

# INTRODUCTION TO 50<sup>TH</sup> BIBLEBOOK

## THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS (the end of A.D. 61)

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### **A. THE WRITER OF PHILIPPIANS.**

The letter to the Philippians says that the writer is “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.” Although Timothy was associated with Paul in his ministry at Philippi and was present with Paul at the time of the writing, he was not the writer, because all through the letter Paul writes in the first person singular. Although some modern people maintain that Philippians was forged by making use of Paul’s other letters, all the evidence points to a genuine and authentic letter. The fact that many things written in Philippians is also found in Paul’s other letters, can only be expected when these letters have the same author. Also the earliest written sources that have been preserved ascribe Philippians to Paul. Thus both the internal as well as the external evidence point only to Paul as the writer.

### **B. THE RECIPIENTS OF PHILIPPIANS.**

#### **1. The city of Philippi.**

The great Greek Empire began when Philip II seized the throne of Macedonia in 359 B.C. He modernised the army by giving the soldiers longer spears, making use of charging cavalry and better organisation. Because armies cost a lot of money, Philip annexed the gold-region in the neighbourhood of a small place called Krenides. He enlarged the town and named it after himself, ‘Philippi’. Philip used the gold he mined partly to maintain a very large army and partly to bribe other countries to surrender. His territorial expansion was continued by his son, Alexander the Great, who conquered vast areas in the east. The Greek empire spread the Hellenistic or Greek culture and language to many countries in the west and the east. The city of Philippi is situated about 16 kilometres from the Mediterranean Sea and its harbour is called Neapolis.

Two centuries after the founding of Philippi, the Romans conquered Macedonia. After the murder of Julius Caesar by Brutus and Cassius, these murderers were defeated at the battle of Philippi by Antony and Octavian in 42 B.C. Philippi was made a Roman colony and Antony settled there. At the battle of Actium in 31 B.C., Octavian defeated Anthony and in 29 B.C. *Octavian became the Roman emperor with the name Ceasar Augustus.*

Philippi became a miniature reproduction of Rome. The inhabitants were predominantly Romans, but the local population lived alongside them. People who possessed the Roman citizenship were very proud of their citizenship and their privileges included freedom from arrest, freedom of scourging and the right to appeal to the emperor. Roman law ruled in Philippi, which gave economic and political privileges to Roman citizens. The economic privileges included exemption from tribute and the right to acquire, hold, and transfer property. The political privileges included freedom from interference by the provincial governor, and the right and responsibility to regulate their own civic affairs. The control of the government of the city was in the hands of two officials, called ‘praetores duumviri’ (‘strategoi’ in Greek). They controlled the officers who carried out the punishment of offenders. The great Roman road, called the Via Egnatia, ran from Neapolis via Philippi to the Adriatic coast and on the other side of the Adriatic Sea the Via Apia ran straight to Rome, the capital of the Roman empire.

#### **2. Paul in Philippi.**

Paul’s first visit to Philippi. During the beginning of his second missionary journey about A.D. 50, the Holy Spirit guided Paul and his fellow-workers to Troas, where Paul saw a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him to come over to Macedonia and help them. Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke crossed over the sea to Philippi<sup>1</sup>. Paul and his fellow workers preached the gospel and the book of Acts relates the conversion of three people: a Jewish proselyte called Lydia, a Greek slave girl and a Roman jailer.

According to Acts 16, Lydia was a business woman from Asia Minor and probably quite wealthy. She was born a pagan and had become a convert to the Jewish faith. Although her way of worshipping God was far superior to any pagan cult with its foolish idolatry and gross immorality, it failed to give her peace with God. When she heard the gospel, the Lord opened her heart and subsequently she and her household believed and were baptised.

According to Acts 16, a slave girl who was demon-possessed and had the gift of fortune-telling was used by her owners to make much money. For several days, she had been following Paul crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation!” Paul did not want to be advertised by a demon-possessed girl and commanded the evil spirit to leave her. It came out of her at once.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16:6-10. The first Christians in Europe were people who had possibly attended Jewish festivals during the life of Christ, but certainly attended Pentecost in Jerusalem in A.D. 30 (Acts 2:5-11)! The second missionary journey of Paul brought the gospel to Macedonia and Greece (Acts 16:6-15).

The owners were so angry that they had lost their source of income that they grabbed Paul and Silas, dragged them to the public square and accused them before the praetores as Jewish trouble-makers. The charge was of an inflammatory character, because the Roman colonists were very jealous of their rights and customs. Moreover, due to the recent expulsion of Jews from Rome by the emperor Claudius, the position of Jews in this miniature-Rome was precarious. Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten with rods and thrown into a dungeon in prison, where their feet were locked far apart in gruesome stocks and their hands were chained to the wall.

*But man's problems are God's opportunities!* Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns to God. God sent an earthquake, which shook all the doors open and sprung all the locks on the chains and stocks. The jailer thought that all the prisoners had escaped and wanted to commit suicide, but Paul stopped him by saying that nobody had escaped. The jailer brought them out of prison and asked, "What must I do to be saved?" And they replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household<sup>2</sup>." They preached the gospel to him and his household. The faith of the jailer and his household revealed its genuine character in loving deeds. They washed the wounds of Paul and Silas. Paul and Silas baptised them. The next day, the praetores ordered to release Paul and Silas, probably because they had heard what had happened. Paul and Silas replied that they were Roman citizens who had been arrested and beaten without trial. That was a great offence against Roman citizens and the praetores feared that they would be punished. They came to the jail themselves to apologise and escorted them from prison. After Paul and Silas had met with the group of Christian converts in Philippi at Lydia's house, they left Philippi. Timothy accompanied them or followed a little later and Luke remained in Philippi.

### **3. The church at Philippi.**

The church at Philippi seemed to have drawn its character from that of its leading members. Several times during the second missionary journey of Paul, the church of Philippi sent gifts to Paul to support his missionary work in Macedonia and Achaia (4:15-16)<sup>3</sup>.

Paul's second visit to Philippi occurred during the beginning of his third missionary journey about A.D. 56. Writing to the Corinthians from somewhere in Macedonia, he praised the eager generosity of the churches of Macedonia, including Philippi, in contributing towards the collection for the needy people in Jerusalem<sup>4</sup>.

Paul's third visit to Philippi occurred during the end of his third missionary journey about A.D. 57, where Luke joined him again to travel to Jerusalem<sup>5</sup>.

During his first imprisonment in Rome between A.D. 60-61, Paul wrote to the Philippians that he hoped to send Timothy to visit the church of Philippi soon and he added that he hoped to be released soon and visit them himself (2:19,24).

It is certainly possible that Paul's fourth visit to Philippi occurred between A.D. 62-64, that is between his two imprisonments in Rome.

## **C. THE OCCASION, DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING PHILIPPIANS.**

During Paul's first imprisonment in Rome between A.D. 60-61, he received a welcome visitor, Epaphroditus. He was a leader in the church at Philippi and had been sent to Paul as a delegate from that church. Travelling by land, his journey must have taken at least one month. He carried with him a generous gift from the church of Philippi, which Paul deeply appreciated. He also gave Paul a report about the conditions of Christians in the church at Philippi. He expressed the church's deep concern for Paul in prison and wanted to know more about his present condition. Epaphroditus suffered from a severe sickness, probably due to having been exposed to considerable danger, but recovered from his illness.

According to the early Christian tradition, Paul wrote four letters during his first imprisonment in Rome, Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians and Philippians. He probably wrote Philippians the last, towards the end of his imprisonment, because Luke, Aristarchus and Philemon are no longer with him when he wrote Philippians<sup>6</sup>. Between Paul's arrival in Rome and the despatch of Philippians much time had elapsed: The distance between Rome and Philippi had probably been covered no less than four times: Someone had travelled from Rome to Philippi with the news that Paul had been imprisoned in Rome. The Philippians collected a gift for Paul and sent it to him by the hand of Epaphroditus. Epaphroditus became gravely ill and someone conveyed this information to the Philippians. Someone from Philippi reached Rome and told Epaphroditus, who in the meantime had fully recovered, about the deep concern of the Philippians for his health and safety. Also the reaction of the praetorian guard and that of the two groups of Christian preachers to the presence and preaching of Paul in Rome indicates that Paul had already been a considerable time in Rome before he wrote Philippians (1:12-18). Finally, Paul was confident that he would very soon be released from prison. Therefore, we conclude that the letters Colossians, Philemon and Ephesians were written between A.D. 60-61 and the

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 16:31

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:9

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

<sup>5</sup> Acts 20:5

<sup>6</sup> Colossians 4:10,14,23

letter to the Philippians was written towards the end of A.D. 61 from Rome and was probably sent by the hand of Epaphroditus to Philippi.

#### **D. THE PURPOSE OF WRITING PHILIPPIANS.**

##### **1. The first purpose of Philippians was to express his gratitude.**

It is possible that Paul had immediately acknowledged receiving their generous gift either by mouth of those who had accompanied Epaphroditus to Rome or by other travellers. It is possible that his letter was delayed by the sickness of Epaphroditus. Nevertheless, in his letter he thanked the Philippians for their gift and he also thanked God for the Philippians and *their partnership with him in the work of the gospel* (4:10-19).

##### **2. The second purpose of Philippians was to provide spiritual guidance to the church.**

Paul's knowledge of the conditions of the Christians in Philippi was up to date. He encouraged them to continue to exercise their citizenship in a manner that was worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1:27-30). He urged them to be like-minded in spirit and purpose (2:2), to be humble as Christ (2:5-11) and to be light-bearers in a crooked and depraved generation (2:14-16). He warned them to beware of the Judaists, who were a group of Jewish Christians trying to turn the Gentile Christians into Jews keeping the Old Testament law (3:1-6). He exhorted them not to think that spiritually they had 'arrived', but rather to "press on toward the goal" (3:7-16). He also warned them against the sensualists, who were people whose god was their stomach and who gloried in doing shameful things. Let the Philippian Christians rather regard their life on earth as a pilgrimage toward their real home in heaven (3:17-21). And finally, he stimulated them to be joyful under all circumstances, to fix their attention on whatever things that are true, right, pure and excellent (4:1-9).

##### **3. The third purpose of Philippians was to encourage the church to be joyful.**

The words 'joy' and 'rejoice' occur 16 times in this letter<sup>7</sup>: He prayed for them with joy because of their partnership in the advance of the gospel (1:4-5). He rejoiced that all the difficult things that happened to himself, like imprisonment and persecution, only contributed to the advance of the gospel (1:12-18). He desired to continue to live for the sake of their progress and joy in the faith (1:19-26). The existence of a Christian church at Philippi was his joy (4:1). But even if he had to die because of his service for them, he would rejoice (2:16-18). He urged the Philippian Christians to make his joy complete by being like-minded, by having the humble attitude of Christ (2:1-11) and to "rejoice in the Lord always!" (3:1; 4:4). Finally, Paul rejoiced greatly in their renewed concern for him and in the gift they had sent to him (4:10).

##### **4. The fourth purpose of Philippians was to stimulate the church to give Epaphroditus a warm welcome home.**

Epaphroditus was the delegate of the Philippian church to Paul imprisoned in Rome. Paul called him his 'brother', 'fellow worker', 'fellow soldier' and the Philippian's 'messenger and minister to his needs' (2:25). He had suffered a severe illness and this had caused great concern with the Philippians when they heard about it. Paul now sent him back so that when they saw him they might rejoice. He urged the church to welcome such men, who had almost died for the work of Christ and who had risked their lives for others, with great joy and honour into their midst (2:28-30).

#### **E. THE DIVISION OF PHILIPPIANS.**

The letter of Paul to the Philippians may be given **the title: "Philippians - the joy of Christians amidst trouble and persecutions"**. The letter portrays Jesus Christ, the joy of Christians.

**The theme** of Philippians is written in Philippians 4:4, "**Rejoice in the Lord always!**".

The letter to the Philippians may be divided into four parts or seven sections:

##### **1. Philippians 1. Joy in living for the progress of the gospel.**

This part consists of two sections:

- Verse 1-11. Paul, the joyful servant. He expresses his thanks and joy for the Philippians' share in promoting God's work and expresses his warm affection for them.
- Verse 12-30. Paul, the optimistic prisoner. He rejoices that his imprisonment only resulted in great advantages for the progress of the gospel. He urges the Philippians that also their conduct and suffering may be worthy of the gospel.

##### **2. Philippians 2. Joy in sacrificial service.**

This part consists of two sections:

- Verse 1-18. Paul, the humble cross-bearer. He appeals the Philippians to be united, humble and helpful after the example of Christ. If the Philippians will continue to work out their salvation, shining as lights in the midst of a wicked world and holding forth the word of life, then there will be every reason for joy. Even if he himself suffers death for the sake of Christ, this is to be considered as a drink-offering, the lesser part of the sacrificial offering brought by the Philippians' Christian testimony and service to God.

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<sup>7</sup> The words 'joy' and its derivatives and the word 'rejoice' and its derivatives occur 439 times in the Bible!

- Verse 19-30. Paul, the thoughtful administrator. He promises to send Timothy, who genuinely lives to promote the interests of Christ. And he sends Epaphroditus back as an appreciated fellow worker.

### **3. Philippians 3. Joy in becoming more like Christ.**

This part consists of one section:

- Verse 1-21. Paul, the indefatigable idealist. He warns against boasting in earthly treasures, such as his race or his religious accomplishments. He himself has thrown away all his old treasures in order to obtain the most precious treasure, Jesus Christ himself. He presses on towards the highest goal in his life and that is to become more and more like Jesus Christ.

### **4. Philippians 4. Joy in peace and contentment.**

This part consists of two sections:

- Verse 1-9. Paul, the tactful pastor. He urges the Philippians to have harmonious relationships, to pray instead of to worry, to only think about good things and to put into practice what they have learned from Paul. All this will result in peace.
- Verse 10-23. Paul, the grateful recipient. He rejoices in the generosity of the Philippians and testifies that he has learned contentment in all circumstances.

## **F. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF PHILIPPIANS.**

### **1. To always rejoice in the Lord (4:4).**

Paul and Silas had sang hymns during their imprisonment in Philippi. The Philippians must know that he also rejoices in the Lord during his imprisonment in Rome. *He rejoices especially because his difficulties and problems have become God's opportunities to advance the gospel* among the prison guards and to encourage other Christians to be bold when they witness for Christ. The word 'joy' and 'rejoice' occurs sixteen times in this letter<sup>8</sup>. And Paul rejoices in the fact that the gospel bears so much good fruit among the Philippians.

### **2. To be confident and responsible in working out one's salvation (1:6; 2:12-13).**

On the one hand, Christians may be fully confident that God himself will continue the good work he has begun in their lives and that God works in their hearts and lives to do his will. On the other hand, Christians ought to be responsible and committed to work out their salvation. This does not mean that they work for their salvation, but that they show the works of salvation. God has a plan for the life of each Christian and each Christian is responsible to work out that plan in his life.

### **3. To have the same attitude as Jesus Christ (2:1-11).**

Although Jesus Christ is God, he humbled himself by also taking on the human nature and by becoming like one of us. He humbled himself even more by becoming our servant. Finally he humbled himself more than anyone else by dying as a criminal for our sins! Just like God exalted Jesus Christ to the highest position in the universe, so he will exalt those Christians who humble themselves<sup>9</sup>.

### **4. To live with one's eyes on Christ (3:18-15).**

To gain Christ and to become more and more like Christ is the highest goal for Paul and for Christians.

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<sup>8</sup> And 221 times in the Bible

<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 5:5-6