



*Paul's letter to the*

# PHILIPPIANS

## LESSON 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE LETTER

### PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

## INTRODUCTION

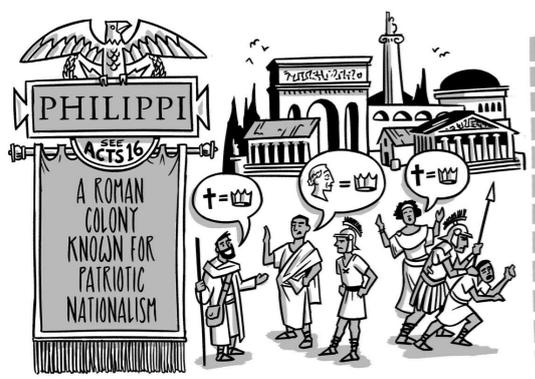
Ask any number of people their favorite Pauline letter, and the majority will say Philippians. For good reason! Here we find a very personal and warm human being who pours out affection for his friends in Philippi.

The letter is full of memorable passages: “I thank my God every time I remember you,” or “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain,” or “I can do all things through him who strengthens me,” or “my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus,” and any number of phrases from the Christ hymn in 2:6-11 and the Paul narrative in 3:4-14.

In ancient writing, Philippians reflects the essential characteristics of a letter of friendship, the marks of which are everywhere. Letters of friendship are related to the separation of friends (1:27; 2:12). Paul’s letter to the Philippians is intended to make up for their mutual absence, functioning as Paul’s way of being present while absent. He informs them about his circumstances and speaks into their circumstances, encouraging and calling them to continue in the ways of Christ (1:12, 27; 2:19, 24). Evidence of mutual affection abounds. As we read this letter in our current climate, observing and imitating these elements of friendship is needed now perhaps more than ever.

This “letter of friendship,” however, is only part of the story, for Paul turns everything into gospel, including the aspects of friendship. Friendship in particular is radically transformed into a three-way bond between him, the Philippians, and Christ. Ultimately, the letter of Philippians is held together by its singular focus on Christ. It is Christ who is the center and focus of everything. Their friendship is predicated on their mutual participation in the gospel, and Paul is altogether concerned for his friends in Philippi and their ongoing relationship with Christ.

May those of us who read it over and again be more and more conformed to the likeness of Christ, so that we might faithfully hold fast to the word of life and shine like stars in the sky (2:15-16). [By Gordon Fee, *Philippians*, 36-37]



# PAUL'S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

## A UNIQUE WINDOW INTO PAUL'S HEART & MIND

- HE SAW HIS LIFE AS A REENACTMENT OF JESUS' STORY
- HIS AWARENESS OF JESUS' LOVE & PRESENCE GAVE HIM HOPE & HUMILITY
- KNOWING JESUS IS DEEPLY PERSONAL & TRANSFORMATIVE

**1:1-11 OPENING PRAYER**

I THANK GOD WHEN I REMEMBER YOU! (1-3)

I'M CONFIDENT THAT THE ONE WHO BEGAN A GOOD WORK IN YOU WILL COMPLETE IT. (1-6)

**1:12-26 PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT**

PAUL SURE IS INTO THIS JESUS THING... (12)

JESUS REALLY LOVES YOU GUYS? (13)

not so bad!

**EXECUTION** OR **RELEASE**

START MORE JESUS COMMUNITIES BETTER FOR OTHERS

**1:27-2:18 FOLLOWING JESUS' EXAMPLE**

CAESAR IS SAVIOR & LORD!

JESUS IS SAVIOR & LORD!

IN THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS...

"YOUR LIFE AS CITIZENS SHOULD BE CONSISTENT WITH THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT THE MESSIAH." (1:27)

**RICH WITH OLD TESTAMENT ECHOES**

ADAM (GENESIS 1-3) SUFFERING SERVANT (ISAIAH 40-55)

**2:6-11 THE MESSIAH POEM**

ALTHOUGH HE EXISTED IN THE NATURE OF GOD, HE DID NOT REGARD HIS EQUALITY WITH GOD AS A THING TO BE EXPLOITED; RATHER, HE EMPTIED HIMSELF, TAKING UP THE NATURE OF A SERVANT; HE WAS BORN AS A HUMAN & RECOGNIZED AS A HUMAN; HE HUMILED HIMSELF BY BECOMING OBEDIENT TO THE POINT OF DEATH, EVEN DEATH ON A CROSS.

THEREFORE, GOD HAS HIGHLY EXALTED HIM, AND GIVEN HIM THE NAME WHICH IS ABOVE EVERY NAME, SO THAT AT THE NAME OF JESUS EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, IN HEAVEN, ON EARTH, OR UNDER THE EARTH, AND EVERY TONGUE WILL CONFESS:

JESUS the MESSIAH is LORD! To the GLORY of GOD the FATHER!

**QUOTING ISAIAH 45:23**

**PAUL'S POINT:** the One True God consists of GOD the FATHER & the LORD JESUS

**4:10-23 CLOSING THANKS**

IN NEED & PROSPERITY, IN POVERTY & PLENTY, I'VE LEARNED THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT: SIMPLE DEPENDENCE ON THE ONE WHO STRENGTHENS ME. (4:12-13)

**4:2-9 CHALLENGE TO LIVE THE EXAMPLE**

EUODIA & SYNTICHE

"MAKE YOUR NEEDS KNOWN TO THE GOD OF PEACE WHO WILL GUARD YOUR HEARTS & MINDS." (4:6-7)

"I PLEAD WITH YOU TO BE UNIFIED IN THE LORD." (4:2)

**3:1-4:1 PAUL'S EXAMPLE**

**PAUL'S PAST**

ZEALOUS & SELF-RIGHTEOUS

"I REGARD IT ALL AS **FILTH** IN COMPARISON TO KNOWING THE MESSIAH." (3:8-10)

"OUR TRUE CITIZENSHIP IS IN HEAVEN & WE'RE AWAITING OUR ROYAL SAVIOR TO COME FROM THERE." (3:20)

NOT THIS!

JESUS AS KING OF THE WORLD

JUSTICE LOVE NEW CREATION

**2:19-30 TWO EXAMPLES**

**2:19-24 TIMOTHY**

LORD, PLEASE KEEP THE PHILIPPIANS SAFE.

**2:25-30 EPAPHRODITUS**

"HE CAME CLOSE TO DEATH TO SERVE THE MESSIAH."

...HE'S OKAY!

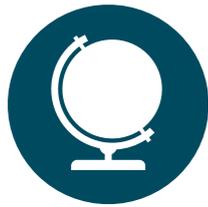
# Philippians

A visual summary of Paul's letter to the Philippians, created by The Bible Project. (It can also be a great coloring sheet!)

created by the Bible Project

# Philippi and Paul: History and Context

N.T. Wright, *The New Testament in Its World* (pp. 436-38)



In Paul's time, Philippi had a population of about 10,000, about one tenth the size of Thessalonica.



Sometime in AD 49-50, Paul and his co-workers left Asia Minor and arrived at Neopolis, then taking a 12 mile walk to Philippi (Acts 16:11-12).



Philippi was a classic romanized Greek city, complete with a Roman system of government.



This marked Paul's move away from cities with sizable Jewish population to cities that were gentile and pagan in both religion and culture.



The resident religions reflect the diversity of the city. As many as 35 different deities were venerated and worshiped in Philippi.



Luke reports several events from Paul's initial visit to Philippi (Acts 16:11-40).



The Philippian church was likely the first church in Europe, and the first phase of Paul's mission in Macedonia (northern Greece).



These events include the conversion of Lydia; the exorcism of a fortune-telling slave girl; and the conversion of the Philippian jailer.

# Philippians: Overview

**Paul's letter to the Philippians overflows with joy, sparkling with the delight of family affection.** It is encouraging and refreshing, reminding readers of the sheer magnificence of Jesus the Messiah, and their common joy in him.

**The letter is written in prison.** While in chains, Paul contemplates the potential end of his life's work, and looks ahead to what might lie in store. **It shows Paul as joyful even amid adversity.** It is a mature and measured piece of writing. Paul displays heartfelt gratitude to the Philippians, whom he regards as nothing less than his joy and crown. Indeed, this letter goes to show that Paul remained tied with bonds of affection to his churches. He never ceased to be delighted at the joy they gave him.

**The letter to the Philippians has been categorized as a letter of friendship, or a family letter, but might more properly be called a letter of fellowship.** This includes practical support; he thanks the Philippians for their financial aid (prisoners in the ancient world received no food from the local authorities), and for the service of Epaphroditus, while also informing them of his own somewhat difficult situation. For Paul, his arrangement with the Philippians was reciprocal: they supported him materially in his ministry, and they in turn shared the fruits of his labor (4:15). At the same time, he warns them against potential intruders and exhorts them to live out the Jesus-story as a colony of heavenly citizens.



*View of the traditional site of the prison where Paul and Silas were kept (Acts 16:22–40). [www.holylandphotos.org](http://www.holylandphotos.org)*

**The centerpiece of the letter is the famous poem of Philippians 2:6-11, narrating the story of Jesus' incarnation, humiliation, and exaltation.** This becomes the paradigm for the Philippians' attitudes and behavior, as it had been for Paul himself. And since the poem displays the biblically rooted narrative of the Messiah as a contrast to all human empire (remembering that Philippi was a proud Roman colony), we are not surprised at the many hints throughout of the contrast between Christ and Caesar — a contrast that was to be displayed in

the way the followers of Jesus would 'shine like lights' in the world.

The great poem itself, in its present context, is designed, Paul says, to teach his readers how to *think* with the "mind of Christ." **Learning to think 'in Christ' was central to Paul's vision of Christian life.**

— N.T. Wright, *The New Testament in Its World* (pp. 434-35)

# Paul's Four Imperatives

★ **Faithfulness:** Paul urges the Philippians living in the midst of Roman patriotism to follow Jesus' example and live out his story, especially in times of difficulty, hardship, and persecution.

★ **Imitation:** Paul calls the Philippians to imitate Christ, to be living examples of the story of Jesus as they participate in his suffering and sacrificial, self-giving love.

★ **Participation:** Paul encourages Christians to exercise humility, be unified, vent their anxieties to God who gives peace that surpasses understanding, and to see beauty and grace in all circumstances.

★ **Contentment:** Paul sees his suffering as a reenactment of Jesus' life story, and hardships taught him that the secret of contentment is total dependence on God. He urges us to trust that God will meet all of our needs.

The diagram is a hand-drawn sketch on textured, light-brown paper. At the top, the word "philippians" is written in a large, black, cursive script. Below it, a thick black oval contains the text "THE BIG IDEA" in all caps, followed by "Following Jesus is about progress not perfection" in a smaller, handwritten font. Underneath the oval, the phrase "HOW PHILIPPIANS FITS INTO" is written in all caps, with two arrows pointing downwards and outwards to two rectangular boxes. The left box is titled "GOD'S BIG STORY" and contains three bullet points: "Humility is essential for unity.", "God provides for us through His generosity and the generosity of others.", and "Joy from Jesus allows us to overcome anxiety about our circumstances.". The right box is titled "MY STORY" and contains three bullet points: "Because of Jesus, we can move from selfish to selfless living.", "Jesus sets the example for our relationships with God and with each other.", and "The more generous we are, the more the message of Jesus can spread.".

# philippians

**THE BIG IDEA**  
Following Jesus is about progress not perfection

↙ HOW PHILIPPIANS FITS INTO ↘

**GOD'S BIG STORY**

- Humility is essential for unity.
- God provides for us through His generosity and the generosity of others.
- Joy from Jesus allows us to overcome anxiety about our circumstances.

**MY STORY**

- Because of Jesus, we can move from selfish to selfless living.
- Jesus sets the example for our relationships with God and with each other.
- The more generous we are, the more the message of Jesus can spread.

# Philippians 1:1-11

*Read Philippians 1:1-11 and use the reflections below to guide your understanding of the passage as you reflect on the significance of this text in our lives today.*

**[Greeting: Phil 1:1-2]** The letter begins with a greeting from Paul and Timothy, addressed to God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, with particular mention of the ‘overseers’ and ‘deacons,’ who were left in charge after Paul departed and about whom Paul is prayerfully thankful.

It is easy to overlook Paul’s description of them as those who are “in Christ Jesus” or the gifts of “grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Yet to the first readers, these opening lines would have been a reminder that all of life had been transformed by the sharing of the gospel.

**[Thanksgiving: Phil 1:3-8]** “I thank my God every time I remember you.” With this line, Paul begins to pour out his heart in gratitude to God for all God has done and is continuing to do. Despite Paul’s situation in prison, a lonely and isolated place, he regards every circumstance as an experience of grace. He remembers the Philippians constantly—with joy (1:4), with confidence (1:6), and with a love that is more than human affection, because its source is Christ himself (1:8).

Paul refers twice to the fact that the Philippians have “shared” in the gospel and in grace; not only in what they have received, but also in what they have given. Paul is thankful because the Philippians are ‘partners in the gospel.’ They are in the gospel business, the grace business, along with Paul.

Paul’s constant prayers of thanksgiving for the Philippian church strengthened his bond with that community. Likewise, we too can remember others with joy, with confidence, and with love in our own prayers. And in our current time of separation, we should do all that we can to ensure that our prayers for others become our words to them as well. Certainly we can imagine how Paul’s outpouring of thanks would strengthen the Philippians’ own faith, as well as solidify the relationship between them and Paul. In the same way, our own words of love to others have the power to strengthen their faith and solidify our relationship with them, perhaps now more than ever.

**[Intercession: Phil 1:9-11]** When Paul turns to making requests, they are for the Philippians, not for himself. He goes on to pray for the Philippians, spurred on by his affection for them, that they abound in knowledge, that they would appear as pure and blameless before Christ, and would produce an abundant fruit of righteousness in their life by Jesus Christ.

What he asks for is a growth in Christian love—that it may overflow and be enriched by knowledge and insight (1:9). Our love for God grows as we learn more about God and about God’s love for us. As we grow in knowledge of God’s nature, our actions should increasingly become in line with God’s purpose. Similarly, true Christian love is not a sentimental affection but a sincere desire for what is best for them. This love requires knowledge and insight in order to help others reach their full potential.

The source of our love for God and for other people is God. The goal that we be “pure and blameless on the day of Christ” (1:10) will be achieved by God, who “began a good work” in us (1:6). God is at work and will continue to work powerfully in our lives to change and transform them, causing love to overflow from them. And what we offer to God is the “fruit of righteousness” — right relationship with God and with others that we possess only because we are “in Christ.” Paul concludes that this is all to the glory of God, which for Paul is the motive and goal for all of life.

**[Final Thoughts]** These first eleven verses are permeated by Paul’s confidence in God. He is confident that God will complete what God has begun (1:6); confident that God’s grace is with him, even in prison (1:7); confident that his prayers for the Philippians will be answered and that by their lives God will be glorified.

Paul’s confidence is not just a vague hope; it is based on what God has done in the past and on his conviction that God is faithful now and forever. God has begun a good work and will not give up; it will be completed on the day of Jesus Christ—the same Jesus who was crucified and exalted (2:6-11).

Let us rest in this hope and confidence, especially in the days ahead!

## Reflection & Discussion

1. What's your favorite letter of Paul's and why?
2. Who in your life are you thankful for right now and why?
3. Where is Paul when he is writing this letter, why does it matter, and how does that resonate with you right now?
4. How is "grace" (or "mercy") a summary of the gospel?
5. How is the work of the Holy Spirit implied throughout Philippians 1:1-11?
6. How does Paul's concept of love challenge and transform how we normally think of love? How is this different from the norm of society?
7. For Paul, prayer was a central way to experience a partnership in the gospel. How can your prayer life begin to more fully reflect that conviction?
8. In what is Paul's joy and confidence rooted? What gives you joy and confidence in this moment? In what ways do you desire to experience joy and confidence more deeply? Individually or as a group, take those things to God in prayer.

*Holy Father, May our love overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us determine what is best, so that we may be pure and blameless in the sight of Jesus Christ and bring glory and praise to your name. Amen.*