

Series: The Fellowship of the Gospel	Reference: <i>Philippians 1:1-2</i>	Title: Introductions	Date: 09.13.2020
Website Writeup:			
We begin today a study of Philippians, join us as we explore what is generally referred to as the Epistle of Joy as it teaches us lessons of joy & unity undergirded by our shared faith in Christ. An appropriate series during this time of lockdown where we, like Paul did with the Philippians, long to be reunited in encouraging fellowship.			

We begin today a new series in Philippians. I was struggling with our next series, until Rachel, our Prayer Coordinator, said she felt this book spoke to us right now. When your Prayer Coordinator speaks, you listen.

So I went to the book & read through it, and lo & behold, it speaks loudly, with the right words, with images of lockdown, unity, interdependence, addressing anxiety & joy, missing Christian fellowship, the supremacy of Christ & humility, Rachel's right, this is a great book to study in this moment!

We begin today very simply with Paul's salutation in 1:1-2, *Paul & Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers & deacons: 2 Grace & peace to you from God our Father & the Lord Jesus Christ.*

My purpose today is none other than to introduce you to Paul's heart, those in Philippi to whom he writes, give a little context & generate excitement about what we'll hear.

Letters are a glimpse into the heart of a person. It's easier to see the soul & character of a person through their writing of a personal letter to a loved one. A letter is one of two sides of dialogue, so it's hard when you don't have the other side to know the situation. Sometimes it's only from within that letter with which we can deduce the situation.

This letter wasn't meant to be an academic exercise, rather a human document written by friend to missed friends & to a specific situation. He didn't sit down to write out a theological treatise. He didn't think he'd be adding to the literature of the day & certainly not that he'd be writing to us who regard it as Scripture! But this doesn't diminish its importance, or transcendence in time & culture. Like a good love song written to a particular person, it continually speaks to us. It's precisely that this letter's written with heart & to a specific need which makes it throb with life.

Human need doesn't change. Human sin & it's devastation in the social fabric is ongoing & seeded with the same pride, selfishness, greed or lust since the Fall in Genesis. The different situations we find emerging in history, although populated with different characters & dress, are basically cyclical. We deal with the same problems over & over in the church & world. Errant philosophies, political, social or theological, are only redressed & relabeled, but in essence the same lies we've fought throughout history.

This letter's like that love song, rising above both culture & history speaking down to us throughout time - always relevant & encouraging if we allow it to teach the lessons & joy it was intended for the original readers.

Paul didn't sit at a desk quietly crafting every word making sure it was perfect, thinking it to be Holy Scripture. He paced back & forth, dictating, words falling over one another in eagerness to help & connect with his brothers & sisters in Philippi.

Like Paul imprisoned, we continue to be on lockdown. We've experienced spiritual pressure, even social persecution in the current social climate. We long for reconnection, encouragement & fellowship once again. We've felt our joy ebb away as it seems peace & fun have become almost outlawed with a sense that if you're not angry & divisive you're in the wrong these days. So, we need these words at this moment more than any other.

Philippians is filled with wonderful soundbites which lodge in our thoughts as we read. Let me quote a few...

- *"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (1:21)*
- *"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." (1:27)*
- *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." (2:3, 4)*
- *"...continue to work out your salvation with fear & trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will & to act in order to fulfill his good purpose." (2:12, 13)*
- *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (4:4)*
- *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer & petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." (4:6)*
- *"...I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." (4:11)*
- *"I can do all this through him who gives me strength." (4:13)*
- And maybe the most pertinent...*"Finally, brothers & sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." (Php 4:8-9).*

These are good meaty words & there are many more in these four chapters, not just pithy sayings, but deep theological commands. Guiding truths to be applied to life leading to deep connection with Christ & others.

Philippians has been called *The Epistle of Joy*. But joy which Paul experienced while in Roman captivity with his leadership contested by usurpers within the larger church. Philippians seeks to make sense of a Gospel of goodness when the world doesn't seem good, or when everyone seems to attack? Paul's been attacked by the outside world & internally from those who call themselves Christians. Feels familiar, and through that lens, we hope these verses take on their intended depth & power.

We get background for this letter from the book of Acts, especially chapter 16. Paul & Barnabas had returned from the Council of Jerusalem, with the Council's decisive watershed ruling that Gentile believers didn't have to be circumcised, or adopt Jewish customs to be saved. The Gospel had been released from undermining & hinderance.

Paul & Barnabas then separated, and Paul took Silas setting out on his second missionary journey (cf. Acts 15:36–40). Timothy joined them in Lystra (cf. Acts 16:1–5). Paul’s plan was to retrace the steps of his first missionary journey & encourage the churches. As they traveled west, the trio attempted to go back down to Ephesus, but the Holy Spirit redirected them. They tried then to go north to Bithynia by the Black Sea, again the Spirit didn’t allow it (cf. Acts 16:6, 7). So, Paul, Silas & Timothy were funneled west to Troas to the mouth of the Dardanelle Straits, the gateway to Europe. There Luke joined them, forming a dynamic foursome.

It was there at the Dardanelles, today’s northern Greece, where Paul beheld, standing before him in a night vision, a man from Macedonia, urging him as Luke tells it, *“Come over to Macedonia & help us.’ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them”* (Acts 16:9, 10).

This is a Spirit led journey, God wanted them there. It's one of the great turning points in history as Paul & others made a two-day crossing to Neapolis walking nine miles along the Egnatian Way to Philippi, and by doing so, the Gospel came to the Europe.

Philippi’s inhabitants were 10,000 at most, resting on a narrow shoulder of land, crowned by an acropolis guarding the *Via Egnatia*, the famous highway between Rome & her eastern empire. Philippi had been founded by Greeks in the fourth century b.c. Phillip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great, had named it after himself.

Philippi eventually became a Roman colony, and as such it was governed by Roman law. Roman expatriates made up the citizenry. Latin became the official language, they wore Roman dress. Public inscriptions in the forum & on buildings were Latin. So the leadership & aristocracy of Philippi were completely Roman & Latin. This created a Greek-speaking underclass & it was largely to these construction workers, tradesmen & merchants to which Paul came.

As a matter of fact, the story of Paul’s time in Philippi is in Acts 16 & that story is largely about 3 people, Lydia of the upper class & a dealer in purple, a Roman jailer representing the sturdy middle class, and a demented slave girl who would have been poor & of the lowest class. Which reflects the Church in all its glory extending through class & economic lines. Paul had to leave the city due to persecution & illegal imprisonment - the church inherited that persecution as he left, which is why they shared in his bonds & defense of the Gospel.

Paul’s custom when entering a town was to go first to the synagogue & preach initially to the Jews of the area (cf. Acts 14:1). But there were so few in the city, the necessary quorum to form a synagogue of ten men didn’t exist. However, after a few days Paul did discover a Sabbath congregation meeting alongside a river outside the city walls. A group of God-fearing Gentile women meeting in a place of prayer worshipping the God of Israel (16:13). These become the first Christians of Philippi.

The first was Lydia, a merchant. As Luke tells it in Acts 16:14, *“One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.”*

So it seems the man in the Macedonian vision turned out to be a woman! Lydia & her entire household believed, and were baptized on the spot (v. 15).

Spiritual opposition was immediate in the form of a girl possessed by *a spirit of divination*. The girl was loud & incessant screaming, “*These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation*” (v. 17). Oddly this was a demonic attempt to co-opt the gospel & destroy it. Because, in a very Roman city, it wasn’t a welcome message, sort of like the mainline today.

There are certain areas which are harder to minister within, and I believe this Eastern Mainline is one. Christian groups & churches struggle to see fruit in this area as compared with others. For instance, ministries such as YoungLife & Cru seem to thrive in other areas with hundreds of attendees, whereas here they struggle along with 10-30 at most, and YoungLife is still barred from certain area schools to this day. But that doesn’t mean God hasn’t called us to break through this spiritual veil of darkness! I think He has, and our efforts will not be in vain over time.

Paul commanded the spirit to leave that young girl & found himself in deep trouble because he’d driven out the girl’s owners’ source of income! So, Paul & Silas were seized & taken to the Roman magistrates, identified as Jews & savagely beaten!

But bruised & bleeding in prison they sang hymns to God (v. 25) until an earthquake opened the prison doors! As a result, the gospel further invaded Europe as the jailer cried out, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*” *And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you & your household’*” (vv. 30, 31), and they were baptized!

Paul & Silas refused to leave the prison though, and when the magistrates learned they were Roman citizens, their arrogance turned to profuse apologies as they urged them to quietly leave town. They did, but not before visiting Lydia. There were undoubtedly tears & laughter in Lydia’s home. Possibly they sang a few of those prison songs together. Certainly there was praise, thanksgiving to God & prayers for the new church. The flag of the gospel had been raised there adding to the body of Christ’s great diversity.

Paul had a unique closeness to the Philippian church, which we see in warm & friendly expressions in this letter. Paul makes this clear right after his greeting as he says, “*I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...*” (vv. 3–5).

The word *partnership* is the Greek word *koinonia*, or *fellowship*. Paul feels a warm fellowship in the gospel with them. The same word (fellowship, partnership) or its derivative appears six times in Philippians (cf. 1:5, 7; 2:1; 3:10; 4:14, 15 [twice]). Fellowship of mutual commitment to the gospel which grew from their commitment to support Paul’s mission spiritually & materially (cf. 4:15, 16).

While there are various reasons for Paul’s writing, this letter comes from the depth of fellowship they shared in the gospel. This accounts for the feel of the letter & how he chooses his words. This is why this book has the subtitle, *The Fellowship of the Gospel*. An unified fellowship of compatriots bound together in the greatest cause, like us. Paul wrote this years after the churches founding, due to their financial support of him as a prisoner in Rome (cf. 4:18). Their gift had been carried to him by a church member,

Epaphroditus, who'd nearly died during its delivery (cf. 2:27). When he recovered & prepared to return, Paul asked him to carry the letter home arriving late in Paul's imprisonment in the early A.D. 60's (60 or 62).

Paul's letter reveals many purposes: to express gratitude for their generosity, to explain why he sent Epaphroditus back so quickly, to catch them up, to inform them that he would shortly be sending Timothy, to warn them of Judaizers & urge them to stand firm in unity. But undergirding these purposes was the reality of their gospel fellowship.

The very words of Paul's greeting evoke an attitude of partnership with the Philippians. He doesn't use the title *apostle*, rather he begins, "*Paul & Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.*" The disuse of his title evidences the familiar warmth which existed between him & Philippian believers. His inclusion of Timothy as coauthor indicates Paul would share his authority with those in the partnership of the gospel. Paul identifies himself & Timothy as servants [slaves] of Christ Jesus - a term in its Philippian/Roman context carried negative connotations that were just as repugnant to them as it is to us today. Paul knew exactly what he was saying because the only other use of *slave* in this letter will come in 2:7, used of Christ who *took the form of a slave*.

However, slaves of the time were given great responsibility & could do very well for themselves in representing their masters, but still they were living property of someone else & in all things represented their masters wishes & desires.

Paul says, "*To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers & deacons*" (v. 1). So while he recognizes church leaders, he really is emphasizing every single Philippian believer as holy (*Hagios* - set apart). Paul wasn't playing favorites. Everyone's set apart & made special to represent Christ in this community as hard as that would be. They would share in all the tribulation as well as joy alongside Paul. His emphasis on everyone foreshadows the call to unity which he powerfully voices throughout the letter. A message we desperately need to hear today. It's a message of equity in the Gospel - equity's a popular word now, but people often don't want the pain, but only the pleasure of an equitable life. It means everyone pulling their own weight, all oars in the water, everyone pulling together. Everyone getting blisters on their hands as we row the ship of God's kingdom through the waters of life.

Paul & the Philippians' fellowship & partnership in the gospel, gives theological & relational context & texture for his major themes. At the very heart of the letter is Paul's call to the Philippians to let their manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ (1:27) and as such, living a gospel-worthy life becomes the theme extending to the end of chapter 2.

To live worthy of the gospel there must be *unity* in the church. He says, "*stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel*" (1:27). In gospel partnership, they must be "*like-minded*" (2:2). Look to "*the interests of the others*" (2:4). Have the mind of Christ (cf. 2:5-8). Work out their salvation as Christ works in them (2:12, 13). And live like Timothy & Epaphroditus (2:19-30), men of integrity who'd proven themselves worthy in walking out the gospel.

All this said, Christ is the absolute center of the letter. No other noun occurs more in Philippians than His name. The Christology of the hymn of Christ in 2:6-11 can be said

to underpin the thinking of everything else in Philippians. Philippians is about Christ & people in Christ (cf. 2:29; 3:1; 4:4, 10). People in the fellowship of the gospel because they're in Christ, whose citizenship is in heaven (3:20). Philippi, although proud of being Roman, was set far off from the center of the Roman Empire among other peoples. A visual image of the Christian living in the world while in & allegiant to Christ. Like us, the Philippian church struggled under their earthly governmental citizenship, while their ultimate belonging is to Christ as citizens of heaven.

Grand themes, and joy shines throughout as one. Listen to some of the joy verses...

- 1:4b: *"I always pray with joy"*
- 1:18b: *"Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice."*
- 1:25b: *"I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith"*
- 2:2: *"make my joy complete..."*
- 2:17, 18: *"But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice & service coming from your faith, I am glad & rejoice with all of you. ¹⁸ So you too should be glad & rejoice with me."*
- 2:29: *"welcome him in the Lord with great joy"*
- 3:1: *"Further, my brothers & sisters, rejoice in the Lord!"*
- 4:4: *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"*
- 4:10: *"I rejoiced greatly in the Lord."*

Philippians evokes a particular joy. The joy of Christ & in Christ. A joy which remains & even thrives in the dark places of life, like prison cells in captivity & persecution. Like in Covid lockdown when it doesn't always feel great & you miss fellowship with others. It's available for us in Christ standing together as we partner in the fellowship of the gospel. It's my hope & prayer Philippians will enhance our experience of this particular joy.

I've also longed to be back together with you all. I've felt the pressures you've felt. I hear the news you hear. I've felt imprisoned by it all, but there's joy to be had in great fellowship with Jesus & each other, even if sometimes from a distance! I miss you, as I am sure you miss others during this time, let's center ourselves in the words of this wonderful epistle to once again put away fear, grasp hold of faith, eradicate anxiety & find this joy once more in abundance!