:9). We will be blameless on “*the day of Christ*” (Philippians 1:10) only because on that day he will have completed his good work in us (Philippians 1:6). In calling righteousness a “fruit,” Paul used the Bible’s farming metaphor that traces any good in us back to the life-giving power of God’s Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 1:5-6, 10; Jeremiah 17:7-8). Our lives can be “filled” with such fruit only because he fills us.

This river of life-changing blessing flows into our lives “*through Jesus Christ*” (whose name Paul mentioned seven times in these first eleven verses). Christ is the source of joy in the midst of suffering (Philippians 1:18-20), of love in the midst of conflict (Philippians 2:1-11), and of glorious future hope amid a society preoccupied with present pleasure (Philippians 3:17-21).

Recommended Commentary

Philippians by Dennis Johnson (Reformed Expository Commentary)



RAFIKI

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Questions for Discussion

Read Acts 16:6-40 and Philippians 1:1-11.

1. Philippi was a Roman colony. What did that mean for its citizens? In Philippians 3:20 Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians, “Our citizenship is in heaven.” What does that mean for us as we continue to live on this earth?
2. Twelve years or so after Christ used Paul and Silas to plant the church in Philippi, Paul wrote this epistle, reminding them of “the first day” when they became partakers of the gospel (Philippians 1:5), of their partnership with him “*in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel*” (Philippians 1:7), and of “*the conflict that you saw I had*” in suffering for Christ (Philippians 1:29-30). What incidents recorded in Acts 16 was he referring to?
3. Typically when Paul arrived to preach the gospel in a city, he would go first to the synagogue. Why did he make preaching there his first priority? (See Acts 13:46; Romans 1:16-17.) At Philippi he and Silas found no synagogue, but rather a place of prayer on a river bank, where some women had gathered. What special challenges did Paul face when planting this church without a core of people who had worshiped and learned in a synagogue before the gospel arrived?
4. According to Acts 16, who were among the original members of the church at Philippi? How were their backgrounds different from one another? What challenges would these differences have posed for their interactions with one another?
5. Why does the gospel—its declaration that all have sinned but that Christ died for sinners—bring together people who are naturally and socially different from each other? Are you having trouble loving and respecting another Christian because of differences between you? How should you apply the truths of the gospel to your attitude toward that brother or sister in Christ?

6. How does the experience of each of the original members of this church illustrate that Paul can now call them “*saints in Christ Jesus*” only because they have received “*grace and peace from . . . the Lord Jesus Christ*”? How does your experience show that God deserves all the glory and praise for the change that the gospel has made in your life?
7. In Philippians 1:1, Paul and Timothy are called “servants” but the church members are called “saints.” Does this sound backward to you? What does each of these words mean? Are you a servant or a saint—or both? How would those who know you best answer in light of what they see and hear in you?
8. Does Paul’s confidence that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” mean that Christians don’t need to resist sin or pursue holiness, since our salvation is guaranteed by what God already started when he drew us to believe in Jesus? Why or why not?
9. What difference will it make to our perspective on our situation—and our God—if we *begin* our prayers with joyful thanksgiving rather than with urgent petition?
10. Is it more important for Christians to have knowledge and discernment (to protect people from false doctrine) or to have love (to welcome and support people), or vice versa? Have you known believers that seem to “specialize” in knowledge/discernment and others who “specialize” in love? To which “specialty” are you naturally inclined? Why does Paul ask God to give the Philippians *both* love *and* knowledge/discernment? How does a lack of biblical knowledge distort our ability to express biblical love? How does a lack of biblical love distort our ability to grasp and convey biblical knowledge?
11. How should Paul’s prayer for the Philippians set priorities for your prayer for the believers with whom you live and labor? What changes should you make in your prayers, individually and together, to conform more to the example of Paul’s prayer for his dear friends in Christ?