

JEREMIAH
BIBLE STUDY SERIES

PHILIPPIANS

THE JOY OF LIVING IN CHRIST

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

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Prepared by Peachtree Publishing Services



THOMAS NELSON
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Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Thomas Nelson. Thomas Nelson is a registered trademark of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Produced with assistance of Peachtree Publishing Service (www.PeachtreePublishingServices.com). Project staff include Christopher D. Hudson, Randy Southern, and Peter Blankenship.

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ISBN 978-0-310-09170-7 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-09171-4 (ebook)

First Printing May 2020 / Printed in the United States of America

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INTRODUCTION TO

The Letter to the Philippians

“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy . . . I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace” (Philippians 1:3–4, 7). At the heart of Paul’s letter to the Philippians is a message of thanksgiving and joy. He had found a group in the city of Philippi who had touched his heart. He had ministered to them and nurtured them in spiritual matters. In return, they had extended care and generosity to him—for which he was grateful. Yet Paul is also quick to note that he is writing this letter “in chains.” He was in prison at the time, and he knew the believers would be facing hard times for their faith. So, he drafted this loving letter to prepare them for what lay ahead and to encourage them to persevere.

AUTHOR AND DATE

The writer of the letter identifies himself as the apostle Paul (see 1:1), and early church historians were nearly unanimous in identifying him as the author. The events depicted align with accounts given in Acts, and the theology aligns with Paul’s teachings in his other letters. Luke tells us that Paul established the church in Philippi after being directed by the Holy Spirit to travel to Macedonia rather than go to Asia Minor (see Acts 16:6–10). It was there a woman named Lydia, “a seller of purple [cloth]” from the nearby city of Thyatira (verse 14), became one of his first converts—and thus one of the first converts in all of Europe. Paul

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composed the letter during one of his imprisonments, either AD 50 from Corinth, AD 53–55 from Ephesus, AD 58–59 from Caesarea—or, as most scholars believe, AD 60–62 from the city of Rome.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING

The city of Philippi was located along the Via Egnatia, a critical road that linked Rome with its eastern provinces, and was a center of trade. Paul established the church during his second missionary journey, and the church had become instrumental in supporting his ministry efforts. It appears that when the congregation heard Paul was in prison, they became concerned and sent a man named Epaphroditus to bring money to Paul and help in his time of need. Paul thus wrote this letter to thank the Philippians for their gift and to explain the significance of his imprisonment so the believers would not lose heart. Above all, Paul wanted them to learn to rejoice regardless of the circumstances they faced. In addition, the apostle had evidently heard of tensions brewing among certain members in the church so he wanted to remind all of the believers to remain unified as a community and bear with one another in love.

KEY THEMES

Several key themes are prominent in the letter to the Philippians. The first is that *believers are to be joyful* (see 1:3–30; 4:4–20). Paul introduces the believers to a contentment that is more profound than happiness. While happiness is a temporary state that comes and goes with moods and circumstances, joy runs deeper because its source is a personal relationship with Christ. As the believers drew their joy from the Lord, they would be able to find joy in any circumstance, for they were tapping into a source greater than their own.

A second theme is that *believers are to be united* (see 2:1–4). Paul uses words such as *fellowship* and *partakers* to stress his connection with the Philippians in their shared ministry. He expresses his gratitude for the Philippians' involvement in his ministry but also helps them realize their

generosity is a benefit to them as well. He calls the believers to join with him in pressing on toward the goal and keeping their focus on heaven (see 3:12–21). He explains their gifts of service as a “sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God” (4:18).

A third theme is that *believers are to be humble* (see 2:5–30). The apostle Paul helps the believers understand that God can accomplish extraordinary things through those who have a humble spirit. He offers the life of Christ as the ultimate example to follow, who “humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death” (2:8). The believers are likewise to model humility in their relationships with one another and to do so “without complaining or disputing” (2:14).

A fourth theme is that *believers are to have wisdom*. Paul is concerned that the greatest strength of the Philippian believers—their love—could be exploited by unscrupulous teachers who had infiltrated the church. Some of these teachers were trying to convince the believers they needed to become Jews, through circumcision and strict obedience to the Law, before they could become Christians (see 3:2–6). Paul had battled such teachings in other churches, but he was concerned the Philippians were especially vulnerable because of their welcoming spirit. He urges them to exercise discernment in their dealings with others.

KEY APPLICATIONS

Philippians is a powerful reminder for us to keep our focus on Christ and follow His example as we deal with circumstances here on earth. As believers, we have received the gift of God’s salvation, and everything else pales in comparison to that blessing. We therefore should never allow our moods or situation to steal our joy or take our focus off the work God has for us. Instead, we must seek to find joy in each and every situation that we face.

Philippians 1:1–11

Who are the people you are most thankful for in your life? Why are you thankful for them?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

SETTING THE STAGE

As we read the opening words of Paul's letter to the Philippians, we are immediately struck by the joy and thankfulness the apostle felt for this community of believers. In the space of a few short verses, he shares that he is thankful to God whenever he thinks of them, how their example fills him with joy, how he values their fellowship, and how he longs to see them again.

For more than a decade, the members of this small church in the Roman colony of Philippi had flourished as a close-knit group of believers. The apostle Paul, who had founded the church some ten years before, simply could not hide the deep attachment he felt to them. Even though he had been separated from them due to his imprisonment, he wanted them to know they were still continually in his thoughts and prayers.

It can be a bit startling to think that this great man of God, who had accomplished so much in establishing the churches, was desperate for the fellowship of his Christian friends. But in truth, Paul was built just like us—and none of us were designed to do life on our own. God created us for fellowship and for relationship. He wanted their fellowship to continue in spite of the miles of separation that lay between them. He desired their love for one another to grow.

As Paul communicates his feelings for these believers, he touches on many of the prerequisites for loving relationships in any church. His words remind us that we should all be thankful for our fellow brothers and sisters. The question is . . . are we thankful for them?

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Greeting (Philippians 1:1–7)

¹ Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, ⁵ for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ; ⁷ just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace.

1. The opening line of first-century letters almost always included the name of the sender, the name of the recipient, and a general greeting. In this case, Paul indicates the letter is from him and Timothy (his co-worker), but adds that they are “bondservants of Christ” (verse 1). The Greek term for *bondservant* refers not to a hired servant but rather to a slave. What point is Paul making by identifying himself and Timothy in this manner?

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2. Paul's greeting reveals a great deal about his relationship and past history with these believers. How would you describe his feelings toward them? How does he view them as partakers in his mission of spreading the gospel (see verses 3–7)?

Thankfulness and Prayer (Philippians 1:8–11)

⁸ For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ.

⁹ And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, ¹¹ being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

3. Paul next describes the content of his prayers for the Philippians. What does he ask God to provide to them? What does he hope this will accomplish in them (see verses 9–10)?

4. Paul uses the phrase “fruits of righteousness” to describe the work he wants God to do in the lives of the believers (see verse 11). How would you describe these fruits?

GOING DEEPER

The picture that Paul paints of the church in Philippi is a congregation that loves one another, is growing in the faith together, and is supporting the work of spreading the gospel. In many ways, this church reflects the harmony that was experienced in the very first church in Jerusalem. Luke tells us the following about that church in the book of Acts.

A Vital Church Grows (Acts 2:41–47)

⁴¹ Then those who gladly received [Peter’s] word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and

LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

5. These events occurred shortly after Peter delivered a sermon in which he proclaimed Jesus to be the promised Messiah. How did the people respond to his message? What happened as a result—in spite of their different backgrounds (see verses 41–45)?

6. What traits characterized this early body of believers (see verses 46–47)? What similar traits did the believers in Philippi possess?

Paul's thankfulness for the believers in Philippi reveals the church was doing well in loving one another and supporting the mission of spreading the gospel. This was not the case in every church that Paul had helped to

found. In the following letter, he instructs a group of believers that was struggling with unity and how the body of Christ is supposed to function.

Unity and Diversity in One Body (1 Corinthians 12:20–26)

²⁰ But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. ²³ And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, ²⁴ but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, ²⁵ that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. ²⁶ And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

7. Some of the believers in Corinth thought they possessed spiritual gifts that were more important than the other gifts—which was leading to issues of pride. How does Paul emphasize the importance of *every* member of the body of Christ (see verses 20–24)?

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8. Why is it important for believers to support and encourage one another (see verses 25–26)?

REVIEWING THE STORY

Paul opens his letter by expressing his love and affection for the believers in Philippi—a community that had continually supported his work in sharing the gospel. He states that he is thankful for their fellowship and is confident that God will continue to mature them in the faith. Although he is in prison, their partnership with him in sharing the gospel brings him comfort. He prays that their love for one another will continue to abound, that they will gain knowledge and discernment to identify false teaching, and that they will continue to lead godly lives.

9. How does Paul refer to himself and Timothy (see Philippians 1:1)?

10. What was the “very thing” that Paul was confident of concerning his brothers and sisters in Christ in Philippi (see Philippians 1:6)?

11. What did Paul pray would guide the believers’ abounding love (see Philippians 1:9)?

12. What did Paul want the Philippian believers to approve (see Philippians 1:10)?

APPLYING THE MESSAGE

13. How are you expressing your love to the Christians who have made—and are making—a difference in your life?

14. What are some ways that you can become more involved in your community of believers?

REFLECTING ON THE MEANING

Scholars tell us that Philippians is the most personal and intimate letter in the Bible. Although the letter consists of just four chapters, there are more than 100 occurrences of the words *I*, *me*, and *my*. In fact, the word *I* alone occurs fifty-two times! As Paul addresses the people of Philippi in the first few verses, we can feel the depth of his affection: “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you . . . I have you in my heart . . . I long for you all” (1:3, 7–8).

Paul could have just kept these feelings to himself. After all, he and the believers in Philippi had been partnering together for years. Shouldn’t they know by now how he felt? Yet Paul knew that unexpressed love is useless when it comes to ministering to a community. The believers in Philippi *needed* to hear these words from Paul. They needed to know that he recognized their sacrifice and appreciated all they had given to him.

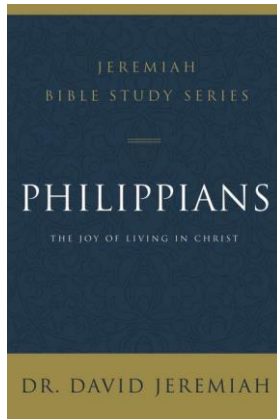
A commercial that ran several years ago pictured a scene between a father and son. The son said, “I love you,” but the dad couldn’t physically hear the words. In the next scene, the father now has a hearing aid. The son again tells his dad, “I love you,” . . . but again the man doesn’t respond. So the son repeats the words: “Dad, I love you.” The father replies, “I heard you the first time, son, but I just wanted to hear it twice.”

Don’t we all feel that way? No one is guaranteed tomorrow, so we need to express our love and appreciation for others *today*. We need to follow the example that Paul sent in each of his letters: “I thank my God always concerning you” (1 Corinthians 1:4); “I . . . do not cease to give thanks for you” (Ephesians 1:15–16), “We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you” (Colossians 1:3); “We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers” (1 Thessalonians 1:2).

Somebody once said that if you are full of gratitude, you can’t be angry at anybody. Likewise, if your heart is filled with thanksgiving, it won’t be hard for you to express your feelings of love and affection for the people in your life.

JOURNALING YOUR RESPONSE

How can you nurture a spirit of gratitude in your life?



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Experience joy in any situation.

The believers in Philippi were experiencing both concern for Paul while he was in prison and spiritual discouragement because of these circumstances. Paul wrote this loving letter to encourage them in their faith and to remind them that there was a greater future in store for him and for them outside this world. Paul even admits the tension he feels between living to continue sharing the gospel and dying so he can be with Christ. This mindset allowed Paul to remain joyful in the midst of suffering and he knew the same would be true of the Philippians believers as well.

The *Jeremiah Bible Study Series* captures Dr. David Jeremiah's forty-plus years of commitment to teaching the Word of God. In each study, he will help you understand what the Bible says, what it meant to the people at the time it was written, and what it means to you today. Along the way, you will gain insights into the text, identify key stories and themes, and be challenged to apply truth you find to your life.

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