

Introduction

Philippians was written by Paul while he was imprisoned in Rome to the small church in Philippi God founded through Paul's travel there roughly 10 years earlier. The city was originally founded around the mining of gold and silver. Through various Roman conflicts the city became a strategic colony for the Roman Empire. The city was located along a trade route between Rome and Constantinople referred to as Via Egnatia (see picture on last page). Philippi was primarily populated with retired soldiers and their families. Philippi looked like, felt like, and operated like Rome. Rome was pluralistic (coexist), polytheistic (more than one god), immoral, hierarchal, and yet extremely hostile toward Christianity. Biblical Christianity, with a Christ who will come again in glory, an inerrant Bible, and a triune Godhead, is an offense to a pluralistic world.¹

Acts 16 gives an account of Paul's first journey to Philippi. Paul calls up Timothy for the purpose of the advancement of the Kingdom. Paul, Silas, and Timothy head toward Bithynia but the Spirit diverts them to Troas. A vision appears to Paul of a man pleading for help in Macedonia and the three immediately depart and eventually arrive in Philippi. There were less than 10 Jewish men in the city so there was no Synagogue in Philippi. On the Sabbath God fearing Jews and Gentiles would exit the gate of the city and gather at the riverside. Paul and his companions went there and found a group of women praying. The gospel is preached and Lydia is saved and God uses her to establish His church in Europe. During Paul's stay in Philippi, he casts a demon out of a slave girl which earns Paul and Silas a thorough beating and lands them in jail despite being Roman citizens. God uses their incarceration to infiltrate Rome all the way to the highest levels.

Paul was with the Philippian church for two brief time periods. However, there was a profound reciprocal bond between Paul and the Philippian Church. Paul deeply loved those people and the people deeply loved him.

The book is commonly referred to as the epistle of joy. The word Joy and to rejoice is used 16 times in just 1600 words. There are many essential doctrines of Christian life packed into just four chapters. Paul thought doctrine so it's no wonder that doctrine drips from the letter to the Philippians just like Romans and Galatians. James Montgomery Boice submits that the entire argument of the book of Romans is found in one verse Philippians 3:9 which we will look at in our text today.

¹ <https://www.truthforlife.org/devotionals/alistair-begg/1/19/2026/>

Overview

Let's quickly look at some highlights from Chapters 1 and 2. This is not intended to be all encompassing rather just a quick overview.

Chapter 1

- Paul conveys his affections for the Philippian Church
- Paul communicates that God first lays hold of us and all righteousness comes from Christ
- The Gospel is spread through Paul's imprisonment throughout the praetorian guard
- The Gospel is spread through men with false motives which pains Paul but he still rejoices in Christ despite being attacked personally. Think jealous Christians jockeying for position.
- Paul is ready go home and be with Christ but knows that he is exactly where God wants him and staying on earth is what is best for the saints.
- Paul calls for unity in the Philippian Church

Chapter 2

- Paul calls for attitudinal unity by the common goal of pursuing Christ
- Paul communicates that a man only knows his own heart and to view himself as the chief of sinners so that he can serve his brother in humility
- Paul points to Christ's death on the cross as the crowning point of humility
- Paul reminds the saints that every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The name Lord is the name above all names and confirms that Jesus is God.
- Paul exhorts that man can do nothing unless enabled by God
- Paul exhorts to not complain
- Paul has no one of kindred spirit other than Timothy
- Paul sends Epaphroditus back to the church

What does the text mean?

¹Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

Paul begins with “finally” indicating that the letter is drawing to a close but then goes on for forty more verses. Finally means different things to different people. For example James Moffat translates finally as “well then”. Paul has the heart of a pastor and it is not uncommon for a pastor to say finally and then rattle on from there. Paul addresses the Philippians as his brothers showing his strong affection for the people there and then commands them to rejoice in the Lord which coincides with the overall theme of joy for the book. A Christian’s joy in Christ should be incessant and independent. Regardless of life’s circumstances nothing separates the Christian from joy in Christ. Paul modeled this through singing hymns in prison and routinely enduring beatings everywhere he went as written in Acts for example. Paul’s heart is further revealed as he states it’s no trouble to write the same things and it’s safe for you. As sinners Christians will never perfectly understand all of God’s word. God continually reveals truth by exposure to His word. God’s word strengthens the soul and mind. The Christian life requires repetition for both the teacher and the student. The repetition of the intake of the word and/or teaching the word builds muscle memory for the soul and mind. The idea is to grind the word so deeply into the Christian’s mind and soul that it becomes primary nature in the pursuit of becoming like Christ. Just as a young awkward pastor evolves into a master of his craft the layman is brought to maturity. The Christian has a tendency in the flesh to pursue self, the new, the different. The pursuit of Christ is found in the depths of the word by the spirit. The scripture will reveal the depths of God’s truths as a Christian matures.

²Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.

Paul’s tone takes a serious turn as he warns his beloved church of the Judaizers. He doesn’t pull any punches referring to them as dogs. This isn’t a reference to our domesticated furry friends or biblical ghetto slang. Dogs of the day were ravenous, scavengers, and possibly rabid.

JB Phillips translates verse two as “Be on your guard against these curs, these wicked workmen, these would-be mutilators of your bodies!”

Being called a dog was derogatory. The Judaizers would have seen this as an even deeper insult as the Jews referred to the gentiles as dogs in the religious sense.

The irony was that Paul was calling the Judaizers who viewed themselves as within the covenant community as in fact outside of the covenant community and unclean. It wasn't friendly fire, it was shots fired. If this is the epistle of joy what is Paul getting at? The Judaizers were distorting the gospel message. They were saying that to obtain salvation a man must put faith in Christ but also fulfill the law. Specifically, they were saying that circumcision was necessary for salvation. This was a huge problem in the churches at that time. In Acts 15 the matter was debated at the counsel at Jerusalem and the Paul also deals with the issue of circumcision in Galatians 2. Paul calls them evildoers and mutilators as they claim righteousness through circumcision when righteousness can only be given by God through faith in Christ and repentance of sin. False teaching is very dangerous for Christians. Truly dangerous false teaching presents a very high percentage of truth and distorts the whole truth with falsity. The Judaizers present Christ but then incorrectly add on the fulfillment of the law for salvation. It is evil to try and please God through man's works that detract from Christ's sacrifice. Paul was telling the Philippian church to look out for anyone that preaches Christ plus man's requirements or minus accountability. A Christian is not free to do whatever they please as they are a bond slave to Jesus Christ.

³For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh. ⁴though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:

Paul uses the imagery of circumcision to refer to the Christian heart. Circumcision is the removal of the skin around the tip of the male organ for hygiene and health benefits. To the Jew circumcision was an outward symbol of a clean heart. A Christian has put faith in Christ and repented of sin therefore being cleansed of sin through the Christ's death on the cross as stated in 1 John 1:7, 9. The heart is in essence circumcised for spiritual hygiene and the benefit of the Christian's soul. The Christian is made righteous through Christ in the eyes of the Father. A Christian is identified as worshipping by the spirit and taking pride in Christ. A Christian does not take pride in outward righteous accomplishments by fulfilling rules and laws. Paul is setting up his testimony of outward righteousness. He's saying if you think you've observed the law and checked all the outward righteousness boxes, get a load of this.

⁵circumcised on the eight day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless

Circumcision is something that we see very early on in the Old Testament. There is a deep and long history with the practice for the Jews. Execution of circumcision on the eight day was seen as the pinnacle of obeying the law. Paul is a real Jew with ties to a revered tribe. He is a Hebrew son of Hebrew parents. Paul was a Pharisee. He had incredible discipline in the keeping of all the laws. He went to an elite school, studied under a regarded teacher, and rose through the pharisaical rank quickly at a young age. How great of a pharisee was he? He was in all the way, the best of the best. He persecuted the church as evidenced in Acts 7 and 8 where he is present and approving as Steven is stoned to death. Paul held to the law so perfectly that no one could question his standing.

⁷But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith

Paul came to the realization that all that he was born into, all that he had done was loss once he met Jesus on the road to Damascus in Acts 9. Paul's conversion was striking. Everything in his life apart from his relationship with Christ was counted as rubbish, filthy rags, dung. Paul came face to face with the law of diminishing returns. He realized every earthly thing he had done was only taking him straight to hell. Notice that Paul speaks to his relationship with Christ. He does not speak of simply knowing who Christ is. Gaining Christ requires a relationship not just knowledge. Narrow is the gate and Paul had found it. Paul points out that righteousness does not come from outwardly keeping the law but comes from God. It is a prompting of the Holy Spirit as communicated earlier by Paul in chapter 1 vs 13. That prompting by the Holy Spirit requires a response of faith in Christ and repentance by man. The order is important. No one can initiate saving faith under their own power.

¹⁰that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul is referring to his longing and necessity to become more like Christ. He's reminding the Philippian Christians of their mission. That the Christian's calling is to life eternal and Christ had the power to raise himself from the dead and now that power lives in the Christian.

GH Morrison—Paul's one passion was to know more fully the resources of Christ. That was the power of His resurrection. The spiritual power of the resurrection is its steady upward pull upon life. Just because Christ was risen and above him, he must gain in Christ the heights of holy living. Paul was willing to do whatever it took to be like Christ. Suffer like Christ. Die like Christ. So that he could somehow be with Christ forever. Paul had a whatever it takes mindset.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.¹³Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul is stating that he is not perfect. One of the greatest Christians to ever live indicates to the Philippians that a Christian will not be perfect this side of heaven. However, the Christian is to strive toward perfection by becoming more like Christ. The Christian is laid hold of for one purpose....to become like Christ. Paul is using an athletic analogy to show the purposeful movement the Christian should have in the pursuit of Christ. Paul indicates that it does not matter what a Christian did in the past. There is no resting on laurels. The pursuit of Christ is vigorous and continuous. The pursuit of Christ is not something to turn on and off. A Christian should ask themselves the questions "where am I". "Am I pursuing the prize". There is no cruise control in the Christian life. A Christian is either pedal to the metal or hard braking.

¹⁵Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Paul is encouraging those that are seasoned in the pursuit of Christ to keep going. He is letting the newer Christians know where they are heading even if they don't see it quite yet. He is reminding all Christians to hold fast to Christ who has laid hold of them. Don't be tempted to add or subtract anything from Christ. The Christian does not need to perfectly keep the law nor is the Christian free to do whatever the eyes see.

17 Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

At casual read one might think Paul is pointing in the wrong direction. Why would he point the Philippians to imitate himself after telling them all about the pursuit of Christ? Christ is indeed the standard to which a Christian is called to attain. In God's infinite genius though he recognizes that a Christian will need examples of how to pursue Christ. Christ can't show a Christian how to become Christ because he was always Christ. Christ is the God man. Christ was, is, and always will be perfect. God used Paul to show us how to go from full pursuit of man centered outward righteousness to full pursuit of Christ by faith and repentance through God's grace.

18 For many of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

Paul refers back to the Judaizers and anyone else who walks as an enemy to the cross of Christ. An enemy of the cross of Christ is anyone who adds or subtracts from Christ. An enemy of the cross of Christ is in pursuit of whatever their appetite desires. An enemy of the cross of Christ takes pride in things that are not of Christ but of the earth. An enemy of the cross of Christ is defined by how he lives not by what he says. "The world is the limit of their horizon" as JB Phillips translates.

20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enable him even to subject all things to himself.

Paul reminds the Philippian Christians that they are not citizens of the earth. This is a concept they would have been very familiar with as Roman citizens. Philippi looked liked, felt like, operated like Rome except it wasn't Rome. Philippian citizens would have looked back toward Rome, another place on earth. The Philippian Christians were resident aliens. Paul reminds the Philippian Christians that they are exactly where God wants them to be and they are to set their minds toward heaven. A Christian's gaze should be fixed toward heaven. A Christian can't be too heavenly minded to be any earthly good. A Christian can be too earthly minded to be any heavenly or earthly good. Paul is telling the Philippian Christians to be zealous for the return of their powerful King Christ Jesus.

A Christian's citizenship in heaven will bring a dimension of heaven to earth. That doesn't mean we should or can make earth like heaven. The pursuit of making earth like heaven is the pursuit of worldly things to most. JB Phillips translates that we "eagerly wait for the savior who will come from heaven." Why? Why wouldn't a Christian be eager for Christ's return? Paul says a Christian's junk body is transformed into a perfect one! The Christian will be in the presence of the eternal king! The LORD of Lords! This earth is great, but it ain't that great. If a Christian is fixated on earthly things he truly is missing out on the eternal picture.

Philippians 4

¹Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Paul is imploring the Philippian Christians to stand firm in the Lord. Run the race in pursuit Christ with endurance so that when they stand before God they may hear well done good and faithful servant.



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