

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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This resource has been adapted into multiple languages, including English, Tok Pisin, Arabic (عربي), French (Français), Hindi (हिंदी), Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Portuguese (Português), Russian (Русский), Spanish (Español), Swahili (Kiswahili), and Simplified Chinese (简体中文).

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Philippians

How do you live as a Christian in a non-Christian world? How do you respond when those around you are hostile to your faith? Paul wrote this poignant letter to encourage the persecuted Christians of the church in Philippi and to strengthen them in the difficulties they faced. Paul wrote while in prison—he, too, was suffering for his faith—but he demonstrated that a Christian can have joy in Christ regardless of the circumstances.

Setting

Philippi was a small Roman colony in the province of Macedonia in northeastern Greece. Located about ten miles inland from the Aegean Sea, Philippi was important because of its strategic position on the Via Egnatia, the major east-west Roman route through Macedonia.

Philippi heard the Good News of Christ from Paul on his second missionary journey (about AD 50; see [Acts 16:11-40](#)). From the beginning, there was opposition to Paul's preaching. During his brief stay there, he was thrown into prison and then asked to leave town, but not before a group of new believers had been established ([Acts 16:35-40](#)).

Around six years later (AD 56~57), on his third missionary journey, Paul visited Philippi again (see [Acts 20:1-6](#)). It is possible that, after that visit, he never saw the Philippian Christians again (but see [1 Tim 1:3](#), written around AD 63).

Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians while in prison. Epaphroditus had brought a monetary gift to Paul from the Philippians and was returning to Philippi, and Paul sent along with him this warm letter of encouragement for the church. Aware that the Philippians were being persecuted, he wanted to support and strengthen them, in part by sharing with them his experience as a prisoner for Christ's sake.

Summary

After a brief introduction ([1:1-2](#)), Paul affirms his gratitude to God for the Philippians and prays for their spiritual growth ([1:3-11](#)). He then talks about his own experience of imprisonment and how it has resulted in the spread of the Good News ([1:12-19](#)). Paul's greatest desire is to live and die for Christ, whatever his situation ([1:20-26](#)). The Philippians, too, must be strong in their faith as they suffer for Christ ([1:27-30](#)). They should warmly support one another, remembering the example of Christ, who gave up everything in sacrificing his life for theirs ([2:1-18](#)).

Eager to know how the Philippians are doing and to tell them how he is, Paul will soon be sending Epaphroditus and Timothy to them, both of whom have proven their willingness to suffer for Christ ([2:19-30](#)).

Paul next warns the Philippians about Jewish-Christian propaganda requiring adherence to the law of Moses ([3:1-3](#)). He recounts his prior way of life, in which he was consumed with following the law. Now he has come to the realization that the only important thing is knowing Christ, sharing in his suffering and death, and experiencing his resurrection power both now and in the future ([3:4-11](#)). All believers are to be single-minded in pursuing full life in Christ ([3:12-4:1](#)).

In closing, Paul encourages the Philippians to fill their lives with joy, prayer, and thanksgiving, focusing their minds on God's good gifts, even in their persecution ([4:2-9](#)). He thanks them for the gift they have sent. He tells them that he has learned to be content regardless of his circumstances, and he implies that they, too, should learn to live this way ([4:1-20](#)). As usual, Paul ends his letter with praise to God, greetings to the believers, and an invocation of the Lord's grace ([4:21-23](#)).

Date and Place of Writing

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are often called the Prison Letters, as they each make reference to having been written from prison. There is no consensus on where or when the Prison Letters were written. They have traditionally been linked to Rome, where Paul was under house arrest in AD 60–62 and then later imprisoned around AD 64~65. More recently, scholars have made a case for Ephesus (AD 53~56). During Paul's two- to three-year stay in that city, he experienced much opposition and suffering (see [Acts 19:23–41](#); [2 Cor 11:23–28](#)).

Literary Unity

In order to account for sudden changes of content and tone in the writing (see especially [3:2–4:3](#) and [4:10–20](#)), some have suggested that Philippians is actually a combination of several different letters or fragments joined by an anonymous editor. An early Christian writer, Polycarp, spoke of “letters” of Paul to the Philippians. Many others, however, judge this to be a single coherent letter, written by Paul, who in his letters often changes the subject unexpectedly to address new issues.

Meaning and Message

Paul writes from prison to Christians who are experiencing opposition, encouraging them to imitate his life and attitudes. By speaking of his own courage, commitment, confidence, and contentment even in prison, Paul encourages the Philippians to respond similarly in their situation. In doing so, he shows us that a Christian life of joy, peace, contentment, prayer, thanksgiving, and devotion to Christ can transcend all circumstances.

Though Paul is in prison, he is not ashamed but rejoices that it has resulted in a greater spread of the Good News. He desires to be bold for Christ, whatever the consequences, for he knows he is called to live for Christ and he feels privileged to suffer for Christ (see [1:12-26](#)). Even in prison, Paul can say that his deepest desire is to be completely filled with Christ's life. Paul is ready to share in Christ's suffering and death, and he is eager to experience the full power of Christ's resurrection. Whatever happens, he will one day be raised from the dead like Christ ([3:7-14](#)). Meanwhile, Paul has learned to be content whatever his lot in life. He relies on Christ and has found Christ's strength sufficient in even the most trying situations ([4:11-13](#)).

Paul urges the Philippians to be full of joy in the Lord as they experience opposition. They are not to worry about anything, but to pray for all their needs with a heart full of gratitude to God. In this way, they will experience the deep peace of God (see [4:4-9](#)).