

INTRODUCTION

As I mentioned last week, before we actually begin a serious study of any New Testament book of the Bible, it's always best to consider the author, the audience, the aim of the book, and the date and place of writing. It's always best to first get a broad picture of a book because it helps us get a better and more accurate interpretation of the book. That should always be our goal: to interpret each book according to the original intent of its author and always in light of the rest of the Scriptures. We should compare spiritual things with spiritual (1 Cor. 2:13) and certainly rely on the Holy Spirit for illumination (1 Cor. 2:13, 14).

So in way of introducing the Book of Philippians we have already considered:

THE AUTHOR

From beginning to end, it is clear that the apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Philippian church. In fact, the early church unanimously accepted Paul as the writer of this book. It was only by the grace of God that Paul's life was dramatically transformed and that he was radically changed from a fierce persecutor of the church to that of a faithful preacher of the gospel. Paul fully understood that his conversion, call, and commission were solely by grace, totally and completely undeserved. Although he acknowledged his apostleship and even had to defend his apostleship to the Corinthian church, Paul wrote:

For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am. (1 Cor. 15:9-10a)

The same Savior and the same grace are still available today. His grace truly is greater than all our sin. I mentioned last week that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. That's true. However, there is a way an individual can put him/herself beyond its reach. You don't have to be an atheist or agnostic to reject God's grace. You don't even have to be hostile toward God and His grace. All you have to do is willfully refuse and reject His offer of grace to you.

THE AUDIENCE

According to the opening verse, it is also quite clear that the Philippian church was the recipient of this letter. The Philippian church was established during Paul's second missionary journey (ca. A.D. 48-50). This second mission trip was made up of Paul and Silas. As they passed through Lystra, the hometown of Timothy, Paul added Timothy to the missionary team. Paul had led Timothy to Christ just a few years before on his first missionary journey. Paul desired to go further into Asia, but either through providential circumstances or direct revelation, they were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6). After turning north to Mysia and trying to go northeast into Bythina, the Holy Spirit once again "did not permit them" (Acts 16:7). With nowhere else to turn, "they came down to Troas" (Acts 16:8).

It was at Troas where,

A vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:9, 10)

This would be the very first entry of the gospel into Europe. But it was also at Troas where Luke, the writer of Acts, joined the missionary team. Verse 10 is the beginning of the "we" passages in the Book of Acts, indicating Luke was with them.

The very first church started in Europe was in Philippi. Philippi was a Roman colony located in the province of Macedonia (Macedonia was a Roman province in the northern part of the area we now call Greece). Being a Roman colony may have been the reason for such a small Jewish population, and apparently the reason for no Jewish synagogue. Luke writes:

And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met *there*. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard *us*. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God [she was Gentile proselyte]. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged *us*, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded *us*. (Acts 16:13-15)

It was also in Philippi where Paul cast out a demon of "a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination" (Acts 16:16). She was a fortuneteller possessed and in contact with demons.

But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged *them* into the marketplace to the authorities. And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe." Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded *them* to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw *them* into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. (Acts 16:19-24)

Although Paul and Silas were falsely accused, unjustly beaten, and wrongly imprisoned, God ultimately used these events in the salvation of the Philippian jailer and his household (Acts 16:31-34). Amazing! It was to this very church Paul would write this letter approximately 12-13 years later.

THE AIM

Paul had several reasons for writing this letter:

1. He wanted to acknowledge the gift the Philippians had sent to him through Epaphroditus and to express his deepest gratitude for their gracious generosity (Phil. 4:10-19).
2. Paul wanted them to know that even in his own circumstances as a prisoner in Rome, the Lord was using it as a means to advance the gospel (1:12). The gospel of Christ had even become evident to the entire Praetorian Guard (1:13), and even those of Caesar's own household had come to know Christ (4:22).
3. He sought to encourage them as they were facing opposition (1:27-30).
4. He wrote to exhort them to unity (2:1-4) and specifically urged the reconciliation of Euodia and Syntyche, two leading women in the church (4:2).
5. He wrote to warn the young church about false teachers (3:1-4:1).

The prominent theme of Paul's letter to the Philippians is *joy*. In fact, it has been called "the epistle of joy." The word "joy" and its various forms occur approximately 18 times. Joy permeates the book from beginning to end.

Another key theme throughout the book is *the Christian's mind or attitude*.

CONCLUSION

In way of conclusion, let's consider the date and place of Paul's writing this letter to the Philippians. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are generally called prison epistles. Most Bible scholars (not all) believe that Paul wrote these four epistles during his first Roman imprisonment; during the two years he was under "house arrest" (Acts 28:30-31).

Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.

I love how Kenneth Wuest describes these two years of faithful and fruitful ministry of Paul:

The word "palace" [Phil. 1:13] refers in the Greek to the Praetorian Guard, composed of the soldiers of the imperial regiment whose barracks were at Rome. Paul had been living in his own rented quarters near these barracks, guarded by soldiers twenty-four hours a day. He lived for two years with a Roman soldier chained to his wrist. As the different soldiers would take their turn guarding Paul, they would hear the conversations he had with his visitors, conversations full of the gospel and of the Savior of sinners. They would hear the apostle pray, and would listen as he dictated the epistles he wrote. The noble prisoner would talk to them about their souls... Thus, the gospel went through the barracks of the Roman soldiers, a place where it would not have gone, if Paul had not been a prisoner there.

So Paul wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon around A.D. 61, and Philippians toward the close of his two-year imprisonment (ca. A.D. 62). 1 Timothy and Titus were written by Paul between his two imprisonments, somewhere between A.D. 62-64/65. Paul wrote his final letter, 2 Timothy, once again as a prisoner and once again in chains; this time as a prisoner of the madman emperor named Nero. This time he is confined to a

dark, dank, dungeon. As he writes to the Philippians, Paul expects to be shortly released and to once again have the opportunity to visit them (2:24). But as he writes 2 Timothy, Paul begs Timothy to come visit him soon. He sees no release or relief in sight except by death. History tells us that the apostle was martyred under the order of Nero around A.D. 66/67.

As you read the prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon), you will quickly discover that first and foremost *the person and work of Christ is prominent in each one of them*. How we view Christ determines how we view our circumstances. How we view Christ determines what we value. How we view Christ determines how we view ourselves and others. Our view of Christ determines the extent of our joy.

Yes, God wants to give us His joy, but His joy is attached to something—or actually to Someone. First-and-foremost God desires to give us Himself. We cannot detach the things of God from God. Some would like to do that. Some have tried to do that. But it’s absolutely impossible.

When God provided salvation for man, God *Himself* came to earth in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. When the angel announced Christ’s birth he said, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of **great joy** which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lke. 2:10-11). That’s where joy begins. It begins with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ Who longs to be your Savior and Lord. Anything else will only leave you empty and frustrated.

You cannot depend on your parents’ or grandparents’ faith to save you. You cannot depend on church attendance to get you to heaven. You cannot depend on church membership to keep you out of hell. It’s not a matter of your good outweighing your bad. Only Jesus can satisfy the deepest need of your soul: the need of forgiveness of sin; and because of sin, the need to be reconciled to holy God through faith. After all, why do you think Jesus came and died an unjust death at Calvary in the first place?

As you view Paul’s life, the life of the Philippian church, and the life of the church throughout history—you will quickly discover that the joy the Bible speaks of and describes is not the absence of adversity. It does not mean a trouble-free life. What it does mean is that if we can trust God with our eternal souls, then we can trust Him with anything else. As believers we can have the settled peace that no matter what happens in life, we can fully trust God Who is in control of our lives and even in control of the events of our lives—and all for our good and ultimately for His glory!

