

# Philippians

– Paul's Ode to Joy in Christ –

**STUDY NOTES**



# Paul's letter to the Philippians

## Introduction

Paul, previously known as 'Saul', had a famous moment of revelation on the road to Damascus. Once a persecutor of the Christians, he became a travelling evangelist calling others to repentance and faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah.

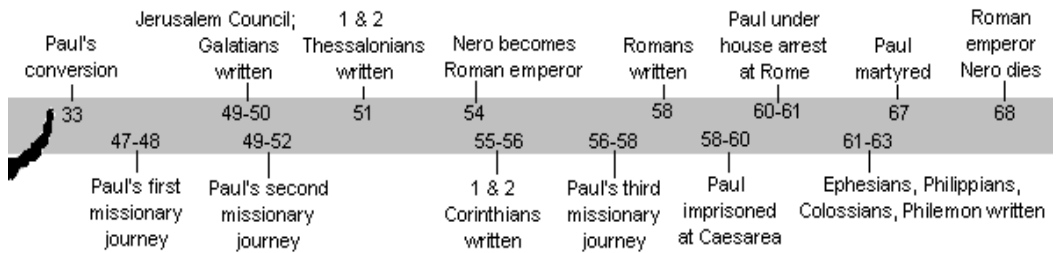
He visited Philippi on his 2nd missionary journey, and the events are recorded for us in Acts 16:11-40 (well worth reading as we begin this series!) Whilst there he had a dramatic prison-escape, but also founded a small church of believers in Jesus having met Lydia the cloth-merchant who came to faith. This church survived and grew in Paul's absence, and he felt a great deal of affection for them. This is his letter in response to their messenger, as they heard he was now stuck in a Roman prison and were concerned for him.

Philippi was a city in Macedonia (now part of Greece) and a Roman colony.

## Map



## Paul's Timeline



## Key Themes

One word that seems to come up over and over in this letter is 'joy' and other variations such as 'rejoice.' But, Paul is writing from prison in Rome. He's underground, cold, dark and damp yet he constantly refers to the joy he has, and that he desires for the Christians in Philippi.

How can we know joy in every situation, perhaps even in the hardest circumstance? When we are in Christ, knowing his love, mercy and grace. When we are aware of his Spirit forming us more and more into his likeness. When we are given that faith to see that whether in life or death, true joy is found in him.

## Philippians' Relevance for Today

This letter continues to speak powerfully into the lives of Christians around the world. The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write a letter with a timeless message of the true joy found in Jesus. It answers questions that we might still have in 21st century Sussex. Such as...

How can we know true joy throughout our lives?

What does it mean to live in a Christ-like way?

Does the Bible have suggestions for how to pray for others?

Are we sure that things will work out well for God's people in the end?

## Week 1—Rejoicing in Prayer

Paul's letter begins in the customary manner for their time and place with an introduction and greeting. Then Paul jumps straight into a warm thanksgiving for them. These Christians clearly meant a lot to him and he has great hopes for them because of all that God can do in and through them...

### Opening Discussion

Do you still write letters, if so why?

### Passage - Philippians 1:1-11

#### Discussion Questions

What does the title 'servants of Christ Jesus' mean for the way Paul and Timothy viewed their leadership?

How does Paul feel about these Christians he's writing to? (v3-5, 7-8)

Have you ever thought of yourself as a 'partner in the gospel'?

Do we pray like v9-11 for others, and if not, can we?

Why does Paul connect love with knowledge and insight in v9?

Put yourselves in their shoes, how would you feel as you begin to hear this?

(If you have time, you might like to compare this opening with Paul's other letters and notice the differences and similarities.)

### Prayer Suggestions

Paul looks back to give thanks, and looks forward in vv9-11. It would be great to pray for one another and the wider church in this way.

## Week 2—Rejoicing in Life and Death

Paul moves on to address his current situation. He seems worried that they will have been concerned for him as a result of his imprisonment. Yet Paul is keen to show them that not only has God used it for good, but that in Jesus he has no fear in life and death. Instead he can rejoice!

### Opening Discussion

Have you ever known good come out of difficult situations?

### Passage - Philippians 1:12-26

#### Discussion Questions

What good has Paul seen come out of his imprisonment? (v12-14)

Why might Paul's imprisonment inspire others to keep preaching Christ?

Those who preach from ambition, is the issue their message or motives?  
What might Paul say if it was the reverse – good motives but a false gospel?  
How can we explain Paul's rejoicing, considering his circumstances? (v18)  
How is it possible to see both life and death as good things? (v21-24)  
Does this passage help you to trust Jesus for life and death?  
How can we live in a way that reflects this hope we have in Jesus?

### Prayer Suggestions

Pray for those going through hard times in the group or known to you. Ask that our walk with the Lord would bring us joy in life, and even in death.

### Week 3—Rejoicing in Suffering?

At the end of chapter 1 Paul begins to urge the Christians in Philippi to live out the implications of the gospel, whatever situation they may face. Since this is hard, he reminds them that we do so together in the strength of God's Spirit. There is some deep teaching here on what it means to live out our faith and face up to suffering, but it is good to cover it, rather than pretend that the Christian life is always easy...

### Opening Discussion

When was the last time you had to co-operate on something, did it go well?

### Passage - Philippians 1:27-30

### Discussion Questions

How would you describe 'conduct worthy of the gospel?' (v27)  
How important is co-operation for living faithfully as Christians?  
V28 is stark. But might this 'sign' prove helpful to those who oppose them?  
How do you feel about Paul's suggestion that it can be 'granted' to suffer?  
Read Acts 5:40-42 & notice what it meant to the disciples to suffer like Christ.  
How can we as homegroups and as a church, 'strive together for the gospel'?  
Why do we often find it hard to ask for support when times are hard?  
Are there challenges you face, for which you need prayer and support?

### Prayer Suggestions

Prayers for unity and sharing burdens amongst Christians. God's grace for those Christians who suffer - locally and around the world.

## Week 4—Rejoicing in Love

These verses are often seen as an early hymn of praise to Jesus. Paul seems to use them to encourage Christians into a spirit of humility because Jesus showed such glorious humility in his earthly life, even to death on the cross. Since he has done that for us, we can now have that mind amongst us that seeks the good of others and the glory of God...

### Opening Discussion

Have you ever met someone very impressive, and yet extremely humble?

### Passage - Philippians 2:1-11

### Discussion Questions

In v1-2, what does Paul suggest we look for as encouragements?

How can selfish ambition and vain conceit manifest themselves in church life?

Do you think Paul would agree that humility is 'not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less?' (v4)

In v6-11, what do we learn about Jesus: divinity? humanity? humility? glory?

Why is it important to 'bow the knee' and 'confess' now, before Jesus returns?

### Prayer Suggestions

For humility, and an increasing Christ-like mind amongst us.

## Week 5—Rejoicing as Lights in the World

Paul continues to develop a picture of what it looks like to live as imitators of Christ. Perhaps there has been some division or grumbling, perhaps he is simply addressing the sorts of issues that often crop up. Either way, he takes the opportunity to discuss how we can live distinctively, continuing to grow as Christians as we 'work out our faith with fear and trembling.'

### Opening Discussion

Has someone said/done anything recently that you've found encouraging?

### Passage - Philippians 2:12-18

### Discussion Questions

What do you make of Paul's plea in v12 that they work out their salvation with fear and trembling?

Is this something we do for ourselves, or is it God's power? (see v13!)

What sorts of things sometimes lead people to grumble?

How does living without grumbling and arguing stand out in the world? (v15)  
What role does God's word play in this?

Why do you think their faith means so much to Paul? (v16-18)

How we can encourage one another along our journey through life?

### **Prayer Suggestions**

It would be good to pray for our witness to God's power at work in our lives, particularly with how we seek to avoid grumbling and live blameless and pure lives. You may also like to give thanks for those who've particularly encouraged you in your faith, and anyone feeling discouraged at the moment.

## **Week 6—Rejoicing in Gospel Partnership**

Paul breaks off from the bulk of his letter to mention two people, Timothy and Epaphroditus. Both seem to be examples of the character and faith Paul has been talking about. They each demonstrate how ordinary people can be transformed and used by God for amazing things.

### **Opening Discussion**

If you know each other well enough, you might like to go round the group and share an encouragement about the person next to you.

### **Passage - Philippians 2:19-30**

### **Discussion Questions**

What is it about Timothy that Paul appreciates? (v19-22)

How does Timothy's character exhibit the humility we discussed in week 4?

Do we take opportunities to commend one another as Paul does here?

What does it say about Epaphroditus that, when ill, his biggest concern is their distress? (v26)

v27 - does Paul believe that God can intervene to bring healing?

In what ways do some people still risk their lives for the Gospel?

How might we best honour them?

Do you find these two individuals encouraging for your own faith?

### **Prayer Suggestions**

It would be good to pray for missionaries and all those who travel and take risks for the sake of the gospel. It would also be good to pray for ourselves to continue growing as Christians.

## [Week 7 - Rejoicing in the Lord](#)

Paul returns to teaching and is particularly keen to refute those who claim that gentile Christians need to observe all the Jewish laws. What he now knows, is that through faith in Christ we are made right with God and can know him personally for ourselves - that is true for anyone and everyone. This reality is now so precious to Paul that everything else he once put his confidence in is comparatively worth nothing. He has come to realise that Jesus is everything...

### **Opening Discussion**

Are you able to share a short testimony of coming to know Jesus for yourself?

### **Passage - Philippians 3:1-16**

#### **Discussion Questions**

Why is Paul so upset by those who claim Christians must observe Jewish law?

How would things change if we were saved by our law-keeping rather than Christ's?

Why does Paul use himself as an example here?

How does Paul see life, now that he believes Jesus is the Messiah? (v7)

What does it mean to him to be 'found in Christ'? (v8-9)

What difference has he experienced through knowing Christ personally?

How does this inspire him to keep moving forward in his faith?

Are you able to describe the difference that knowing Christ has made to you?

Do you feel more secure in your walk with the Lord, knowing that righteousness comes as a gift from God through faith?

### **Prayer Suggestions**

It would be good to give thanks that we are saved by faith, without having to keep the law. Also, to ask for God to help us to press on for more as Paul describes here.

## [Week 8 - Rejoicing in a new citizenship](#)

For the 2nd time in this letter Paul seems to break off and mention an example of Christian faith to follow. This time he refers to himself and others who live in the same way. This is because there are other unhelpful examples of people living as enemies of Jesus, who seem set on earthly comforts, and not the joys of knowing the Lord. Paul reminds the Philippians that they have a new status, a new identity in Christ. They are now citizens of heaven and



empowered to live accordingly...

## Opening Discussion

Who has been the most influential in your Christian life?

## Passage - Philippians 3:17-4:3

### Discussion Questions

Is it arrogant of Paul to set himself up as a model for them to follow?

Do you find it helpful to hear about other peoples' faith?

Why do you think Paul talks about these 'enemies' with tears?

Do we live as if v20 is true?

Does the Bible give us any glimpses of what these glorious bodies are like?

What characteristics does Paul commend among the people in 4:2-3?

What difference does it make to your life to live as a citizen of heaven?

### Prayer Suggestions

Pray for those who've encouraged your faith, and that we might in turn be able to help others to know, love and follow Jesus.

## Week 9 - Rejoicing always

It seems that Paul feels he hasn't spent enough time talking about joy, as this passage opens with the famous encouragement to 'rejoice in the Lord always.' As he draws towards the end of his letter, he summarises many of the main themes that he's been writing to them about. Although he believes that he will see them again, perhaps we can detect him wanting to focus them on the life they can have in Christ through rejoicing, prayer and practice...

### Opening Discussion

We've heard Paul talk a lot about joy, how would you describe the difference between joy and happiness?

### Passage - Philippians 4:4-9

### Discussion Questions

Why does Paul keep encouraging them to rejoice – does it sound false?

What is the difference between general happiness and rejoicing 'in the Lord'?

Do you find it easy to show gentleness to 'all'?

What sorts of things tend to worry you?

Have you experienced the peace that guards your heart and mind?

How easy is it to have our minds filled with unhelpful things?

Do you have a good way of spending time thinking about 'good things'?

v6&7 is a great passage to learn – give it a go!

### **Prayer Suggestions**

Paul gives us a wonderful encouragement to prayer here, let's use it for ourselves and one another:

'in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.'

### **Week 10 – Rejoicing in every circumstance**

Paul brings his letter to a close with a final note of thanks and joy. He reminds them of the practical and spiritual ways that they have supported him. As is customary he passes on greetings, and finishes with a short prayer...

### **Opening Discussion**

As we finish, is there anything in particular that God has been saying to you?

### **Passage - Philippians 4:10-23**

### **Discussion Questions**

Paul rejoices in their concern for him, but for what reason is he glad? (v10-11)

What makes Paul able to be content, and even rejoice, in every circumstance?

v13 is widely-quoted, but what are the things Paul can do in God's strength?

How have the Philippians been a particular blessing to Paul and his ministry?

(v14-17)

Why do you think we're often reluctant to speak as openly about giving?

What is especially significant about greetings coming from God's people in

'Caesar's household'?

### **Prayer Suggestions**

Pray that God would continue to apply the great themes of this letter to our hearts, and help us to grow in faith like Paul. May we rejoice in the Lord because of the riches of his glory and grace.

## Further Reading

### Short Articles

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/why-study-the-book-of-philippians/>

This short article by Ryan Kelly is a really helpful introduction to spending some time in Philippians. He writes:

*‘Behind the text of Philippians stands a riveting story shared by Paul and the Philippian Christians—what we might call the “fellowship of the cross.” They shared deep love and affection, even tears. We read of imprisonment, the threat of death, great sacrifice, opposition, and boldness—all springing from the joyful reality of the gospel and toward the ultimate priority of the gospel’s spread throughout the world.’*

### Books

*Philippians for You* by Steven Lawson.

I find that the most helpful Bible commentaries aren’t necessarily the most in-depth or academic. Often, it’s when you can sense that God has spoken to the author that you in turn receive the most helpful insights from God’s word. This short book does just that for me.

*Rejoicing in Christ* by Michael Reeves

Whilst this book isn’t specifically on Philippians, it takes up one of the major themes—the joy that comes from a true union with Jesus. This is theology at its best —warm, accessible, heart-warming and inspiring.

[These and other books on Philippians can be ordered from our local Christian bookshop, *Living Word Books* in Bognor Regis or online from [10ofthose.com](http://10ofthose.com), [ICM Books](http://ICMBooks.com) and [Eden books.](http://EdenBooks.com)]

### Sermons

Talks from this series will go online shortly after the Sunday they’re preached. You can listen online or download at:

[www.allsaintswick.org.uk/36/Talks](http://www.allsaintswick.org.uk/36/Talks)

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*

*Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

*And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*