

Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Philippians



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Living and Sharing the Gospel

Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Philippians

By Michael D. Morrison

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# Joy, Hope and Love: Paul's Letter from Prison

By Ronald Kelly and Paul Kroll

Paul has been called the greatest Christian who ever lived. He also suffered greatly for the name of Jesus Christ. When Paul defended his calling to the church, he defined suffering as a major proof of his spiritual office. "I have worked much harder," he insisted, "been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again" (2 Corinthians 11:23).

Paul's many trials did not deter him from living a Christian life. Neither did they restrict his preaching the gospel. To the contrary, suffering seemed to motivate him to even greater spiritual service. He said something remarkable about his adversities: "For Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

We shouldn't, however, think of Paul as an indestructible superman. There were times when the tremendous hardships he confronted were more than he could bear. After suffering one rather malicious incident of persecution, Paul admitted he and his companions "despaired even of life" (2 Corinthians 1:8).

But Paul had faith in the living God to see him through his trial. "On him we have set our hope," wrote Paul, "that he will continue to deliver us" (verse 10). But as Paul's life demonstrates, God often delivers us *out of* troubles we are already in, not necessarily *from* troubles before they begin.

Yet, as we must, Paul was able to rise above his many afflictions. How did he do it? And how can we surmount our trials and troubles? Paul didn't overcome by his own strength or will. He never took personal credit for being able to bear his painfully heavy cross. He attributed his spiritual muscle to its

true source — Jesus Christ. Paul said, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13).

He rejoiced, not in his own will and courage, but in the power of Christ in him. And by that example we know that we, too, have access to the same spiritual power and courage.

### **Apostle of spiritual joy**

Paul maintained this Christ-centered faith during at least four years of suffering as a prisoner of the Roman government, first in Caesarea and then in Rome, possibly in other places as well. During his imprisonment, Paul wrote four letters that survive in our New Testament. They are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. We, living almost 2,000 years later, are fortunate to have these letters to teach us the inspiring truths of God. We are the beneficiaries of Paul’s spiritual wisdom forged in the crucible of personal suffering.

These four letters are among the most hopeful and encouraging Paul wrote. They help us understand how we can find joy in our trials and peace in our suffering. The upbeat message in the prison letters contrasts markedly with Paul’s grim physical condition. Such a contrast teaches us a fundamental truth about our Christian faith: No matter what our misfortune or difficulty, God reigns supreme and sovereign. He can — and will — see us through any calamity.

### **Christ the center**

The Rome of the apostle Paul’s day was a breathtaking city. Rome — the nucleus of the mighty Roman Empire. Rome — the axis of political power. Rome — the hub of the Western world’s social and economic systems.

In his book *Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, New Testament scholar William Barclay described how Rome had united the world:

In the Roman Empire a new unity had come to the world. The *pax Romana*, the Roman peace, was a very real thing.

Kingdoms and states and countries, which had struggled and warred with each other, were gathered into a new unity in the Empire which was Rome. (page 67)

When Paul was brought to Rome as a prisoner of the empire, he must have been impressed with the city. Perhaps Rome's greatness suggested a metaphor to Paul that expressed a profound truth about Jesus Christ. As Dr. Barclay wrote: "It may well be that in his imprisonment Paul saw with new eyes how all this unity centred in Rome; and it may well have seemed to him a symbol of how all things must centre in Christ" (page 67).

That is, Jesus Christ is the heart and hub of all that exists. All that exists has its focus in him. In Christ, "all things hold together," says Paul (Colossians 1:17). Paul reasons that through Christ's death, Jesus brought the discordant elements in this world together (verse 20). Jesus reunited person with person and humans with God. To Paul, Jesus was God's imperial moving force for reconciliation (verses 19-20).

Paul emphasizes Jesus as the focus of this spiritual union. God has purposed to "bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ," he writes (Ephesians 1:10). Paul describes the center of this unity in Christ as occurring within the church — not in an empire ruled by an emperor from Rome. He says Jesus has been appointed by God "to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (verses 22-23).

The church, then, is the place in the world where the unity of Christ is experienced. Dr. Barclay says: "It is within the church that all the middle walls of separation must be broken down" (page 67).

Paul shows exactly in what way the church is unified. The church is one body and one Spirit. The church has one hope, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all"

(Ephesians 4:5-6).

The Roman Empire of Paul's day had one leader who unified the empire: Emperor Nero — a reigning potentate with near absolute power, if he wanted to use it. Nero had lofty titles and broad rule throughout the world. He was the Pontifex Maximus — the high priest of the empire — a mediator between the gods and the people.

Paul may have been thinking of a comparison between Nero and Christ as he was dictating his letter to the Ephesians. Here was Nero, mighty in this world but puny when compared with the Creator's power. Jesus Christ is the true king of the universe, having all rule and every title that can be given, including High Priest. He is both Lord of the world and Savior of his people.

Paul writes that God has placed Jesus Christ “at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given” (Ephesians 1:20-21). Thus, the unseen Christ is Lord of all. But his rule can be seen only among those who are Christ-centered — that is, those who are part of the Body of Christ.

No matter that we may face adversity, persecution, affliction, hardship or disaster. God's remarkable purpose for us is so much better, that it is not to be compared with this life's sufferings, says Paul. Beyond that is the wonderful news that we can have the spiritual strength to endure trials when they strike our lives. Paul says to us that we do not face life's problems alone, but do so with the Holy Spirit — through Christ in us.

That's how Paul was able to remain assured in his terribly unsure years in prison. We should think of a spiritually joyful Paul in prison, not someone downcast and fearful. He is striding around some small room or dismal cell in Rome, perhaps in the presence of — or even chained to — a Roman soldier. We see Paul carefully dictating a profoundly positive letter to encourage the church. Paul writes hopefully of his future in spite of the obvious

hopelessness of his predicament.

This contrast between Paul's rather hopeless physical situation and his hopeful reaction reverberates through a letter he is writing. It is one of the four prison epistles. This one is to the Philippians, and it becomes a message of joy. The word *joy* occurs 16 times in its various forms in the letter. Spiritual joy, rejoicing in Christ, is a major theme. "I will continue to rejoice," Paul writes to concerned believers while he is under house arrest in Rome (Philippians 1:18). He continues, "For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance" (verse 19). Paul has confidence in the outcome of his situation. No matter how bleak it is, no matter what ominous turn it may take, God's will shall be done.

Meanwhile, the power of the Holy Spirit will see him through his predicament, no matter how difficult. Through Christ, Paul will face the worst and come out the best. What may happen to him in the near future is not the issue.

Paul's present prison life, admittedly, is less than ideal. However, that is not the issue for the apostle Paul. He learned to be content whatever the circumstances. Encouraging the people he knew and loved, Paul says: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation" (Philippians 4:12).

### **Paul encourages the church**

Here is Paul in an uncertain and trial-filled position. Yet *he* is the one encouraging the church to have hope, joy and peace. He virtually *demand*s the members to feel triumphant: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (verse 4). Paul, who is suffering in prison, pleads with the Philippians: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer



and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (verse 6).

Paul is no bootstrap psychologist. Church members need not attempt to manufacture this confidence and exultation. They should have joy and peace *within* because these are fruits of the Holy Spirit living within us (Galatians 5:22). So Paul can tell the church: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

Paul’s prison message is always hopeful, his outlook confident, his future bright. This especially shows through in another prison letter, the one to the Ephesians. When writing this letter, Paul is in chains, with little to look forward to in this world. But he is exuberantly thankful for God’s priceless spiritual gifts.

It is these gifts — joy, peace, faith, hope — that will get Paul through his trial. Paul tells the Ephesian Christians that God and Christ are the source of all these spiritual blessings — ones we need to support us through life. He writes: “To him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Yes, says Paul, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). Joy, peace, faith, hope — these spiritual blessings are ours if Christ lives in us. These spiritual qualities are indestructible because they have their source in Christ, who is always with us. Because we cannot lose Christ, our spiritual blessings are secure.

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# Joy in Jesus Christ

## Philippians 1

Paul's letter to the church in Philippi says more about joy than any other New Testament book. Even though Paul is under arrest and in chains, he rejoices because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He writes to thank the Philippian Christians for the help they gave him and to encourage them to face their own trials with joy rooted in their faith in Christ Jesus.

### Prayers of joy and love

Paul follows first-century custom by first saying who he was, then the people he was writing to: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" (1:1, NRSV in this chapter).

In some letters, Paul introduces himself as an apostle. But since the Philippians already accept his authority, here he introduces himself simply as a servant of Christ Jesus. He views his chains, his mission and his entire life in the context of doing Christ's work. He writes to "the saints" — the holy ones, those who are set apart for God.

First-century Greek letters often began with *chairein*, "greeting." Paul modifies this to *charis*, "grace." Grace is part of his identity, and he begins writing with a prayer for grace and peace "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 2).

He then praises the Philippians — not directly, but by thanking God for them (verse 3). Not only is this giving credit where it is due, it reminds and encourages the Philippians that God is working in their lives.

Paul writes that he is "constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now" (verses 4-5). The Philippians supported Paul's missionary work,

and had sent him help (4:15; also see 1 Cor. 8:1-5). Paul rejoices that these people have such a zeal for the gospel, and this letter shows them his gratitude that God is using them in this way.

Paul's joy is rooted in God's faithfulness: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (verse 6). Since the Philippians had begun so well, Paul knows that they will persevere in the faith — not on their own strength, but because God will continue to work in them. "All of you share in God's grace with me" (verse 7).

### **Prayer for love**

God knows how much I care for you, Paul writes — I care for you as much as Jesus himself does (verse 8). The Philippians are concerned about Paul, but here, the man in prison expresses compassion for those who are not. As we will shortly see, they faced some trials of their own.

Then Paul tells them what he prays for: "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God" (verses 9-11).

The Philippians already love. Paul wants their love to grow into wisdom and good behavior, and this letter will help them do that. As they grow in knowledge, they will have a better foundation on which to make decisions, and their behavior will come not from their own righteousness, but from Jesus Christ working within them. And the praise will go to God, because he is the source of the righteousness.

### **Priority of the gospel**

Paul then begins to address their concern for him. They had heard of his arrest and imprisonment, and he reassures them "that what has happened to

me has actually helped to spread the gospel” (verse 12). The gospel is what is important, he implies, not my comfort. So what looks like misfortune for Paul is really turning out quite well. Since he could talk to his guards, “it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ” (verse 13).

Instead of other Christians being frightened by Paul’s arrest, they became encouraged by Paul’s boldness in captivity. “Most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear” (verse 14). Paul could be restrained, but the gospel was spreading even more.

Some people were trying to take advantage of Paul’s restrictions, but Paul does not worry about them. He judges everything by one standard: the gospel. “Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel

“The others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true” (verses 15-18). Paul is encouraged by those who preach out of love, but he sees good even in what the others are doing, because more people are learning about Christ.

And because of this, Paul says, “I rejoice.” His joy was in the gospel, not in his own advantage.

Paul has reason to be confident, because his confidence is in Christ. “I will continue to rejoice,” he writes, “for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance” (verse 19). Paul knows that he will be released, but in the meantime, the gospel is going to more people. So he is happy.

## **To live is Christ**

Paul does not know whether he will be released alive, or released by death. No matter which, he is sure that Christ will give him strength to be faithful. “It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death” (verse 20). If Paul escapes alive, he will praise Christ. If he is killed for his faith, that will also be a witness for Christ.

“Living is Christ and dying is gain” (verse 21). Death can be “gain” for Paul only because he knows he will get more after death than he has in this life. He trusts his Savior for eternal life, so he uses this mortal life to serve his Savior. If he dies, he will be assured of a reward. If he lives, he can preach the gospel. Because his life is in Christ, and Christ is his priority, both possibilities are good. No wonder he rejoices!

“If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you” (verses 22-24). If it were just for himself, Paul would rather die, escape his troubles and enjoy life with Christ. But he has an assignment to preach and teach, and he is convinced that he is not yet finished.

“Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again” (verses 25-26). His work among the saints is to help them experience joy in their faith. His release from prison and his ministry among them will help the Philippians focus on Christ as their source of joy.

## **The gift of suffering**

Paul then hints at troubles the Philippians themselves are facing. This may be why he mentioned the possibility of death, why he set an example of viewing death as gain, why he encouraged them to view everything through the lens of Christ. Whether in life or in death, their goal should also be to exalt Christ, to bring glory to him, to demonstrate that he is worthy of their trust.

No matter happens, he wants the believers in Philippi to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (verse 27). Their behavior should show that they trust in Christ even when threatened. “So that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel” (verse 27). Imitate me, he seems to be saying. Face your trials just as I am facing mine — rejoicing in Christ, holding fast to the faith. And he urges unity, a point he will address again in later chapters.

Stand firm, he says, “in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing” (verse 28). If the Philippian Christians keep their faith even when threatened with death, it will be evidence that they are thoroughly convinced of a glorious afterlife with Christ. This will exalt Christ, and might convince some people that they need the salvation that these saints so strongly believe in.

Paul then writes about a surprising gift: “For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (verses 29-30).

Yes, they are to view their sufferings as a gift, as part of their faith in a crucified Savior. Just as the Philippians share grace with Paul (verse 7), they also share in persecutions. Yet they are to rejoice, for the sufferings are part

of joining Jesus in his journey to glory, and these sufferings exalt Christ, showing him to be more valuable than all earthly comforts, more valuable than life itself. Whether they live or die, they have reason to rejoice, for they have Christ!

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# The Example of Jesus

## Philippians 2

Paul, in prison, is writing to thank and encourage Christians in Philippi. They face their own trials and have their own problems. They, like many churches today, had some petty disagreements and selfishness. Paul points them to a better approach to interpersonal relationships and gives them three examples they can imitate.

### **Consideration**

Paul begins by reminding them of blessings they have been given by Christ: “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion...” — he assumes that they have enjoyed all of these — “then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (Phil. 2:1-2).

He is not just asking them to think like one another. As he will soon explain, he wants them to be like-minded with Christ — to be encouraging, comforting, sharing, tender and compassionate, as Christ is. He wants them to have the same kind of love as Christ has, being like him in attitude and goals. That is the only sure way to be united with one another. When the Philippians put this into practice, Paul’s joy among them will be complete, for his gospel will have produced its fruit.

The bottom line, he says, is to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” (verse 3). Do not be motivated by selfishness or pride, for they destroy unity and are the essence of sin. Instead, “in humility consider others better than yourselves.” Paul does not say that others are better — only that we should consider them better. Objectively, everyone cannot be better, yet Christian unity must be built on considering others ahead of self.



“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (verse 4). We may consider our own interests, but we must also look out for others. This is the way of Christ. He, the best of all humans, did not put himself first, but considered the needs of others.

## **Humility**

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (verses 5-7). Scholars call this passage “the Philippian hymn,” because its style and rhythm cause some to think that Paul is adopting words that Christians were already singing — words of praise for Christ Jesus.

Paul is using these words to remind his readers of the example they are to follow: someone who was divine, having the greatest of honor, yet who did not cling to his rights and privileges. The 2011 edition of the NIV puts it this way: Jesus “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.” Though the Philippians had important rights as citizens of a Roman colony, they were to focus on others, not themselves.

Jesus willingly set his rights aside, in humility becoming a human, serving our needs. “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!” (verse 8). His humility, his desire to serve, was complete. He endured the most painful and most shameful form of death, just to serve our needs.

The result? God resurrected him and “exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (verses 9-11).

What is the name above all other names? The name of God. In Isaiah 45:23, God says, “Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.” Paul is saying that Jesus should be given the same honors as God. When we bow to Jesus, God gets the glory.

Jesus is in the highest place, worthy of worship, worthy of the name “Lord.” Because he was humble, he is now exalted. Humility is the praiseworthy way.

## **Contentment**

How should we respond to Jesus’ humility and service? Paul pleads for action: “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed — not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence — continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (verse 12). The Philippians have been a responsive church, eager to do what is good. Paul is asking them to take one more step, applying the humility of Christ to their interpersonal relationships.

They are to work not in order to get into salvation (salvation is a gift that they already have), but to work out its implications — to diligently apply it in their lives by imitating their Savior. They are to work, and yet realize that they are not working alone: “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (verse 13). We cannot make ourselves more like God — only he can, and he does it by changing our desires and our actions. He does not force us, but enables us. We work, trust him to do his work, and give him all the credit (see 1:3 and 1 Cor. 15:10).

“Do everything without complaining or arguing,” Paul writes, “so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life” (verses 14-16). In other words, as you share the gospel, be aware of the example you set (see 1:27). Be content, be peaceable, and you will be seen as points of light. Society doesn’t make it

easy to be Christlike, but instead of viewing this as an obstacle, see it as an opportunity to make the gospel attractive.

Paul then makes his appeal personal: “in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing.” This will complete his mission, he says, bringing the people toward maturity in Christ.

Paul then elevates the significance of what they are doing — he is a sacrifice for God, and so are they. Their lives are given together as an offering to God. “But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you” (verse 17). Although I am in jail, he says, I rejoice because of the way that you serve the Lord. “So you too should be glad and rejoice with me” (verse 18).

## **Timothy**

“I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you” (verse 19). Paul hopes to send a friend to them, who will (if we read between the lines) report on whether the Philippians put Paul’s exhortations into practice.

Without directly saying so, Paul writes that Timothy is a good example, already doing what Paul is exhorting. Timothy “takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (verses 20-21). Timothy does not act from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility he looks to the interests of others, of Jesus and the gospel.

“But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel” (verse 22). Look to him, and hear what he says. “I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me” (verse 23). As soon as I find out whether I will get out of prison, I will send him, my son in the faith, to serve your needs. “And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon” (verse 24).

## **Epaphroditus**

But Paul did not wait. He sent his letter with someone else: “But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs” (verse 25). Epaphroditus, apparently one of the leaders in Philippi, had come to visit Paul in prison. Now Paul is sending him back with special commendation:

“For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill” (verse 26). In other words, he is looking out for your interests. He is distressed not because he was sick, but because he doesn’t want you to be worried about him.

“Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety” (verses 27-28). I care for you, too, and I will be less anxious about you when he is there.

“Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him” (verse 29). He is setting a great example, and if you honor people who serve, more people will serve. Epaphroditus put his life on the line: “he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me” (verse 30). Be willing to serve, Paul says, and you will be great. Humble yourself for him, and he will exalt you with Christ!

### **Things to think about**

In my own experience, what role does self-interest play in squabbles?

When others consider me better, do I tend to agree with them?

Do I sometimes assume that other people want what I want? Do I “serve” them as a means of getting what I want?

What rights and privileges do I have? Am I willing to give them up to help

others?

If I can't complain (2:14), what can I say about things that are wrong?

Can I trust God to do his work within me? Does he sometimes seem to work too slowly?

What examples of humility do I know locally? Do I honor them?

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# Starting Right and Finishing Well

## Philippians 3

Paul writes to the church in Philippi to encourage them to rejoice in their trials and to be considerate of one another. In chapter 3, he comments on the foundation of the faith and exhorts them to finish well. He tells them that salvation is not by works, but he exhorts them to work. Let's see how he balances these two thoughts.

### **The true people of God**

Although Paul is only in the middle of his letter, he indicates his transition by writing, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!" (3:1). He wants to stress that joy is found "in the Lord."

"It is no trouble for me to write," he says, "the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you" (3:1). In other words, I've told you before, but I think it will be helpful if I remind you. Then he warns them about false teachers.

"Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh" (3:2). Paul is referring to Judaizers, who taught that people must be circumcised in order to be saved. This heresy was apparently not an urgent problem in Philippi, but Paul wanted to be sure that the Philippians wouldn't fall for it.

He uses harsh words about those who taught salvation by works — dogs, evil-doers, mutilators. He used the Gentile objection to circumcision — that it was a mutilation of the flesh. Paul was not opposed to Jews circumcising Jews, but in this letter, writing to a primarily Gentile church, he felt free to use the Gentile perspective.

"Dogs" was Jewish slang for Gentiles. Why does Paul refer to the Judaizers by their word for Gentiles? He considers them not truly the people

of God, not part of the true Israel. “For it is we who are the circumcision,” he writes (3:3) — and by that word *we*, he is including his Gentile readers. Although they are not physically circumcised, they are part of the true circumcision (Romans 2:29).

Those who have faith in Christ have the circumcision that counts, the circumcision of the heart. We Christians, not the Judaizers, have the true worship: “we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” (3:3). Our hope of salvation, he says, is not based on our flesh, anatomy or genealogy. Our confidence is in Christ.

### **Past performance is worthless**

If salvation were based on genetics and Jewish laws, Paul would do well. Even though he has those, he trusts in Christ, not in his works. “Though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more” (3:4).

Then he lists his merits: “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless” (3:5-6).

Paul has everything the Judaizers have, and more. He was born a Jew, educated in Judea, zealous even by the standards of the strictest group. He did everything he could, but it was not enough. Not because he failed, but because even at its best, the old approach does not work. He had to start over.

No one can accuse Paul of preaching grace for his own benefit or to ease a troubled conscience. Paul has gone from being a respected rabbi, to being a persecuted apostle, for one reason only: he is persuaded that Christ is the truth, the way and the life. “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ” (3:7). He counts those things as spiritually valueless. They cannot bring him any closer to God.

“What is more,” he writes, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things” (3:8). Paul was willing to give up all his Jewish advantages, all his merits, because Christ is so much more valuable. Paul is still a Jew, of course, but genetics and traditions cannot save him.

“I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (3:8). Circumcision is not wrong in itself, but it is worthless for salvation — and actually harmful if someone trusts in it. Only Christ counts; only he is of value for our relationship to God. Paul wants something far more valuable than anything Judaism can offer, and that is Christ.

On judgment day, Paul wants to be found in Christ, “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (3:9). True righteousness does not come through law-keeping (no matter how well we keep the laws) — it comes only as a gift of God to those who trust in Christ. This is the right place to start.

### **Eyes on the goal**

Paul’s goal is “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (3:10-11). Now he knows only in part (1 Cor. 13:12), but he wants to know Christ fully, and he will experience this only in the resurrection.

But to share in Christ’s glory, Paul also shares in his sufferings, and by doing so, he will in some way attain the resurrection. Not that he will earn salvation through his sufferings, but that through faith he is united to Christ, including his crucifixion and death (Rom. 6:3-6). He shares in Christ’s sufferings as well as his glory. Both are part of being “in Christ” through faith. He has joined Jesus in the journey of salvation, and he is willing to



follow him wherever he leads.

But Paul has not yet achieved what he wants: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12). So Paul works hard to perform the work for which Jesus called him. This is part of knowing Christ — knowing his will and being eager to do it. Paul wants to experience the riches of Christ, even if they involve some suffering. His confidence in Christ does not make him complacent or lazy.

And again he says: “Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (3:13-14). He does not rest on the many good things he has already done — he works, for that is what Christ called him for. Paul is not talking about qualifying or earning the prize, but about his zeal for it.

### **Good examples**

Paul has a reason to explain his eagerness — he wants the Philippians to share his approach. “All of us who are mature should take such a view of things” (3:15). Those who are mature recognize that they are not yet complete, but the immature sometimes claim victory prematurely. So Paul adds, “And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you” (3:15). As you mature in Christ, you will learn to think this way, too.

“Only let us live up to what we have already attained” (3:16). Those who are in Christ should live like it (Eph. 4:1); we should let Christ make a difference in our lives, changing us, giving us zeal for his work. And to reinforce this active faith, we are to be attentive to good examples. “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live

according to the pattern we gave you” (Phil. 3:17).

Be zealous for Christ, he says. “For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ” (3:18). Here Paul equates the gospel with “the cross of Christ.” The good news is based on a crucified Savior, for salvation comes through what Christ did, not on what we do. But many people are embarrassed by the cross and stress works instead.

“Their destiny is destruction,” Paul says (3:19). “Their god is their stomach” — they seek financial support — “and their glory is in their shame.” They glory in the flesh, in circumcision and works of the law. But now that Christ has come, it is shameful to choose these things instead of Christ, or to insist on both, when Christ is all that we need. Paul concludes, “Their mind is on earthly things” (3:19).

In contrast, Paul says, “Our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). Our minds are set on heaven, not on earth. We focus on the spirit, not the flesh. Our hope is in the future, not in this world. “We eagerly await a Savior from there [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (3:20-21).

When Christ returns, we will be like he is (1 John 3:2). He will give us the righteousness we need, and that is why we can so eagerly strive to do his will. “Therefore,” Paul concludes, “that is how you should stand firm in the Lord” (Phil. 4:1). Be eager, press onward, and trust in Christ!

### **Things to think about**

Have I been fairly successful at keeping biblical laws? Does that tend to give me confidence?

Do I count my past (whether good or bad) as rubbish, as irrelevant?

Do I want the fellowship of sharing in the sufferings of Christ?

Does confidence in Christ make me zealous, or complacent?

Can I trust God to teach people who think differently than I do?

What is my attitude toward the cross of Christ?

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# Think on Good Things

## Philippians 4

As Paul nears the end of his friendly letter to the church in Philippi, he encourages his readers to focus on the positive, and he closes with thanks and praise that can encourage us.

### **A plea for peace**

Verse 1: “Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!” As he explained in chapter 3, we cannot trust in our imperfect performance — we must trust in Christ and in the transformation that he will bring us when he returns (3:21). By keeping a clear focus on Christ, we can stand firm until the end.

As he exhorts them, Paul reveals how much he likes these people who have helped him: he loves them and longs for them. They give him joy and honor, and he can appeal to them as friends.

Paul then turns to a specific problem within the Philippian church, mentioning two women by name: “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord” (4:2). The disagreement between these Christians was apparently not a private matter, but had caused problems within the congregation. Paul does not cast blame and does not give orders, but treats them both the same.

Paul then asks someone to help: “Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life” (verse 3).

Paul not only pleads — he praises. These women had been a big help in Paul’s evangelistic team, but good gospel workers can have weaknesses in

other areas, and these two needed some help in patching up their differences. So Paul calls on an unnamed but faithful friend to be a mediator. After all, these women are in the book of life and will live forever with each other, so they ought to try to get along now.

## **Peace and joy**

Paul then goes back to a persistent theme in this letter: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (verse 4). But it’s hard to rejoice when we have persecution and personal disagreements. Nevertheless, we are to rejoice, for we are in the Lord. We have much to be happy about: a salvation that no one can take away from us.

“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near,” Paul exhorts. This is good advice for anyone, anytime, whether in a time of persecution or a personal squabble. Gentleness is better than retaliation.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (verse 6). We are encouraged to pray about everything that concerns us, confident that God will take care of our needs. Rather than worrying or fighting back, we can be thankful, even in times of trial. Paul is helping the Philippians to concentrate on the positive.

“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (verse 7). With confident prayer, we can have inner peace. Although circumstances around us may be in turmoil, we can have a peace that by normal standards doesn’t make sense. But our faith is in Christ, not the circumstances of this world.

“Finally, brothers, 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” (verse 8). If you want inner peace and interpersonal peace, then think on good things. Love looks

for good things, not bad (1 Cor. 13:5-6). If you have a problem with someone, look for whatever is true and good and praiseworthy. Give your problems to God, and you will find peace.

“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” (Phil. 4:9). Paul again appeals to his own example among the Philippians. He tried to live the gospel as well as to share it, and he encourages the readers to do the same.

### **A thank-you note**

Paul then thanks the church for the help they sent him while he was in prison: “I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it” (verse 10). Although Paul is thankful for the physical help they gave, he also uses this opportunity to point the readers away from the physical, toward faith in Christ:

“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (verses 11-13).

Paul had times of plenty, and times of poverty. In both cases, he looked to the Lord, not to his physical circumstances. He was content even when in poverty, because he looked to Christ. Christ did not give him strength to break out of jail, but to stay in jail. Christ did not give him the ability to turn stones into bread, but to endure hunger. This is the kind of strength Christ gives — perhaps not the kind we want, but the kind we need most.

Verse 13 is sometimes lifted out of context to say that Christ enables us to

do anything we want, such as to succeed in business. But this is not what Paul meant. Rather, Christ enables us to endure all circumstances. The new revision of the NIV makes it clear that we need to consider the context: “I can do all *this* through him who gives me strength.”

Paul does not preach in order to get a salary, and he is not dependent on anyone. But Paul praises them for the help that they gave, because it reflects a spiritual virtue within them. “Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need” (verses 14-16).

When Paul was ministering in Corinth, for example, he received financial help from Philippi (2 Cor. 8:1-2) rather than being supported by the Corinthians (1 Cor. 9:7-14). Although the church at Philippi was poor, and some of the Corinthians were wealthy, the Philippians supported Paul’s missionary work. And in Thessalonica, too, they continued to help him.

Paul appreciates this not so much for his own benefit, but because it is a spiritual value for the Philippians. “Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account” (Phil. 4:17). Frank Thielman says, “The imagery is of a bank account that receives compounded interest” (*Philippians*, p. 237). God will reward them for the good that they have done, and Paul was eager for them to be blessed as a reflection of their generosity. When we serve God in physical ways, we benefit spiritually as God is working in us.

“I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (verse 18). This financial

help is more than enough for me, he says, and then he points out its spiritual significance: It is a sacrifice that pleases God. We worship God in our offerings, whether they are given to the poor or to missionary workers.

And in return, “my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (verse 19). The reason that we can be generous is because God will supply everything we need, including the strength to endure difficulties.

### **Closing comments**

Paul ends his letter with a traditional doxology, praising God: “To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (verse 20).

Then, as a customary postscript, he adds a few personal greetings: “Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send greetings. All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household” (verses 21-22).

Who are these people from Caesar’s household? We do not know — they may have been part of Caesar’s staff that worked in various parts of the empire. Paul mentions them here perhaps to drop a hint that the gospel is bearing fruit in significant places.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen” (verse 23).

### **Things to think about**

Would I want my name to be in a public letter, with an apostle asking me to quit arguing with another member? (verse 2)

Am I willing to give all my anxieties to God in prayer? (verse 6) Am I willing to be thankful even in difficult times?

How well do I concentrate on the praiseworthy, rather than the things that irritate me? (verse 8)

Poor people are more likely to be Christians than wealthy people are. Do I find it easier to trust in God when I am poor, or does wealth tempt me to



trust in my money? (verse 12)

What kind of strength is Christ giving me in my circumstances? (verse 13)

Do I view my offerings as a form of worship, or as payment for services that I want to benefit from? (verse 19).

How often do I greet saints in other cities? (verse 22)

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*The Bible: A Guided Tour* (co-author)

*Discipleship 101: Basic Christian Teachings*

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*What Does the Bible Say About the Kingdom of God?*

*What Does the Bible Say About the Old and New Covenants?*

*What Does the Bible Say About Speaking in Tongues?*

*What Does the Bible Say About Women in Church Leadership?*

Ronald Kelly and Paul Kroll, at the time they wrote their chapter, were employees of Grace Communion International.

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