

## Philippians

Paul's relationship with the ecclesia at Philippi was a very special one. It had begun with joy – with hymns sung loud at midnight in the heart of the Philippian jail – and every time Paul thought of his beloved brothers and sisters in Philippi his heart would fill with joy again. They had understood the gospel message at a deeper level than had been the case at some of the other cities where Paul had preached; they were not racked with problems of false doctrine and un-Christlike practice that had become an issue elsewhere, for their faith was well-grounded. And this faith was a faith which was working and which was manifesting itself in practical outreach. They were the only church that had communicated with Paul and offered him financial assistance through his hardships (4:15); they had sent a gift to him by the hand of their brother Epaphroditus who had risked his life to come to Paul. They longed to contribute to his work, and were frustrated because their opportunities to do so were too limited! Small wonder that Paul says he 'has them in his heart' and that he 'yearns for them with the affection of Christ Jesus' (1:7,8, ESV). The closeness of fellowship and warmth that Paul felt with the Philippians was perhaps unparalleled with any other ecclesia amongst whom he ministered.

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All this is not to say that there were some warning clouds on the horizon. But whereas Paul has to take to task the Galatians and the Corinthians for their waywardness, in Philippians we are dealing much more with the averting of potential hazards down the line rather than the existence of fully-fledged problems. Paul

tells them to ‘beware of dogs ... beware of the concision’ (3:2; the concision is a reference to the famed ‘circumcision party’ – ESV renders Paul’s ironic term as ‘those who mutilate the flesh’). The threat was there, but the ecclesia had certainly not been led astray so far, and Paul has confidence that a few direct remarks of this sort could ward off the danger without the need for an extensive, reasoned presentation of the foolishness of a return to the Law.

Similarly he ‘boasts’ of his Jewish credentials and achievements (3:3-9), evaluating them as ‘dung’ in comparison to Christ, in order to stave off any claims to superiority that might be made by Judaizing Christians. He speaks of those who preach the

### The Theme of Unity

One of the ways Paul emphasis unity is by using inclusive language (he includes all of them in his words; he is siding with no one!):

- To all the saints in Christ Jesus (1:1)
- In every prayer of mine for you all (1:4)
- It is meat for me to think this of you all ... ye all are partakers of my grace (1:7)
- How greatly I long after you all! (1:8)
- I know that I shall abide and continue with you all (1:25)
- I joy and rejoice with you all (2:17)
- For (Epaphroditus) longed after you all (2:26)
- Salute every saint in Christ Jesus (4:21)
- The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all (4:23)

[Interestingly, there seem to be a lot of other occurrences of the terms ‘all, every’ – although these are not in the context of unity. 1:3,4,9,13(x2),18,20; 2:9,10,11,14,21,29; 3:8 (x2),21; 4:5,6,7,12,13,18,19,22]

Paul’s insistence on a united outlook and a spirit of togetherness comes out more explicitly in the following passages:

- Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel (1:27)
- Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind (2:2)
- Let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing (3:16)
- I beseech Euodias and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord (4:2)

In addition to this, Paul’s threefold reference to ‘fellowship’ (1:5; 2:1; 3:10) also emphasizes the mutual need and partaking in what God has done through Christ. An appreciation of these tends to banish the temptation of division and disunity in which pride often plays a big negative role. There are also a number of references to do with partaking, working together, being concerned for others, etc which are relevant to the theme of unity: 1:7; 2:3,4,14,25.

gospel for rivalry rather than in truth (1:15), and of the Philippians’ ‘opponents’ against whom they must struggle (1:28,30). He re-iterates his warning against those who are live only to serve their own appetites, and urges them the hold fast to the faith and follow his example (3:15-19). But in all these warnings and exhortations, he is only strengthening their resolve in a position they already share. There is no imminent danger that they will be led astray, for their footsteps are set in the right path.

There is only really one ‘negative’ issue to which Paul keeps returning and which can consequently be judged a more developed threat. It is the issue of ecclesial unity. The way Paul deals with it is very clever. It is not until chapter 4 that he addresses a specific manifestation of the problem (the disagreement between two sisters, Euodias and Syntyche who had once worked ‘side-by-side’ with

Paul: 4:1-3). But before he does address it directly, he prepares the ground by his repeated use of inclusive language like ‘all (of you)’ and ‘every’, by references to the importance of fellowship and sharing, and by stressing the need to be of one mind (see the PANEL). The combined force of these references carries considerable motivational and spiritual power – for anyone who loves the Truth and finds themselves locked in some ultimately petty disagreement in the ecclesia knows that Paul is right. By the time he raises the specific issue of 4:1-3 his point is already largely made; all he needs to do is simply to ensure they don’t miss it, even if the cost is a little personal embarrassment for them as the letter is read in the ecclesia!

## Joy / rejoice

Given the absence of major doctrinal challenges to address, with what will Paul concern himself in this letter? One of first things that comes to mind is celebration. We have already seen Paul’s joy at the spiritual caliber of his Philippian brethren, and his rejoicing in the fellowship they share. There is a wonderful sense of togetherness and intimacy as they strive towards the same spiritual goals.

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### A Call to Joy

Here are the occurrences of the key related terms ‘joy’ and ‘rejoice’ in Philip-  
pians:

- In every prayer of mine making request with joy (1:4)
- Whether in pretence or in truth Christ is preached; and I therefore do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice (1:18)
- I will abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith (1:25)
- That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me (1:26)
- Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be like-minded (2:2)
- I (hold forth) the Word of Life that I may rejoice in the day of Christ

(2:16)

- If I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all (2:17)
- For the same cause also do ye joy and rejoice with me (2:18)
- That when ye see (Epaphroditus) again ye may rejoice, and that I may be the less sorrowful (2:28)
- Receive (Epaphroditus) in the Lord with all gladness (2:29)
- Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord (3:1)
- We worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh (3:3)
- My brethren ... my joy and crown (4:1)
- Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, rejoice (4:4)

- But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care of me hath flourished again (4:10)

The words translated ‘joy’ and ‘rejoice’ in these passages are pretty closely related in Greek (as of course they are in English also). Paul also uses a couple of other terms, which, while not as closely related, are distant cousins, so to speak. These references would not be significant enough in their frequency to draw attention to in their own right, but as part of an overall picture in which Paul keeps repeating related terms, they are perhaps worth referencing. One is ‘thanks’ in 1:3; 4:6. The other is grace / gracious in 1:2,7 and 4:23.

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But Paul widens out this theme of joy and rejoicing by moving beyond what he feels for them to exhort them to experience for themselves more of this spiritual jubilation. If all the things of the Faith are true – the liberating redemption Christ has wrought, the wonderful prospects of God’s plan for the world – then what sort of attitude ought we to have as we live out our lives of discipleship? Joy must surely be towards the top of that list! And since the Philippians have mastered so well the foundational aspects of discipleship and faith in Christ, then they can be free to concentrate on the proper outworking of this in one’s demeanour and approach to everything in life. If we of all people do not know how to be joyful there is something sadly wrong. Christ’s redeeming work has not been allowed to have its full impact upon our hearts.

The language of rejoicing, then, is central to Philippians – and uniquely so amongst the New Testament writings (see the PANEL). “Rejoice in the Lord always,” says Paul, “and again I say, rejoice!” (4:4; also cf 3:1). The double occurrence of the word ‘rejoice’ here really drives the point home, as does the use of ‘always’. In good times and bad, then, in persecution or triumph (as Paul has illustrated by his own example, and by passages like 1:18 and 2:17), our discipleship may be characterized by joy. As the panel illustrates, there are several verses in the letter where Paul similarly doubles the key terms ‘joy’ and ‘rejoice’ by using them twice in the same verse for particular emphasis.

The exhortation is a very powerful one. It is about appreciating the value of what we have in Christ – and showing that we mean our words of thanks. It is about understanding that even painful circumstances in life are under the governance of God and our furthering His purpose, which in turn leads to a joyful trust and assurance. Even persecution and ultimately death bring us closer to Christ, and in that sense can be a source of rejoicing too. The phrase ‘it’s all in the mind’ is often bandied about, but if the spiritual foundations are right, then in this respect it is absolutely true. Our attitude of mind is absolutely critical, and we have every reason to be glad for our place in God’s purpose, by His grace.

## Controlling the Mind

This talk of attitudes of mind leads naturally to a second dominant theme in Philippians. A spirit of joy and rejoicing are indeed an attitude of mind which is to be cultivated in Christ, but Paul's focus on the mind and its activities in his letter to Philippi is wider than simply this.

### Mental Activity

It is meat for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart (1:7)  
 Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel (1:27)  
 Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind (2:2)  
 In lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves (2:3)  
 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus (2:5)  
 For I have no man likeminded (like Timothy), who will naturally care for your state (2:20)  
 If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more (3:4)  
 Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you (3:15)  
 Let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing (3:16)  
 Whose god is their belly ... who mind earthly things (3:19)  
 I beseech Euodias and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord (4:2)  
 The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (4:7)  
 Whatsoever things are true ... honest ... just ... pure ... lovely ... of good report ... if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things (4:8)

One of the most famous passages in the entire epistle is the one which begins 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus' (2:5) and proceeds into a beautiful description of the submission and humiliation of the Lord, followed by his glorious exaltation. The passage is justly famed (and unjustly misused by Trinitarians!) and is thought by many scholars to be a quotation of an early Christian hymn, which may or may not be the case. But the thought which triggers it – and this is the key point – is the concept of Christ's mind or attitude, and the possibility that disciples

may also share that same mind. This is at once a staggeringly uplifting thought, and an enormous challenge. Denying oneself by refusing all pride and grasping-for-self while relying instead on the grace of God is the very essence of what God requires. First the cross, and then the crown.

Once again, the panel walks through the references for further study, but a couple of points can be pulled out here. In the presence of so much earthly thinking (3:19), Paul recognized that a humble mind which is truly focused on serving others (2:3) is a rare and precious thing – that was why Paul appreciated Timothy so much (2:20). Many of the other references to the mind are to do with likemindedness – the fact that we are all

striving to inculcate the mind of Christ ought to have greater binding power upon us than some of the differences in outlook that can seem to loom so large. In these references Paul takes the Philippians back to the theme of unity we considered earlier. In another passage, he advises them to give their minds to the right type of content – ‘whatsoever things are lovely ... think on these things’ (4:8). There are many, many things with which human beings can choose to fill their minds. But they will be held accountable for the choices they make.

In a way, the letter to the Philippians is a course in intermediate or even advanced discipleship. The foundations have been laid in other letters, but now Paul can give himself to the weighty matters of the believer’s mental and spiritual life. We may have learned to bring our bodies into subjection in a measure, but to control the mind is a life’s work! Yet there is a reward – the reward of the peace of God which transcends the mastery of man’s intellect and passes understanding.

## **Autobiography**

While the ecclesia at Philippi was founded during the course of Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 16), it is generally thought that the epistle was written during his first imprisonment in Rome after the third missionary journey and his appeal to Caesar, along with Colossians and Ephesians. Certainly Paul was a prisoner when he wrote, and he speaks of converts in the praetorian guard, and of brethren amongst ‘Caesar’s household’. There are alternative views that the letter was written during an earlier Ephesian (or perhaps Caesarian) captivity, but it seems that this issue makes little effect on the meaning, purpose or upbuilding power of the letter, whichever position is taken.<sup>1</sup>

Paul writes because he has important things to say about unity, about rejoicing and about the mind, but also because Epaphroditus has brought a gift from the ecclesia to help Paul. He wants to thank them, and now he sends Epaphroditus (who has

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<sup>1</sup> The case for Ephesus is quite interesting and is presented, for instance, in Ralph Martin’s commentary in the Tyndale commenary series (IVP). Again though, it seems to be a matter of more academic than practical interest.

been almost fatally sick in the meantime) back to them again (2:25-30). He plans to send Timothy to them shortly (2:20-25), as soon as he gets a sense on the likely outcome of his own trial (2:23), and hopes that he may even be able to visit them himself shortly (2:24).

But aside from these practical arrangements, Philippians is also helpful in giving a sense of Paul's outlook upon life and upon how he felt and viewed the world as an apostle and servant of Christ. Here are a couple of the points which emerge:

Though he is naturally distressed by the work of opponents and false brethren (3:18), he is immensely pleased that the work of the gospel is going ahead whatever the opposition – even if Christ is being preached under false pretences (1:15-19)!

Even one with so great an understanding as Paul still has to learn. He learns by suffering and hardship, and by triumph and success. He has learned to be content in whatever state he finds himself (4:11-13).

Though he has a man of such attainment and prowess, when this is set alongside the gospel he realizes it is nothing. He is prepared to lose it all – as indeed he really has – so that he might gain Christ (3:3-8).

He is a man with a mission – an enormous sense of purpose, not only to preach, but also to press towards the mark of his high calling in Christ (3:14), so that he might glorify God, whether by death or life.

What he really wants is to participate more in the sufferings of Christ. He wants to know more about what Christ underwent, and how, and why. He strives to be a partaker in those sufferings so that he may know his Lord the more (3:10-14). What is more, he wants his readers to develop the same attitude (see 3:15 as the conclusion to 3:12-15 in a modern version)!

He is prepared to face even his own death with joy so that he will be with his Lord the sooner and so that he may glorify God with his body. Yet, because he knows he can help his brothers and sisters further by remaining alive, he is content with that

outcome also. Again, this shows an incredible level of spiritual maturity and perception (1:19-25; 2:17).

In these respects, then, as doubtless in others also, Paul is a great example of faith to believers in every age. And so he may justifiably write:

*“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” (3:17 ESV)*

*“What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – do, and the God of peace shall be with you.” (4:15)*