

Bible Study on Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Introduction: When studying this letter, it is recommended that you take time to read the Book of Acts chapter 16 to give you some background to how the church was planted in Philippi. Philippi was a Roman colony and chief city of that region called Macedonia (part of Greece today). It was a stopping place for traders going from the east or west. Such a place was strategic for the gospel to be preached and then spread throughout the region. On his second missionary journey, Paul and his team had come to Macedonia from Troas (West Turkish coast) via Samothrace (Greek island now called Samothraki) to Neapolis (Karala today) and then to Philippi nearby. It was the first time that we know of the gospel being proclaimed in part of Greece in Europe.

The brief commentary below has been given to stimulate study of this letter. Questions follow on to encourage individuals and small groups to continue further bible study.

Chapter 1: Paul had written to all the Christians (the saints) in Philippi where there is a leadership showing the local church had been established. He had prayed constantly for the church in Philippi (1:3-4) and had a deep longing in his heart to see the Philippian believers grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (1:5-11). Paul had seen his imprisonment as a means of causing others to stand up and preach or speak to individuals boldly and fearlessly the gospel (1:12-14). He takes a positive attitude in rejoicing to hear of Christ being preached regardless of whether it is preached out of jealousy against him or out of goodwill in support of him. Sadly there is evidence of some believers whilst preaching faithfully the gospel showing privately their opposition to Paul. Clearly there was a divided church where there was greed, pride, envy and strife (1:15-18).

Whilst Paul could not go out preaching the gospel he was still an ambassador in chains. If Paul's imprisonment had been in Rome under house arrest, the Roman guards that watched over Paul night and day would have heard the gospel because of the people who came to see Paul. Hence the gospel would have been passed on amongst the Roman soldiers.

In looking to the future, Paul had desired to be with Christ but knew that he still had to remain in the flesh to encourage, instruct and comfort the Philippian believers who would rejoice in seeing him again (1:21-26). Paul exhorts them to behave in such a way that they stand together united in spirit and mind where they are good witnesses to the gospel of Christ in Philippi (1:27). They were not to be afraid of their enemies who opposed the gospel and were doomed to destruction unless they repent. Their hope was eventually deliverance to be with God eternally. They had to face up to suffering just as they had seen the suffering of Paul had gone through (1:28-30). Such suffering can bring great joy in being counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ as shown when the apostles had departed from the council in Jerusalem 'rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name' (Acts 5:41).

Chapter 2: Paul continues to write about this life of unity in Christ which believers share having fellowship with God and with one another through the Holy Spirit. There is the same love working together in one accord and showing likemindedness in having the mind of Christ to see things as he would see them. We live for others being more concerned about their welfare than our own showing humility so that nothing is done out of pride and self-ambition (2:1-5). The Lord Jesus Christ is our example in humbling himself as a servant coming as a man in obedience to die on the cross (See **Matthew 20:25-28; John 13:1-17**). He showed a selfless, sacrificial and serving mind where he was totally submissive to the will of God (2:5-8). As believers, we too must have the attitude of a servant.

Now Jesus Christ is highly exalted to the highest place. Everyone shall acknowledge him as Lord. In receiving Jesus Christ into your life as Saviour, Lord and Master whilst on earth you bow down to him

for salvation. Those bowing down to him only after death will know condemnation leading to eternal damnation in hell (**2:9-11**)

Like the Philippians, we have to work out our own salvation in the fear of the Lord. We should know God is at work in our lives to do his work through us (**Ephesians 2:10**). We should do all things willingly without complaining. We are to be witnesses of Christ as lights in the world that can bring the word of God to others (**2:12-16**). We have examples in Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus who lived out the Christian life being faithful servants of the Lord (**2:17-30**).

Paul sacrificed himself willingly to serve the Philippians with joy. He hoped that he could rejoice in seeing the Philippians live out the Christian life with joy. He longed to see them again if he was released from imprisonment in Rome. In **verses 23 and 24** they seem to imply what was Paul's present situation.

Secondly, Timothy had proved a faithful servant of the Lord in working with Paul to preach the gospel. Paul had intended to send Timothy to the Philippians. He had highly commended Timothy because he believed he was likeminded in showing the same care for the church in Philippi as he did (**2:19-20,22-23**). There is that sad comment from Paul saying: "For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's" (**2:21**). Regrettably, many Christians were selfish and were only concerned for their own interests. Selfish people will never know the things of God. It seemed to Timothy's credit that he was the only man that Paul could see capable of caring for the Philippian believers. Thirdly, Epaphroditus was seen as a faithful servant of the Lord highly commended by Paul. He was described by Paul as a brother, companion in labour and fellow soldier who had been able to work with others. He had met practical needs of Paul. There had been deep concern about Epaphroditus having become critically ill, but God in his mercy had raised him up again much to Paul's relief from much sorrow. Paul had shown that Epaphroditus was not concerned for his own life even near to death. He had come as a messenger representing the church in Philippi having been able to serve Paul on behalf of the Philippian believers. Paul stresses the care in sending Epaphroditus back and for the church in Philippi to receive him gladly with respect (**2:25-30**).

This chapter has shown us that we need the mind of Christ as that remedy to be able to serve the Lord together as shown in Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples.

Chapter 3: Paul makes no apology in exhorting the Philippian believers again to rejoice in the Lord because it was a safeguard in warning them of false teachers, evil workers and mutilators of the flesh who had taught salvation by work. Paul shows that for true believers they are the circumcision (**ch3:1-3**).

Paul uses himself as an example of being confident in the flesh. All that Paul had achieved would not give him confidence in the sight of God. He knew none of his achievements would save him hence there is loss. Paul came to reject his achievements to be able to receive Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is enough. No matter what self-advancement we make all will be counted loss to receive Jesus Christ as our Saviour. Paul had realised that to gain Jesus Christ, he had to turn his back on boasting of his ancestry, nationality, culture, prestige, education. Religion and personal achievements (**3:4-8**).

Paul goes on to show that he had increased in the knowledge of Jesus Christ having gone through much suffering even being disowned by his own people the Jews. His desire was to know Jesus Christ whatever the cost. Jesus Christ alone will be our joy, hope, satisfaction and wealth. Paul longed to know the fellowship of Jesus Christ to be continuously 'found in him' (**ch3:9**). He had abandoned his own self-righteousness having tried to keep the law but knowing that he could not satisfy God. He had received the righteousness of God by faith which all believers receive as a gift

from God (**3:9**). Our salvation is not of works but free by grace. Paul goes on to say in **3:10** that he wanted to be like the one that saved him. As believers, we all need to know God by becoming like Jesus Christ in having an intimate relationship with him. We must expect to suffer as Jesus Christ did and to die to self, sin and the world. It may mean for some of us facing martyrdom as it was eventually with Paul. **3:11** seems to show Paul expressing some doubt about a personal resurrection but this not so. He was absolutely in no doubt about a resurrection (See **1Thessalonians 4:13-18** and **1 Corinthians 15:51-57**). It was the way Paul will reach the resurrection. He was prepared to pass through severe trials and persecution on the way. Paul goes on to say that he was not perfect but pressing on vigorously to lay hold on Jesus Christ who had chosen him and had already laid hold on him. Our goal is to finish the course as Paul did (**2 Timothy 4:8**) in receiving the prize of countless spiritual blessings having shown commitment, effort and determination (**3:12-14**).

Paul exhorted the Philippian believers to share in the desire to mature as Christians (**3:15-17**). He was confident that if others did not agree with him as long as they press on to know Jesus Christ, God will reveal the truth to them. The Philippian believers had a responsibility to respond to the truth holding fast to what they had received and to live in it. Paul, whilst holding himself as an example to follow, was not dictating to others that he was the final authority on what to believe and do. He desired to see fellowship where God was pursued together. The Philippian believers were encouraged to observe living that kind of life. Paul was such an example as an apostle. Do we serve God as an example for others to follow to grow in the faith?

Sadly, as Paul shows to the Philippian believers there are many enemies of the cross. They could be the false teachers as seen earlier in **3:2** or possibly Christians who have turned away from serving the Lord. Paul was compassionate in weeping for those who opposed the cross of Jesus Christ. These men were to end up in eternal destruction in the lake of fire forever. They were self-indulgent being occupied with earthly things such as home comforts with good food, clothing and pleasure with no desire for the things of God. They boasted in the things which they should have been ashamed of such as immorality and idolatry (**3:18-19**). True believers are heavenly minded looking with expectancy for Jesus Christ to return for his church. We are already citizens of heaven. Our place has already been secured. We will know that resurrection from the human body (subject to sickness, suffering and death) to a glorious body which is fit to be in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ forever (**3:20-21**). That same divine power of the Lord Jesus Christ to transform our bodies will be seen to subdue all things to him (**3:21**). Everything will be subject to Jesus Christ who is in control of all things being all-powerful.

Chapter 4: In view of the return of Jesus Christ, Paul wrote what the Philippians should do in the meantime. Paul continued with a firm exhortation to “stand fast in the Lord” (**4:1**) because of the many enemies of the cross. Paul showed his heartfelt concern for the Philippian believers in addressing them as his ‘brethren dearly beloved and longed for’ (**4:1**). He then requested the disagreement between the two sisters Euodia and Syntyche to be resolved probably with the help of an independent third party (**4:2-3**). The church should seek family unity in “endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (**Ephesians 4:3**). Paul gave the command to ‘rejoice in the Lord’ no matter how miserable the situation of life may be. The Philippian believers had to show patience and gentleness to all men (**4:4-5**).

Paul showed that prayer was the vital resource for all believers to be released from anxiety. We are told to bring everything to God in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. All our requests should be made known to God. In doing so, we shall know the peace of God that passes all understanding that will garrison our hearts and minds (**4:6-7** and see also **John 14:27** and **Isaiah 26:3**). We are exhorted to keep our thoughts pure (**4:8**) if we are to be spiritually minded (**Romans 8:6**). Our

behaviour needs to conform to the word of God if we are to know the peace of God in us (4:9). Paul highly commended the Philippian believers for their generous giving after a lapse of time. He received their support through Epaphroditus and showed his gratitude in saying their gifts were a sacrifice which was well pleasing to God (4:18). Paul never demanded such gifts having learnt to be in all circumstances content in the times of plenty and abundance and in the times of hunger and want (4:11-12). His trust was in the Lord Jesus Christ who was his strength and the one who would supply every need (4:13,19). Paul gave God continually the glory (4:20). Paul showed his unselfishness because he had valued fruitfulness amongst the Philippian believers to remain rather than the gifts they had brought him.

The letter closes with Paul sending greetings from all the brethren especially from Caesar's household indicating the evidence of Paul having written this letter from Rome whilst imprisoned. The final greeting of grace is how the letter begins (4:23).

Section One Questions

- 1) What evidence in **Acts chapter 16** do we have of Paul being called by God to go to Philippi? See **16:6-10,14,18,30-34**.
- 2) What is known of Philippi? See **Acts 16:12**.
- 3) What does this letter teach us about prayer? See **1:3-7,9-11,19; 4:6-7**.
- 4) How does Paul desire the Philippian believers to grow spiritually? See **1:9-11; 2:1-4, 12-16; 3:9-17; 4:17**.
- 5) What had happened to the believers as a result of Paul's imprisonment? See **1:12-20**.
- 6) What problems had arisen in the church? See **1:15-16,18; 2:21; 3:18-19; 4:2-3**.
- 7) Does the Philippian letter show us where Paul was imprisoned? See **1:12-13; 4:22**.
- 8) What do we understand was the mind of Christ? See **2:5-8**.
- 9) How can we know the mind of Christ? See **1:27; 2:1-5,20; 3:1,16-17; 4:2-4**.
- 10) Is there a contradiction between **2:6** and **John 10:30**?
Read also **Matthew 24:36; John 14:9-11, 28-29; 17:11,21-22**.
- 11) What was Paul expecting to happen to him in the near future? See **1:19-26; 2:23-24**.
- 12) What does this letter teach us about suffering? See **1:28-30; 3:10**.
- 13) What has God done for his Son, Jesus Christ? See **2:9-11**.
- 14) How will everyone ultimately respond to Jesus Christ? See **2:9-11**.
- 15) How do we work out our own salvation? See **2:12-16**.
- 16) What do we learn from Timothy (**2:19-23**) and Epaphroditus (**2:25-30; 4:18**) being examples of faithful men of God?
- 17) What is known of Paul's background before he came to know Jesus Christ? See **3:3-6**.
- 18) What serious warnings does Paul give to the church in Philippi? See **3:2, 18-19**.
- 19) What was Paul's desire above all else and how does he encourage the believers in Philippi to follow his example? See **3:7-17**.
- 20) What is the future to be for all believers? See **1:6; 3:20-21**.
- 21) What does Paul exhort the Philippian believers to do in **4:1-9**?
You will see commands if you look carefully at **verses 1,2,4,5,6,8,9**.
- 22) Is there evidence of the church in Philippi being generous in their giving?
See **4:10, 14-16,18**.
- 23) What confidence does Paul show in the Lord in **4:11-13, 17, 19, 20**?
- 24) Study the greetings at the beginning and the end of this letter. See **1:1-2; 4:21-23**.
- 25) What does this letter reveal of the Second coming of Jesus Christ? See **1:6; 3:20-21**.

Section Two Questions

These questions may require more in-depth study. You may wish to study them on your own rather than together in a group.

Q1 What does this letter reveal of who Jesus Christ is?

See **1:21-22; 2:5-11; 3:8-14; 4:13, 19-20, 23.**

Q2 What do we understand about church leadership in view of the words 'bishops' mentioned in **ch1:1**. You will find the scriptures helpful elsewhere for further study. See **Acts 14:23; 15:1-6, 22-23; 20:17,28-30; 21:18; 1Timothy 3:1-7,8-13; 5:17; Titus 1:5-9; Hebrews 11:2.**

Q3 What does this letter teach about fellowship?

Study carefully **1:8, 24-27; 2:1-5, 20, 25-26, 29-30; 3:17; 4:1-3, 10, 14-18.**

Q4 What does this letter teach about joy? It is helpful to study the following verses: **1:18, 25-26; 2:16-18,28; 3:1,3; 4:1,4,10.**

Q5 Does the letter reveal the importance of a believer having a servant's heart?

See **1:1; 2:6-8, 22, 30.**

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