

## **Philippians: The Joy & Suffering Of The Furtherance Of The Gospel [1]**

**By: Keith Keyser**

The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ holds the answer to the momentous problems facing mankind today. In spite of this, the good news encounters opposition wherever it is proclaimed. The Adversary, Satan blinds men's minds against it, 2 Cor. 4. 4, the world system allures people away from it, 1 John 2. 15-17, and the flesh rebels against its claims, Gal. 4. 29; 5. 17. The Lord Jesus foretold this sobering situation, saying:

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me, John 15. 18-21.

Paul taught the same principle to his converts, affirming that '...all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution', 2 Tim. 3. 12; see also Acts 14. 22. Elsewhere he told his 'child in the faith', Timothy, to '...endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ', 2 Tim. 2. 3. John puts it succinctly: 'Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you', 1 John 3. 13. Of course, the apostles were not 'armchair theologians' who lacked the knowledge of the vicissitudes of real life. They themselves suffered for their identification with Christ and His gospel. For example, Paul's experience of persecution and hardship for the progress of the glad tidings is clearly set forth in his epistle to the Philippians. What is more, this encouraging letter demonstrates the unassailable joy that the believer possesses in Christ in spite of the difficulties that serving Him brings about in this life.

### **Gold, Politics, And Geographic Advantage**

Philippi was an important city in the Roman province of Macedonia. Founded by Greeks in the sixth century B.C. as Krenides ('Springs'), it eventually was wrested from the Thracians and renamed Philippi in 356 B.C. by Philip II of Macedon – famous for being Alexander the Great's father. Thanks to gold mines in the vicinity, in those days it was a 'boomtown'. It was also strategically located about ten miles away from the Aegean Sea. Macedonian control eventually gave way to the Romans, who incorporated Macedonia and its holdings into their advancing empire in 148 B.C. It was located along the prominent highway the Via Egnatia. By that time, gold was no longer prevalent and the population dwindled. Nevertheless, world events again revitalized Philippi after Julius Caesar's assassins Brutus and Cassius were defeated outside the city by Octavian (later known as Augustus) and Antony. By 27 B.C. it was declared a Roman colony, meaning that its residents enjoyed the rights and privileges of Roman citizens.<sup>1</sup> One writer describes the city's affinity for the imperial capital in these words:

In every way the colony was a reproduction of Rome. The city of Philippi was laid out in the same patterns of Rome, and style and architecture were copied extensively. The coins produced in the city bore Roman inscriptions. The local magistrates liked to term themselves *praetores (strategoi)*, in the Roman manner. The Latin language was used and its citizens adorned themselves in Rome dress. In every way Philippi was a “little Rome” when Paul first traversed its streets. Although it was not the general capital of the province (Thessalonica was), Philippi was a leading city and the first station of the famous road the Via Egnatia, which Rome built to link its eastern territories with the Empire. This road ran directly through the middle of the city and divided it into a lower and upper city. The lower city contained the agora and library while the upper city situated on the side of the mountain was the location of many of the temples.<sup>ii</sup>

In short, it was a cosmopolitan place, which was an ideal base for establishing a gospel beachhead in Europe.

### **An Inauspicious Beginning**

At the commencement of his second missionary journey, Paul was overtly forbidden by the Spirit to preach in Asia Minor; instead, he was called to evangelize Macedonia, Acts 16. 6-10. When the missionary party arrived in Philippi, it did not appear to be a fortuitous place to begin a new work for God. After all, the apostle’s normal approach consisted of going to the local synagogue, making contacts among fellow Jews, Gentile proselytes, and “God-fearers” (one step below a proselyte). Philippi seems not to have met the rabbinic requirement for a Jewish house of worship, however, for it does not appear that there were ten Jewish men residing in the city. Accordingly, upon arriving they made their way to a place where Jews were known to gather for prayer. There they encountered some devout women. Despite the initial lack of a formal congregation Paul and Silas preached to these dear souls, resulting in the conversion of a Thyatiran businesswoman named Lydia and her household, Acts 16. 14-15.

The next victory in the gospel was drawn from the world of the occult. A certain enslaved fortune-teller, who derived her ‘second sight’ through demon possession, daily accosted the missionaries with her misleading cries. In response, Paul cast the unclean spirit out of her, thereby depriving some local businessmen of their lucrative ‘property’. Consequently, they did what any opportunistic, aggrieved entrepreneur would do: they took the heralds of the gospel to court. Like the high priests and Sanhedrin before them, they denounced the Christians as dangerous threats to peace and Roman law. Since the famed *Pax Romana* (Roman peace) was built upon the *Lex Romana* (Roman Law), these charges were taken quite seriously and resulted in the preachers’ imprisonment, Acts 16. 16-24.

Rather than hindering the gospel, this turn of events actually led to one of the most dramatic conversions in the New Testament. Under these difficult circumstances, Paul and Silas displayed a remarkably resilient attitude, praying and singing within their cell. The stocks held their feet,

but their ebullient spirits could not be restrained. With hearts full of His love, their voices were profitably employed in communion with their Lord. Astonishment must have seized their fellow inmates, for when an earthquake opened the prison's doors and loosed the prisoners' bonds no one fled, vv. 26-28. Clearly God was at work within this place of confinement. This uncommon turn of events terrified and transfixed the jailer. He and his family believed in the Lord Jesus Christ that very night. Between Lydia's household and the unnamed warden, a fledgling assembly was established. Amidst the harsh treatment of the business and legal communities, the gospel produced fruit for God's glory (Paul refers to this 'shameful' treatment in 1 Thess. 2. 2). It was a harbinger of what was to come in his later written ministry to the Philippians.

### **A Postal Bible School For Serving The Lord**

At the time of the writing of Philippians, Paul was once more in prison. Scholarly opinion is divided over the location of his incarceration – Rome, Ephesus, and Caesarea being the suggested possibilities. Regardless of the location, like before, his imprisonment failed to stop the gospel. On the contrary, Philippians makes it clear that Paul possessed a jail-proof joy that transcended trials due to the knowledge of God's incontrovertible purposes, e.g. Phil. 1. 6; 4. 4.

Paul could not go to Philippi to preach, so he took up his pen in order to exhort them. Chiefly on his heart was their unity in Christ leading to participation in the furtherance of the gospel. He notes their fellowship in the gospel and refers to his great affection for them, 1. 3-11. Nonetheless, their assistance in the ministry was imperiled by a lack of unity within the assembly, which seemed to stem from self-centred behaviour among the believers. Therefore, the apostle devotes a large portion of the book to exhorting them to be more unified, selfless, and Christ-like, 1. 27; 2. 1-11; 4. 1-3.

### **Outlining Philippians**

#### General Outline

Chapter 1: The Gospel's Progress Against Opposition & Suffering

Chapter 2: The Gospel's Selfless Proponents

Chapter 3: The Gospel's Selfish Enemies & Their Defeat

Chapter 4: The Gospel's Uniting & Providing Power

#### Detailed Outline

Phil. 1. 1-11: Introduction

1. 12-26: Paul's imprisonment & its effect on the gospel

1. 27-2: 5: Exhortation to live worthy of the gospel amidst suffering & embrace the mind of Christ

2. 6-11: Christ's selfless example

2. 12-16: Exhortation to work out their salvation and live consistent with it

2. 17-18: Paul's selfless example

2. 19-24: Timothy's selfless example

2. 25-30: Epaphroditus' selfless example

3. 1-2: Answering Self seeking false teachers

3. 3-14: Paul's past, present & future regarding righteousness

3. 15-21: Exhortation to a godly walk in view of Christ's second coming and the resurrection of their bodies

4. 1-9: Exhortation to unity among the saints

4. 10-19: Thanksgiving for their financial gift

4. 20-23: Closing salutations

### **Other Prominent Themes Of The Book**

Philippians repeatedly mentions joy, but it is far removed from erroneous human conceptions of pleasure. This epistle's joy emanates from God's goodness, love and power. As one writer says: 'It is the joy that comes from complete dedication to the will of Christ which brings about a willingness to even go to the point of death for the sake of the gospel'.<sup>iii</sup> The book also has much to say about 'the mind', 1. 27; 2. 2, 3, 5; 3. 15, 16, 19; 4. 2, 7. Thankfulness is also an important topic, 1. 3; 4. 6, 10. The third chapter focuses on the important subject of true and false righteousness, but the positive aspects of that subject also appear elsewhere, 1. 11. Likewise, discernment and fellowship run through the epistle like underlying threads, 1. 5, 9-10; 2. 1. In order to effectively serve the Lord for the advancement of His gospel, the saints need to grasp these important concepts, which are also essential for the Christian life.

Almost two millennia after it was written, Philippians continues to challenge, encourage and comfort believers in various circumstances of life. The apostle's temporary hardship produced a letter which is being used by the Holy Spirit to edify the saints and advance the glad tidings of Christ. It contains beautiful promises of God's material and spiritual provision for His people, as well as reminders of the Lord's incomparable condescension and sacrifice. It refuses to succumb to melancholy sentiment or discouragement; instead advocating joy in the midst of trials. Most

importantly, it views the events of life through the spiritually enlightening lens of being in Christ.

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<sup>i</sup> For a good overview of Philippi's history see Herbert W. Bateman IV, "Were The Opponents at Philippi Necessarily Jewish?". (1998). *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 155* (155:40-43).

<sup>ii</sup> James L. Blevins, "Introduction to Philippians', *Review and Expositor Volume 77* (1980; vnp.77.3.312).

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320).