

The New Testament, Book 11

The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians

Philippi was a leading city of the Roman province of Macedonia (what is now northern Greece). It was situated on a wide, fertile plain; and it was on this plain, west of the city, in 42 BC, that Marc Antony and Octavian defeated the army of Brutus and Cassius, avenging the murder of Julius Caesar. This battle marked the death knell of the Roman Republic, and the birth of the Roman Empire.

Octavian (later known as Augustus Caesar, the first Roman emperor) established Philippi as a Roman colony to commemorate his victory there¹. Philippi was a thoroughly Roman city; it could be thought of as a miniature Rome, for its people were Roman citizens with voting rights and Philippi was self-governing, with its own senate and legislature. All of the names of local people mentioned in this epistle are either Greek or Roman names.

Philippi was a prosperous city; the plain was fertile farm land, there were gold mines there, and it was strategically located on the Great Northern Military Road that connected Rome with Asia.

Philippians is the second of the four “prison epistles².” The Church at Philippi was the first church established in Roman Europe, early in Paul’s second missionary journey; it was here that he first preached on European soil. While at Troas, he had been directed to go into Macedonia, contrary to his plan, by the vision of a Macedonian man saying, “Come over into Macedonia and help us³.”

It was in Philippi that Paul and Silas were miraculously delivered from the jail and salvation came to the jailor and his family⁴.

While at Philippi, Paul wrote I and II Corinthians.

¹ Octavian was later given the title “Augustus” by the Roman Senate; and, after his defeat of Antony and Octavian at Philippi, and of the navies of Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, he consolidated power and became the first Roman emperor.

² The other three prison epistles are Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon.

³ Acts 16:8-12.

⁴ Acts 16:16-40.



Augustus Caesar, victor over the armies of Brutus and Cassius, and the Navies of Antony and Cleopatra, and founder of the Roman Empire



The Ancient City of Philippi.

Notice the wall and similar houses, row on row, just inside the wall, the Great Northern Military Road passing through the center of the city, and the temples on the hill top.

Was Luke the First Pastor in Philippi?

There is reason to believe that Luke was left behind temporarily when Paul and Silas left Philippi, and that he became the first pastor of the church at Philippi. This would be fitting, for Philippi was a thoroughly Gentile city, and Luke was a highly educated Gentile physician. It appears that there was no synagogue in Philippi, so there was probably no significant Jewish population in this thoroughly Roman city.

But this is only interesting speculation, and not a fact.

Financial Support for Paul from Philippi.

The prosperous Philippians had been generous in their support of Paul. And they were similarly generous when Paul was collecting funds for the

impoverished Christians in Judaea, during a disastrous drought. He also had received generous financial support for himself and his party from the church at Philippi: at least twice during his brief stay in Thessalonica; and, probably, on one other occasion, while he was in Corinth⁵. Epaphroditus had brought this gift of money from the church at Philippi, nearly losing his life in the process. After he recovered, Paul sent him back to Philippi with this epistle.

Was Philippi Paul's Favorite Church?

Unlike some of Paul's other epistles, this one corrects no heresy or disorder in the church (except for a conflict between two of the women, Euodias and Syntyche). Perhaps this is to some degree true because it was a thoroughly Gentile church in a thoroughly Roman city. It must have been an unusually well-taught and well-led church, and there was no synagogue there. Also, it seems, the trouble-making Judaizers had not gone there.

Some commentators believe that Philippi was Paul's favorite of all his churches.

A. Author. The human author is Paul. He tells us this in the very first verse, and his authorship has been almost universally accepted since the time of its writing in the mid-1st Century.

Eusebius (263-339 AD), in his classic "Ecclesiastical History," attributed to Paul all 13 of the epistles that bear his name, plus Hebrews.

B. Place and Date. Philippians was written from Rome, about 60 AD.

C. Occasion. About 10 years after the founding of the church at Philippi, and four years after Paul's last visit to the church, a messenger named Epaphroditus had arrived in Rome with a gift of money for Paul's support. He had nearly lost his life in reaching Paul, apparently from ongoing physical exhaustion and sickness. He apparently stayed with Paul in Rome for some time, until he recovered sufficiently to make the return trip. He had been away long enough for word to reach Philippi that he was very sick, and for word from them--that they were worried about him--to reach Rome. When Epaphroditus returned to Philippi, he completed his long and hazardous round trip by delivering this epistle to the church there.

D. Theme. The theme of Philippians is joy--and in all circumstances. Joy, in its various forms, is mentioned 19 times in the four chapters of this epistle.

⁵And they possibly sent financial support while Paul was in Rome: Acts 18:5; II Cor 11:7-9; Phil 2:25-30; 4:15-17..

It is noteworthy that the man who wrote “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice” was writing from prison. Happiness depends on happenings (circumstances), and can be fleeting; but joy is transcendent, regardless of circumstances--it is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10), flowing from our regenerated spirits and our relationship with the Lord. Joy is transcendent--in fact, it seems, eternal.

Suffering and trials are to be expected--they will come; but we can overcome them and live joyfully if we keep our eyes on Jesus, stay near to Him, and press toward the mark of our high calling in Him.

E. Highlights. Highlights in Philippians include the following:

1. Paul’s Suffering and Bondage Have Enhanced the Gospel Message. (1:1-19)

After a warm salutation from himself and Timothy, who is with him in Rome, and expressions of his love for, and confidence in, the Philippian saints, Paul speaks of the faithfulness of God in the life of each believer. He also tells them that his suffering and imprisonment have worked together for good, for the proclaiming and advancement of the gospel.

Paul has even made converts among important people in Caesar’s palace⁶!

Then he describes two kinds of preachers: those who preach in a wrong spirit, who are argumentative or contentious; and there are those who preach in a spirit of love. The contentious preachers, he says, vex and irritate him; and yet, he says, preachers of both kinds are proclaiming the gospel and advancing its cause.

This would seem to be the experience of many of us today.

NOTES:

a. The word “saints” in verse 1 simply refers to all of the believers in the Philippian church. The underlying Greek word rendered “saints” is “hagios”; when used in the plural, as it is here, it refers to the believers--God’s consecrated people, not to certain revered individuals of exceptional holiness.

b. In the church at Philippi it seems that there were multiple congregations, each with its own bishops and deacons.

c. Verse 6 is a great promise concerning the faithfulness of God in the life of each believer. It cannot be fully understood, however, without vv 9-11 following, and vv 12 and 13 of Chapt 2. There is a dual responsibility in each life: God will faithfully perform his; but we also must be faithful to

⁶ These conversions probably took place among the crowds that gathered in Paul's home in Rome during his two years of house arrest.

grow in knowledge and make wise choices as we go through life--until the day of Christ, i.e. the time of his return in the Second Advent.

2. To Live Is Christ and To Die Is Gain. (1:20-24)

Paul summarizes the significance and meaning of life and death for a believer, saying that he will go on preaching with boldness and what happens to him in the process is really not important to him.

Christ is glorified, he says, whether he preaches in freedom, or is persecuted and put to death. In fact, he says, he looks forward to death in the flesh, so that he can be with the Lord. Nevertheless, he says, it is profitable for the cause of Christ for him to remain on Earth for a while.

Concerning his own future, whether being preserved here on Earth to continue his ministry, or being in Heaven with the Lord, either is alright with him. And, in just one verse (v21), he expresses this in a classic summary that should be a comfort to us all: “For me, to live is Christ [in useful service to Him, and fellowship with him while here on Earth], and to die is gain [for then I will be with Him in Paradise for all of eternity].”

3. Suffering for the Gospel Is to Be Expected. (1:25-30)

Paul expresses his desire to travel again to Philippi to be with the saints there to strengthen them; however, he says, this may not happen. Whether he comes to see them or not, he says, it is vital that they conduct themselves in such a way that is becoming for Christians, and that, one way or another, he will hear of their faithful work in furthering the gospel message.

He then tells them not to fear the enemies of the gospel, but to press on, undaunted. It is part of their privilege as Christians to suffer for the sake of Christ⁷. As they prosper in the work, and suffer for Christ, they will be experiencing what Paul is experiencing.

4. Let This Mind Be in You. (2:1-8)

In light of what he has just said about living and suffering as believers, Paul urges the Philippians to fulfill his joy by being selfless and by living in harmony and humility with one another. Let nothing, he says, be done by them for the purpose of seeking recognition or glory, which is not only counterproductive, but vain and empty.

Each should not look only after his own affairs, but let each look also after the needs and affairs of others⁸. Jesus, he says, must always be their example, and they should seek to emulate his “mind” (his attitude). He, knowing full well that He is the divine God the Son, Second Person of the

⁷ John 16:33; Rom 5:3-5; Phil 3:10; I Pet 3:17.

⁸ This fundamental principle of Christian life is important enough to be repeated in another of Paul’s epistles (Eph 5:21).

Trinity, humbled Himself to such an extreme degree that He not only allowed sinful men to torture, mock and spit on him, but He willingly submitted to a horrible, shameful death on a filthy, bloody Roman cross.

He, and He alone, is our ultimate example and role model. You and I cannot reach his level of humility and selflessness--but we should form a holy habit of always trying to do so.

5. Every Knee Shall Bow. (2:9-11)

Because the divine Son of God humbled Himself and underwent the shame and horrors of crucifixion, the Father has highly exalted Him and has given Him a name that is superior to every other name. And, as a result, at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow--in Heaven, on Earth, and below the surface of the Earth. And, someday, every tongue in every place shall confess that Jesus the Christ is Lord⁹.

And finally, in all this, God the Father is glorified.

NOTE: In vv 10 and 11, "...every knee should bow...", and "...every tongue should confess...", the word, "should" does not mean that this is a good idea--or that it would be wise to do so. The Greek verb rendered "should" is "mello," a strengthened form of "melo," giving it a sense of duty or compulsion, i.e. a necessary act. It is not a suggestion; it is both an imperative, and a prophetic promise.

*In the final judgment, at the end of the age, every knee **will indeed** bow, and every tongue **will** confess that Jesus Christ is Lord; but the wicked, who have rejected his free gift of redemption, will be bowing before the Redeemer whom they have denied, acknowledging that He **is indeed** the Lord of all--but with bitter tears and trembling. It will be too late for them--they will have no hope!*

6. Work out Your Own Salvation. (2:12-13)

Verses 12 and 13 must be taken together, for neither can be understood without the other; in fact, neither would be true without the other.

Verse 12 alone seems to say that our salvation is up to us--that we must carry on, fulfilling our lives as Christians with our own resources, as if God is saying, "Congratulations, you are now a Christian; do the best you can, and if you make it, we will see you in Heaven."

Verse 13, alone, seems to say that the presence and power of God are within us, and that we have no responsibility for the way we perform as we go through life, for He will work it all out for us.

⁹ Isaiah 45:23; Rom 14:11.

Taken together, however, which is the way these verses must be taken, they say that our Christian life is before us, that we must study to show ourselves approved, being disciplined and careful in our choices and behavior, seeking always to do those things which please God, in awe and reverence, and shrinking from those things that offend or grieve Him.

However, Paul adds, the Spirit of God will be, at all times, within us, to guide and strengthen us in choosing and performing those things which please Him.

Here, again, is an example of the perfect balance in the Word of God. It is also an illustration of a fundamental principle of Bible study: it is that we cannot fully understand, or validly interpret, any part of the Bible until we consider everything else that the Bible has to say about it.

7. A Man with a Shepherd's Heart. (2:14-23)

Paul encourages the believers at Philippi, urging them to live so as to be lights shining out of the pagan darkness that surrounds them; and he expresses his desire to send Timothy to them, to learn of their condition and report back to him. In expressing this, Paul reveals a vital principle concerning ministry. He describes Timothy as a man “who will naturally care” about their condition and welfare. A key word here is “naturally”; it is Timothy’s very nature to watch over and care for the people of God, seeking to know their needs, and to minister to them.

This type of minister or priest is sometimes described as having “a shepherd’s heart¹⁰.” In the Roman Catholic Church such a man as Timothy is called “a pastoral priest.”

Paul adds that, depending on how his case is decided by Caesar, he hopes to travel to see them himself.

NOTE: It is my opinion that one of the greatest mistakes that has been made in the modern Church is the concept of “the ministry,” as if there were only one kind of ministry in a local church or parish.

In Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and Episcopal traditions, we refer to this as “the priesthood.”

In most Protestant traditions, we refer to this as “the ministry.”

Thus, one individual, when committed to ministry and ordained, is expected to be able to do all things for his congregation. This is not only an unreasonable expectation but is, it seems to me, decidedly unscriptural¹¹!

¹⁰ The Greek noun rendered “pastors” in Eph 4:11 is the plural of *poimen* meaning “shepherds.” It means not just leading and feeding, but watching over the flock to protect and care for the welfare of each individual in the flock. This word appears only in Ephesians 4:11; but the metaphorical concept of a spiritual shepherd is seen here, and in such passages as Acts 20:28-31 and I Pet 5:1-4.

Some, like Timothy, are natural shepherds; others do not enjoy this kind of ministry, and are not very effective in it; but they love to teach. Still others can teach when called upon, but are more at home with evangelistic preaching. I think we all have seen examples of this. As a result of this fundamental assumption some, who try to be “all things to all men,” become frustrated and discouraged. Some give up on ministry and leave it; and sometimes the result is still more tragic.

8. Human Accomplishments vs Knowing Jesus. (3:1-9)

Paul calls upon the Philippians to live joyfully, and warns them concerning trouble-making heretics, calling them “dogs¹².” He then recites his Jewish credentials (which really are impressive) and says that he considers all of those accomplishments to be loss compared with the excellence of personally knowing the Christ, for whom he has abandoned all of his earthly accomplishments and credentials. To make his point even stronger, he compares his earthly accomplishments to dung.

What matters, he says, is to be rightly related to Christ, not with righteousness achieved by human effort, but the righteousness that we receive by knowing the Lord. He also expresses this goal in three separate parts, and the three parts are sequential; they occur in the order in which he has written them¹³.

First, he says, we must “know Him.” It is not enough merely to know **about** Him; we must go beyond that, have a spiritual birth, and **know** Him, personally and experientially¹⁴.

Second, we must know the power of his resurrection, i.e. by experiencing the life-changing, miracle-working, power of the Holy Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead. We must be filled with the Holy Spirit, and be re-filled, in an ongoing way¹⁵.

Third, we must enter into the fellowship of his suffering¹⁶. This, of course, does not refer to the suffering of Christ in the substitutionary

¹¹ There are many ministries needed in every congregation. Lists of ministries are found in three places in the NT: Ephesians 4:11; Rom 12:6-8 and I Cor 12:27-31. No two of the three lists are alike, which means that none is intended to be taken as complete. In addition to these there are many other kinds of ministry to be performed in a congregation. All should be performed as unto the Lord.

¹² When speaking to the Syrophenician woman with the demonized daughter, Jesus used the diminutive of the word for “dogs,” meaning “puppies (Matt 15:26; Mk 7:27). Here, Paul uses the same word, but not the diminutive; he is using the insulting form of the word--a full-grown dog.. This was a common insult among Semitic people in the 1st Century, and is still today.

¹³ Our triune God seems often to do things in threes.

¹⁴ John 3:3.

¹⁵ Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8, 4:8, 31.

¹⁶ Matthew 5:11-12; Jn 16:33; Rom 8:11,16-18; Phil 1:28-30; II Tim 3:12; I Pet 4:19.

atonement, in the scourging and on the cross--only He was worthy to suffer that for all the rest of mankind. But we **will** suffer for our faith, in varying degrees, from rejection and persecution, all the way to--for some of us--a martyr's death. And, in this way, we join Him in, and identify with, his suffering.

The result of all of this is that we be made "conformable" to his death. We are to become yielded and shapeable, like clay in the potter's hands. A potter cannot make something beautiful out of a hard, dry lump of clay. In life, surrendered and yielded to the will of God, we can eventually become as He would have us to be--broken and contrite before Him, consistent, faithful, and submitted to his will--even to the moment of death. In this way we can become like Him in death.

NOTES:

a. The Greek word rendered "know" in the first requirement ("That I may know Him...") is "ginosko" and it means to know experientially, i.e., not just to know intellectually and understand, but to experience knowing Him. A negative form of this word is used in Mat 1:25 where it is written "And [he] knew her not until she had brought forth her firstborn son."

b. In this last part of the passage the underlying Greek word rendered "made conformable" is "summorphoo" meaning "to be made in like form as another." This Greek word is used in no other place in the NT.

10. Pressing toward the Mark. (3:11-14)

The ultimate goal in life is to be resurrected (redeemed) and separated from the spiritually dead. Paul often uses the analogy of a distance runner, always keeping his eye on the goal line. Here is an example, and he is speaking of the goal line as "the resurrection of the dead." He uses an interesting word here for "resurrection": the underlying Greek means literally "out-resurrection," i.e. to be lifted out, and separated from, the spiritually dead¹⁷. This will take place at the final (Great White Throne) judgment¹⁸.

However, Paul says, he has not yet arrived at that finish line; he still has some distance to cover in this life. He wants to possess that life eternal, for which Jesus laid hold on him on the Damascus road; but he is not there yet. In order to reach the goal line, he will not look back, dwelling on the past. Instead, he will forget those things which are behind in his life, and keep his

¹⁷ Daniel 12:2; Matt 25:31-46; Rev 20:11-15.

¹⁸ For more on this matter see "Death, Resurrection, Judgment and Eternal Destinations" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

eyes on the goal line¹⁹. He will press ever forward, toward the mark, to gain the prize; and that prize is the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, the fulfillment of God's will in his life.

***NOTE:** This passage is an example of the fact that Paul's writing is rich, but sometimes difficult to follow. Such passages (and there are many) must be read slowly and carefully. At the same time, we must not shrink from it, or be discouraged; for, as we have already seen, even Peter sometimes found Paul difficult to follow²⁰.*

11. Our Glorified Bodies. (3:17-21)

In the closing passage of Chapter 3 is an exhortation to lead godly lives and, almost as an afterthought, Paul refers to an extremely significant fact; and he does it in one verse--the final verse of Chapter 3. This fact is that when Jesus returns, those believers who have died before us, and those of us who are still alive when He returns, will receive glorified bodies, like his--perfect bodies, that will never be tired or sick²¹. What a great promise!

12. Living in the Peace of God. (4:1-7)

Paul urges two women in the Philippian church to settle their disagreement, asks an unknown "yoke-fellow" to help certain women who have labored in ministry with Paul in the past, and reminds the church to rejoice in the Lord always²². And then he expresses the key to having the peace of God. To live in God's peace, which is beyond our understanding, he says, do not be anxious, excessively worried about the future. Instead, he says, they should pray about what is troubling them, and pray with thanksgiving (thanking Him in advance for the outcome). This might be simplified as "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything, thanking Him, and you will have the supernatural peace of God²³." And, as an additional benefit, that supernatural peace of God will watch over and protect our hearts and our minds. The essential ingredient in all of this, of course, is our close relationship with Christ Jesus.

***NOTE:** In v 7 the underlying Greek word rendered "keep" is "phroureo." It is a military term, meaning to protect from an enemy as by setting a garrison of soldiers in place. In v 7, that which is guarded and protected is the peace of our minds and hearts. It is this peace, with which God protects*

¹⁹ Isaiah 43:18-19; Lk 9:62; Hebr 6:1.

²⁰ II Peter 3:14-16.

²¹ See also in this regard I Cor 15:51-54.

²² The identity of the "yokefellow" addressed in v 3 is unknown. The Greek word rendered "yokefellow" is *Suzugos*; it may be that this is the name of a man in the church who, as the late Dr. Henry Morris suggests, "lived up to his name" (Morris, Henry M. "The New Defender's Study Bible," p 1827).

²³ An additional benefit of this peace is in guiding our decisions; this will be made clear in Col 3:15.

our hearts and minds, as if they were surrounded by armed warriors. This is a wonderful thing, and it is beyond our ability to understand; we might say that it makes no sense, but it is wonderfully true.

13. Guard Your Thought Life. (4:8)

We should strive to keep our minds on things that are good, godly, mentally healthy things, and we should avoid thinking of negative, ungodly, evil things, except when thinking of the remedy for them.

When an uninvited, ungodly thought or memory occurs in your mind (and such thoughts and memories **will** occur--they are Satan's fiery darts), rebuke it in the name of Jesus, replace it with a godly, healthy thought and press on.

NOTE: *Since we are definitely habit-prone creatures, we should use this inherent reality as a weapon against Satan and his devices, rather than allowing him to use it against us. One excellent way to use our habit-prone nature against the evil accuser is to thank God throughout the day---let it become a "holy habit."*

Thank Him for everything, and I mean everything. When you wake in the morning, thank Him for allowing you to live to see another day begin. If you wake feeling rested, thank him for restful sleep. When your body functions in a normal, healthy way, thank Him. Thank Him because many people are struggling, suffering, and dying because their bodies don't function normally. I watched a friend die, slowly and very horribly, with a kidney disease, because her urinary system did not function normally; it was terrible.

Thank Him when there is an open parking space when you are about to be late and need one. Thank Him when you are able to get into the necessary lane in traffic so as to be able to reach the right exit. Thank him when unexpected blessings occur; and thank Him when bad things almost happen, but don't.

It is a great and holy habit to develop. It will irritate Satan, and will keep us in close touch with the Lord all day, every day.

13. Living in the presence of God. (4:9)

Verses 6 and 7 above tell the Philippians how to experience the peace of God; and verse 9 tells them how to experience the God of peace.

This single verse (9) states that if they practice the godly things that they have learned, seen, and heard from the teachings of Paul, and which they have seen him act out in his life, and do them, the God of peace will be with them. It is not enough to learn the lessons, and see them performed in his apostolic example; they must also live that way themselves; and the happy

result will be to experience the abiding presence of the One whom the Hebrews call *YAHWEH Shalom*, the GOD our Peace.

14. “I Can Do All Things...” (4:10-13)

Paul again thanks the Philippians for the gifts they had sent by Epaphroditus, but assures them that financial support is not of paramount importance, because he has learned to get along and be content, whether he has an abundance, or nothing, whether well-fed or hungry. And, in this context, Paul makes a statement that is often misunderstood. He says “I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me.”

If we lift those 10 words from their context, it sounds like we are saying that we can do anything, because Christ gives us the necessary strength. For example, it could mean that, because Christ gives us strength, we can bench-press 1,000 pounds, or throw a javelin from Key West to Seattle. But we must interpret these 10 words in their context; Paul is saying here that because Christ gives him the necessary strength to carry on, he can get along and function as he needs to function, whether he has plenty, or has nothing. With our trust in God, times of want will not overcome and defeat us; and that limited promise alone, beloved, taken in its context, is a truly wonderful promise²⁴.

15. “My God Shall Supply All Your Need.” (4:19)

Having written extensively about his own needs and the sufficiency of God’s provision, Paul closes with the assurance that God will also provide for the needs of the Philippians, according to his limitless “riches in glory.” Whereas verse 13 cannot validly be taken out of its context, verse 19 can be. It is a stand-alone promise. However, one thing concerning it must be carefully noted: this promise pertains to all our needs--not all our desires. There may be many things that we desire and, frequently, some of them are things that we should not have; but we can safely depend on our God, who knows our needs, to supply those necessary, healthy things²⁵.

16. Greetings and a Brief Benediction. (4:20-23)

In a closing salutation Paul reminds the Philippians to greet all brothers and sisters in Christ, and sends greetings from the believers at Rome, especially those of Caesar’s family and household servants who have come to know the Lord. And, with a brief benediction, he closes.

²⁴ I owe this insight, concerning Phil 4:13 in its context, to my long-time Christian friend, Ginny Lynn of West Palm Beach, whom the Lord used in significant ways when He was calling me to know Him, and in my early Christian life. I owe her a very great deal that only God can repay.

²⁵ See also in this regard II Corinthians 9:8-9.

***NOTE:** During Paul's first imprisonment of two years in Rome (his house arrest) he wrote four of his epistles: Galatians, Ephesians, Philemon and this one. He also lived comfortably, received visitors and sometimes taught large gatherings in his house and many were brought to a saving relationship with the Lord in those teaching/preaching sessions. It is particularly interesting that in these meetings he even reached members of Caesar's family and his household servants with the good news of redemption.*

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