

# Advent Course

## Based on Paul's Letter to the Philippians

### Introduction

During September and October our Sunday readings have included a few passages from Philippians, so it seems like a good time to look more closely at the whole letter, which is sometimes known as 'The Epistle of Joy', because of the frequent references to joy and rejoicing.

Before we start the course and get to the letter itself, I thought it would be helpful to set the scene, in so far as it is known. So do read this before you start.

### Background

The earliest record we have of an Apostle taking the Gospel into Europe is Paul's visit to Philippi on his second missionary journey. This is recorded in Acts 16:6-40. Paul was travelling with Silas (Sylvanus), who had been, "*a leader among the brothers in Jerusalem*" Acts 15:22. In Acts 15:32 his was called '*a prophet*' meaning an inspired teacher and proclaimer of God's will. They had been joined by Timothy at Lystra. He was still very much an apprentice. It seems apparent from the use of the pronoun 'we' that Luke joined Paul in Troas and journeyed with him to Philippi (Acts 16:10). He then seems to have stayed on there when Paul left (Acts 16:40).

### History of Philippi

Gold and silver had been mined in the area since Phoenician times, 3000-2000 BC and a town called Crenides had been established at the pass through the hills between Macedonia and Thrace to the east. In 368 BC Philip of Macedonia (Alexander's Father) captured it from the Persians, renamed it after himself and developed it to guard the eastern frontier of Macedonia. He built a road from there to the Aegean Sea at Neapolis (Acts 16:11).

In 42 BC Octavian (Augustus) and Mark Anthony defeated Brutus and Cassius at Philippi, so uniting the Roman Empire. To commemorate the victory, the town became a Roman Colony. This meant that a body of discharged soldiers were granted citizenship of Rome, awarded land to settle with their families in the colony, exemption from poll-tax and tribute and granted important local government posts. These colonies were usually established at strategic points on trade routes throughout the Empire (Philippi was on the Egnatia Way, which crossed the Balkan Peninsula), so if there was unrest in a province there were experienced soldiers handy to deal with it.

### Letter to the Philippians

As we read it becomes apparent that Paul is writing from prison, but we don't know for sure when and from which city. There are arguments in favour of three possibilities:

- i) From Ephesus around 55 AD (1 Corinthians 15:30-32 and 2 Corinthians 1:8-10, both written between 55 and 57 AD)
- ii) From Caesarea between 57 and 59 AD (Acts 23:23-26:32)
- iii) From Rome between 60 and 62 AD (Acts 28:30-31)

Since reading Tom Wright's book 'Paul a Biography', I have been persuaded towards Ephesus. Although in Acts Luke does not mention imprisonment there, but he does write of riots for which Paul was blamed. He

would almost certainly have been arrested for disturbing the peace. There is reference in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10 of a truly grim episode in Ephesus, which Paul felt could have very likely ended in his execution. Consider also 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, much of which is omitted from Acts, which reminds us that the book is not a complete account of Paul's missionary work.

It is apparent from the contents of Philippians that this is one of perhaps four communications between his prison and Philippi. The journey from Ephesus to Philippi was 7-10 days, the journey from Caesarea or Rome was much longer, probably 2 months or more.

Two years imprisonment in Caesarea did give time for many journeys to and from Philippi, but Paul was never in fear of his life there, he was awaiting transfer to Rome to set his case before Caesar; his right as a Roman Citizen.

Imprisonment in Rome has been the most favoured possibility, but if Caesar did grant him freedom, wouldn't Paul have wanted to fulfil the mission he felt he had in Spain; to win new converts for Christ? Yet in the letter, he seems to be thinking of compelling work still to be done in Macedonia, 1:26-27.

Before reading Paul's letter to the Philippians it is helpful to read Acts 16:6-40, which describes Paul's initial visit to the city.

## ***Paul's Letter to the Philippians***

Instead of setting questions and sending suggested answers a week later, for this Advent course I plan to work through the book, verse by verse or passage by passage, in the form of a commentary and then posing a few questions at intervals for you to think about and or discuss with a study partner. I will not supply any suggested answers. It is not divided into sessions; you will have the complete course from the start so that you can work at your own pace, a little each day or perhaps a chapter a week. I will be working from the NIV, so the wording will be different in other translations, but hopefully that won't prove confusing.

Remember as you work to keep Rev. Stephen's three principles in mind:

1. What does this say about God?
2. How does this relate to the rest of the Bible, especially Jesus' teaching in the Gospels?
3. What does this text tell me I need to do?

You may want to start by reading the whole letter and then work through it again bit by bit.

### **Chapter One:**

1:1 In his greeting, Paul includes Timothy. The Philippians met him as a raw recruit (Acts 16) and Paul is planning to send him to work with them again in the near future. In 3:19-23 he tells them he is now an experienced member of Paul's team, implying that they may have every confidence in his teaching and council.

Notice that Paul does not refer to himself as, "an apostle of Christ Jesus" as he usually does. This is because he is writing a social letter, not one full of instruction, which would need the authority bestowed on the apostle by Christ.

Think about what Paul means by, "*saints in Christ Jesus.*" 'Saint' means set apart for God and "in Christ" was the essence of his theology; to die to the old life and be reborn in Christ.

'Overseers and deacons' (you may have '*bishops*', also called '*overseers*'), were the people in charge of the church. For a definition of who they were and what they did, read 1 Timothy 3:1-13. Although in that passage the recommendation seems to be that they all be men, this was, as we know, not Paul's practice, a lot of women named in his letters obviously held these posts. In Philippi that may well have include Euodia and Syntyche mentioned in 4:2 and we also think of Lydia (Acts 16:11-15).

1:2 Grace and peace combined the normal Greek and Hebrew greetings.

### **1:3-11 Thanksgiving and Prayer:**

Usually Paul used his opening prayer to introduce problems he would address in the letter, but not here, although there is a hint in his repetition of "all" in verse four of what he will say in 4:2. He's not taking sides in any disagreement, but prays for them all equally.

1:4 here we have the first use of 'joy' in the letter. He will use 'joy' or 'rejoice' sixteen times.

1:5 Partnership is an important concept between Paul and the Philippians and he wants them to be aware that this is how he views their relationship. Together they are involved in worship, prayer, mutual support, work, suffering, friendship, the grace of God, life in Christ and spreading the word.

1:6 Highlights 'confidence', a very important message to them from Paul is that he has confidence that God will continue his work in the Philippians. His thinking is that God does not start something and not finish it.

1:7 The idea of "*defending and confirming the gospel*" was similar to 1 Peter 3:15, "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.*" It's witnessing, even in times of difficulty, danger or persecution.

1:8 This gives us a sight of Paul's genuine affection: a gentle side that we often miss, as he seeks to correct mistakes, when writing to other churches.

1:9 When Paul speaks of increasing in knowledge and insight, this is the 'wisdom' James told us we should ask God for in his letter 1:5-6.

1:10 And this discernment that comes with wisdom is usually a moral discernment as we seek to choose the right path.

1:11 "Fruit of righteousness" reminds us, I think, of Galatians 5:22; Paul's listing of the fruits of the Spirit.

### **Ask yourself:**

Can we learn from the manner in which Paul prays for the Philippians and what he asks God to grant them?  
How do our prayers for fellow Christians compare?

### **1:12-18: Paul's imprisonment**

1:12 This verse sounds like reassurance. Had the Philippians expressed concern that Paul's imprisonment had hindered the spread of the gospel? In fact it has enabled him to meet a whole new group of people, the Palace or Imperial guards, and tell them about Christ. Every major centre in the Empire had an Imperial Guard, so this could have been in Ephesus, Caesarea or Rome. The new cult of worshipping Caesar would have needed a powerful military presence in Ephesus, where the worship of Artemis was all prevalent. We have only to read in Acts 19 of the riots Paul's mission caused, when the silver trade for her shrines was threatened. Any cult that opposed Artemis might have caused unrest. Wherever they were, Paul seems to have found his guards receptive listeners.

1:13 Many people had heard that he is in prison for serving Christ.

1:14 His friends had heard him talking to these guards and been emboldened themselves to spread the gospel even more themselves, reaching more people all the time.

1:15-18 Paul recognises that some people see themselves as his rivals, but he is not in competition. As he sees it so long as the word of God is being spread, that is good and he rejoices. In fact, in his absence, more people are finding that they too have a gift for teaching and preaching. His lack of concern reassures us that they were not preaching heresy or trying to impose Jewish law on the Gentiles. What seems most likely is that ordinary people were talking about the fact that he had been imprisoned for talking about a Jew who was crucified, but is alive again and is really the Lord of the world.

Again we have an insight into Paul's character. He could be tolerant when it was appropriate and humble; all too happy to share God's work with others.

### **1:19-26 - Paul contemplates execution**

It may be that these verses link to 1 Corinthians 1:8-11

1:19 His "*deliverance*" or "*salvation*" could be taken to mean either his release or his spiritual salvation after death.

1:20 Whichever happens he hopes to be a powerful witness for Christ in life or death.

1:21-23 He sees it as a win-win situation. If he lives he can go on doing God's work, if he dies he will be with Christ, which is better for him personally, but while he can still work for Christ on earth, then that is surely more important.

1:24-26 If he lives it would be good for the Philippians because it means he can visit them again and help them increase their joy in their lives in Christ. Convinced of the importance of this, he believes he will live.

### **Ask yourself:**

What are the positive aspects of Paul's attitude of mind and his actions, during his imprisonment? What can be learnt from his example?

Do we look out for the interests of the Church before those of ourselves?

### **1:27-30 – Advice for them whatever happens to him.**

1:27 "*Live in a manner worthy of the gospel*", sound advice for all Christians everywhere. It is very true that how members of a church behave affects how non-members view Christ. Dissentions, divisions, false claims of healing, abuse, all manner of arguments and petty disputes are pounced on to discredit Christ.

1:28 '*Don't be afraid*' is the constant message of reassurance given to God's people. Fearlessness shows others your confidence in God Paul tells them, it makes opponents stop and wonder who or what they are opposing, could it be God himself?

1:29 "To suffer for Christ" and rejoice about it, is Christ's own teaching in Matthew 5:11-12. It is reflected in Acts 5:41.

1:30 The Philippians had seen Paul flogged and thrown into prison Acts 16:22-23, and know of his current situation. It sounds as if some of them are suffering similar hardships, hence, in part, this letter and its encouragement.

### **Ask yourself:**

Where do we stand? Do we live according to Paul's advice here? Especially in relation to, "*Live in a manner worthy of the gospel*"? Do we need to improve and if so how can we go about it?

### **Chapter 2:1-5 – Unity**

2:1-2 Paul explains how to achieve and maintain this partnership he mentioned in 1:5. Everyone in a church must work together with one aim in mind and that is making Jesus their focus. Their motivation

should be wanting to be part of his family and the love within that family will promote and sustain happiness.

2:3-4 Assume the needs of others are more important than your own.

We might compare this with Luke 6:31 “Do to others as you would have them do unto you.” How?

2:5 Paul tells us here. Follow Jesus, with your eyes fixed on him.

### **2:6-11 – A poem of amazing theological insight.**

Some have suggested these verses were an early hymn, and yet who other than Paul was thinking with such insight and clarity at this time? It is a statement of the Christian faith.

2:6 By “*nature*” or “*form*” he means the very essence; something that cannot be changed; Christ is God. During the Incarnation he did not grasp or exploit his divine powers to make being human easier.

2:7-8 To make himself nothing or to be emptied is the sacrifice of the Incarnation. He gave up all his divine privileges. He took humility to the extreme humiliation of crucifixion for love. In 2 Corinthians 5:19 Paul writes, “*God was reconciling the world to himself.*”

2:9-11 To describe how we should honour Christ, Paul turns to Isaiah’s words found in 45:22-24, a strongly monotheistic passage, thereby making it clear he isn’t moving away from Jewish monotheism. Christ is the Lord.

Remember times were exceptionally difficult. Paul’s message was subversive, because the words he used were those used in the Imperial cult of worshiping the Emperor, who presented himself as lord of peace and son of god. This cult, whilst not compulsory, was endorsed and encouraged and gradually became embedded in life in the Provinces. There was a direct clash in the terminology.

### **Ask yourself:**

What was Paul’s view of Jesus? Make yourself a list like the one Rev. Stephen made of how Peter viewed God, according to what was written in his letter. It is perhaps a helpful way to address what Paul says in 2:5, that, “*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*”

### **2:12-18 – “shine like stars” is borrowed from Daniel 12:3**

The Philippians are to be a sign of light and beauty in a world of darkness; a sign of God’s new life.

2:12-13 Paul encourages people to take responsibility for their own spiritual lives. Salvation comes from God. God works in people and brings the desire for him into hearts, so that we seek him. It is only with his help that we receive the power to overcome evil and do the right thing. William Barclay in his Bible Notes on Philippians wrote: “There can be no salvation without God, but what God offers man must take. It is never God who withholds salvation; it is always man who robs himself of it.”

2:14-16 Paul sees the church as the new Exodus and here he recalls the “complaining and arguing” of the Israelites. They complained a lot to both God and Moses. He doesn’t want the people of the new exodus, or new covenant, to make that mistake again, but to stand out as beacons for God’s love. He wants to be proud of them all.

2:17-18 Paul is comparing a life spent in God’s service to being “poured out like a drink offering”. Even if he dies as a result, he is happy in the knowledge that they have their faith.

### **Ask yourself:**

Do we “shine like stars” or struggle by with a fair bit of whinging?

Write down what you feel you need to work on to make your life in Christ complete.

## **2:19-24 – Timothy**

From 2:23 it sounds as if Paul believes he will soon hear his fate: death, release or extended imprisonment.

2:19-20 Paul plans to dispatch Timothy back to Philippi with the news as soon as he knows. Also Paul is keen to hear Timothy's report of the Church there, especially as he knows many of the members.

Acts 19:22 tells us that Timothy was sent from Ephesus to Macedonia, which would fit in with these verses, if Paul was in Ephesus.

2:21-22 Here is Timothy's reference, he is now an experienced and much loved and valued member of Paul's team.

2:24 A note of optimism to encourage them.

## **2:25-30 – Epaphroditus**

We hear about this member of the Church at Philippi, who not only brought the gift of money, which would buy food for Paul during his imprisonment, but had also stayed to buy the food and other needs and take them in for him. He fell ill and nearly died. Although much better, we get the impression that he is a bit homesick and wants to reassure everyone back home that he really is all right. Paul probably worried that he might fall ill again. Besides, after the verdict he might not need his services. It would be wrong to keep him.

In these verses we get an indication of the communication between Paul and Philippi since he had been in prison.

1. Philippians heard of his plight
2. They sent Epaphroditus with the gift
3. They heard he was ill
4. He heard that they knew he was ill

2:27 *"to spare me sorrow upon sorrow"*, Paul is already at a low ebb, physically and mentally, and if Epaphroditus had died, he would have felt guilt as well as sorrow for letting him stay.

In these words about his friends we glimpse Paul's caring love for others as well as theirs for him.

### **Ask yourself:**

How would you define Paul's character?

Do you think we see a different side to him in this letter, when compared to his other letters?

## **Chapter 3:1-11 – Beware fake news!**

3:1 The first sentence might sit more naturally as a response to Epaphroditus' recovery, there is no sign that the letter is winding down; there is much still to say.

There was no synagogue in Philippi, when Paul first visited, that may have still been the case, but news of their thriving Christian community would be known about elsewhere and Christian Jews would have heard and sent itinerant preachers to tell them that Paul had got things wrong; Gentiles did need to follow the Jewish Law.

3:1b Paul has written and warned them about this before, but it is so important he eagerly repeats it.

3:2 "Those dogs" are the Jews who tell Gentile Christians that they must follow the Jewish law. Paul is being ironic rather than rude. The Jews called Gentiles "dogs", because dogs roamed wild, scavenging and eating whatever they could find. They were therefore unclean. Gentiles were unclean too because they ate food that was considered unclean by Jews. In Mark 7:27 Jesus alluded to Jews as 'children' and Gentiles as 'dogs'.

Mutilation of the flesh, of course, refers to circumcision. Paul can refer to it in this derogatory way, because he no longer sees it as a sign of God's covenant.

3:3 There is a new covenant, which is faith in Christ. With belief being an inward and spiritual truth there is no need for an outward and physical sign.

We mustn't think that Paul has become anti-Jewish. He just believes that God has acted in an unexpected way to fulfil his promises; it is all the same religion. What happened to him on the road to Damascus was not conversion from one religion to another, but enlightenment as to how God had acted. There was an ancient prophecy, which Paul would have known, but which perhaps he would only then have fully understood, it is Deuteronomy 30:6, "*The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.*"

3:4-5 Before finding Christ, Paul had been zealous for the Jewish faith; as Jewish as they come. So one would think he would be the one pushing for Gentiles to conform to the Jewish Law, but not a bit of it.

3:6 He freely confesses to his persecution of the early church and

3:7 shows how bitterly he regrets that persecution. He uses the words 'profit' and 'loss', because he had thought he was well in credit with God for all the reasons mentioned in verses 4-6.

3:8 Everything pales into insignificance, when compared to knowing Christ.

3:9 Being righteous in God's eyes is only possible through God's gift of faith in Christ.

3:10 Also he wants to be identified with Christ crucified and risen. By this he means knowing the power of resurrection in daily life and sharing Christ's suffering by dying to the self-centred life that is natural to us by being willing to face all manner of difficulty and hardship for Jesus' sake. Paul feels the power of the Resurrection living on. In other letters he expresses this idea, Romans 8:10-11, 2 Corinthians 4:10-11 and Ephesians 1:18-20.

3:11 The use of the word '*somehow*' sounds almost as if he had doubts, but rather I think it is a reflection of his humility. He feels unworthy, because of his persecution of the early Church and what he sees as other failings since.

### **3:12-4:1 Citizens of Heaven**

3:12-14 He goes on to confess that he is far from perfect, but every day he does his best to know Christ better and to be what Christ wants him to be. He goes on to say that we must put our mistakes behind us and keep striving to improve. Verse 14 is worded to appeal to the Greeks' love of athletic competitions.

3:15-16 This is advice for all Christians, not just the new converts, we are all still learning and growing in the faith. No-one should be complacent. The longer we follow Christ the more we understand the discipline and effort needed to face the difficulties of the Christian life and will know that it takes constant work to keep our standards as high as possible.

3:17 Paul begs the Philippians to remember and adhere to what he taught them.

3:18-19 It is with great sadness that he reminds them of those who are teaching other things, which are not true. He is thinking of the Christian Jews mentioned in 3:2, but also possibly the Gnostics, whose teaching so upset and worried John in his First Letter. We don't know how early the heresy began, but Paul would have been aware of alternative ideas, because people would have been all too ready to challenge his teaching with everything that differed. In verse 19, "*Their mind is on earthly things*", does seem to describe Gnostics rather well. A theologian, I sadly forget who, wrote, "Gnostics were the reproach and grief of Paul's ministry."

3:20 "*Citizenship*" was a word people from Roman Colonies understood. It gave them recognised privileges. The Christian on earth is a citizen of heaven, Ephesians 2:19 and perhaps John 14:2-3. Citizens of a city also had responsibilities, as does the Christian on earth.

3:21 If you want to know more about these “*splendid bodies*” read 1 Corinthians 15:35f and for a better idea 2 Corinthians 5:1-10.

4:1 We could hardly have a clearer picture of how Paul felt about the Church at Philippi. If this imprisonment was at Ephesus, the gift of a monetary collection may have been something quite new. It may even have been the inspiration for Paul’s collection from all the Gentile Christians to help the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. But that’s just me speculating.

**Ask yourself:**

There was and always has been false teaching. What do we need to be aware of and correct, when possible today?

Think about your own Christian life and see if you feel you can find encouragement from 3:12-17.

**Chapter 4:2-9 Exhortations**

This is a snag in reading other people’s post; we don’t always know the full story.

4:2-3 It is clear that Paul knows these two women. He might have heard of their disagreement from the last letter or messenger from Philippi. Whatever their differences, Paul urges their reconciliation. If they can’t sort things out themselves then others in the Church should help, especially “loyal yokefellow”, although we don’t know who that is, Paul believes he is gifted as a peacemaker. He goes on to praise everyone in the Philippian Church.

Compared with some of his advice to other Churches, this is gentle and gives a picture of unity and everyone usually working together. It is also sound advice to all Christians in all Churches.

4:4-7 These verses contain advice for Christian living. Paul can’t emphasise enough the need to rejoice in the Lord. He surely means to show joy by celebration. But be gentle about it, don’t offend others or present an unfavourable impression to non-Christians by exuberance that is too boisterous. Remember the Lord is rejoicing with you.

Prayer is the natural companion to celebrating God’s creation and goodness and prayer is a strong antidote to anxiety. Pray for peace of mind and the peace of God will undoubtedly prevail. What is the peace of God? That which “passes all understanding”, which is beyond our ability to obtain for ourselves. It is another of God’s gifts.

4:7 Paul’s benediction, in which he prays for God’s gift of peace for the Philippians.

4:8 This is advice on what to think about, then these thoughts might be reflected in actions. In other words, how to follow along Christ’s path. Think like this and it is easier to be joyful.

4:9 This is a bold command by a confident teacher. It’s not conceit; Paul felt Christ’s guidance in everything he taught.

**Ask yourself:**

In 4:1, Paul advises the Philippians to, “Stand firm in the Lord”. How does he advise them to do that? Disagreements and people falling out with each other happens with depressing regularity. Are we guilty ourselves and if so how do we deal with it?

Do we ever act as peacemakers? How can we do that successfully, without causing more upset?

**4:10-20 – Thanks for the gift**

4:10 I think here, “*I rejoice greatly in the Lord*”, might be code for “I nearly wept for joy when Epaphroditus suddenly appeared”. Much of Paul’s pleasure is in his knowing how pleased the Philippians were able to give him something. We know he refused payment as a teacher and this was very hard for Greeks to

understand, they had never before heard of a teacher who didn't automatically expect payment, let alone one who refused it.

4:11-13 This could sound a bit ungrateful, but I think what he means is that he would have scraped by with God's strength, but it was good to be spoilt and not have constantly to struggle against hunger. He takes a stoic rather than effusive approach, stoicism was very popular at the time and stoics believed in self-sufficiency and mind over matter. In Paul's case, God sufficient.

4:14-18 More gratitude for their kindness and we learn that this is not the first time that they have helped him financially, in 2 Corinthians 11:9 we read of more gifts from Macedonia. The "matter of giving and receiving" does appear to be something the Philippians spontaneously felt was as natural for members of God's family as it would be within one's natural family.

4:18 Here Paul sounds less the stoic, but suddenly very Jewish in the association with gifts to God. But what pleases God are less the fragrant aromas more the generous spirits behind the gift and this is what pleases Paul most about their gift to him.

4:19 Which leads him naturally into a prayer both for their needs

4:20 and that God's gifts to us and our gifts in his service all go to further his glory.

**Ask yourself:**

Do we give as generously as God would like us to, both in a financial way as well as in using the gifts he has given to us?

**4:21-23 Final Greetings**

There is the expected message of goodwill to all the Christians in Philippi from all those with whom Paul has contact. But who are, "*those who belong to Caesar's household*"? He doesn't mean members of Caesar's family, exciting though that thought may be. Household might refer to servants and slaves or to soldiers in the Imperial Guard. This sounds as if the imprisonment must have been in Rome, but look back at 1:13. The Imperial Guard were posted throughout the Empire, probably for a limited period of duty and then returned to Rome to guard Caesar. Paul seems to have made converts or at least stirred up interest among the guards and he may already be thinking of them returning to spread the word in the heart of government.

4:23 This blessing is the same as the one he uses in Philemon, Galatians and 2 Timothy.

As we read "*Amen*" we too can share in Paul's blessing as it rings strongly down through the centuries.

**Ask yourself:**

Is there a key verse that sums up the letter?

What are Paul's exhortations and imperatives to the Philippians in living their Christian lives?

Advent heralds the new Christian year. Do you have some new year resolutions?

Mary Thomas  
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