

Lesson 1
Introduction to Philippians
Acts 16:6-34

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. We are beginning a series of messages on the Book of Philippians. This is probably the most tender and delightful letter that the Apostle Paul ever wrote. It is filled with expressions of praise, confidence and rejoicing. This book warms the heart of the inner man like few books of the Bible.
- B. Philippians unveils to us the real heart of the Apostle Paul—his heart for Christ, for Christians and for the ministry. For many people, Paul came across as a dominant, aggressive and arrogant personality but this letter reveals his true heart. For those who knew Paul, they dearly loved him. It is no wonder Philippians is the favorite book of many Christians.

II. BACKGROUND

- A. The City of Philippi. Philippi had a very interesting history. In its early beginnings, it was a gold mining town. Philip of Macedon, seeing the importance of this spot militarily, named the city Philippi. When Rome conquered Greece, Philippi became a Roman colony. It was the chief city of Macedonia and was known as “little Rome.” All the inhabitants of the city, not counting the slaves, were Roman citizens with many special privileges such as they did not have to pay taxes to Rome. So much like Rome was Philippi that many Roman soldiers made this place their home, never returning to Italy. Philippi was a military center, a political center and an education center. Before the gospel came, it was a place loaded with religious paganism, like every other Roman city.
- B. The Church at Philippi. The Background to the Book of Philippians is found in Acts 16, which tells of Paul’s visit to Philippi on his second missionary journey and the founding of the church there. The beginning of Christianity in Philippi had a most exciting and dangerous beginning. Paul like Timothy and Silas tried to go into Asia Minor to preach the gospel, but the Holy Spirit sovereignly stopped them. Then they tried to go into Bithynia which is modern day Turkey, but again the Holy Spirit would not sovereignly allow them to do so. So they went to Troas and there God gave Paul and his companions a vision. They were to go west into Greece which was the door opening to Europe.
NOTE: These verses tell us God has a master plan of evangelism for this world. It was God’s sovereign will that the gospel would go to Europe and not Asia Minor or Turkey at that time. Asians needed the gospel; many would die without Christ and perish. Why God sovereignly sent the gospel to Europe and not Asia we will never know, but we know it was right. God would later send the gospel into Asia Minor and Turkey. Everything falls within the timing of a Sovereign God. It was Paul, Timothy, Silas and Luke who came to this city proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. At first, they probably had very little response to the gospel (Acts 16:12) for this was the first attempt of evangelizing the western world.
 - 1. The first Christian convert in Europe was Lydia, a seller of purple goods (one who dyed garments for royalty and the wealthy). Lydia was a prosperous business woman. Lydia is a prototype of the modern woman; she was probably a first century

feminist who wanted to be liberated from first century male dominance. She was a wealthy, influential career woman and a leader of people. She was also a Jewish proselyte and met on the Sabbath with others along the river. Philippi was a Gentile city with few Jews, for there was no synagogue; the rule was that there had to be 10 Jewish men before a synagogue could be instituted. When Paul proclaimed the gospel, God sovereignly opened Lydia's heart and she believed in Christ as her personal Savior (*Acts 16:14: One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message*). As a Christian she truly became the liberated lady of Philippi. Lydia later invited the Apostle Paul and others to her home. The church at Philippi had its beginnings in a home. NOTE: We need to keep this in mind, for so often our worship services in our monstrosity church buildings become so stayed, formal and dry that they lose that spontaneity and dynamic of early church worship. There is a dynamic to small group worship that one cannot get in a large group, but the reverse is true also. The church needs both.

2. Paul and Silas also won a fortune teller to the Lord. The Apostle Paul had to first cast out a demon from her. The conversion of this young girl shook the city and they dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates of the city. They were then thrown into prison; maximum security with the tough criminals. In prison, they were rejoicing and singing songs.
3. Paul and Silas were locked in stocks down in the inner prison with their arms and heads held immobile, when an earthquake shook the prison, toppled the walls and released the prisoners, setting them free. The prison keeper gave serious thought to suicide to protect his reputation but Paul assured him that none of the Christians had escaped. This caused the jailor to realize there was something different about Christians and he began to tremble and cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" And they said to him, "Believe on (in) the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved. He must have known about salvation because Paul witnessed to him. NOTE: Salvation is not by works but the faith in Christ. Christ alone is the way – not church membership, baptism, good works or whatever. Many people who have been in church all their lives never realize that salvation is by a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, not being a good, respectable church member.
4. The church at Philippi was made up of converted feminists, demon possessed people, leading citizens like the jailor, and apparently hardened criminals. They were these things but they came to Christ; they were converted by God. They were new creatures.

If we are doing the work of leading people to Christ, the church will be made up of all kinds of people who have been converted to Christ and changed by the grace of God. Feminists, drug addicts, abortionists, alcoholics, crooks, sex perverts, homosexuals, Satanists, demon possessed, outstanding citizens, they all have Christ in common (*1 Cor. 6:9-11: Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*)

III. OCCASION FOR WRITING

- B. Philippian Gift. The Philippians had helped Paul several times by giving him financial assistance and had sent a gift to him at Rome through Epaphroditus (***Phil. 4:15-16, 18: Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Phil. 4:18: I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent.***). NOTE: The giving of the Philippians was amazing, for the Christians in Philippi suffered social persecution (Phil. 1:29). They probably could not get good jobs. They were generally poor but they gave sacrificially of what they did have (***2 Cor. 8:1-4: And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.***). NOTE: God's work is carried out by sacrificial givers, not necessarily by the rich. Often the poor are more willing to sacrifice than the rich.
- C. Return of Epaphroditus. The Philippians had sent Epaphroditus to Rome to care for Paul. While in Rome, Epaphroditus had become quite ill, almost to the point of death. Now he was returning to Philippi and this gave Paul an occasion to send a letter by him (***Phil. 2:25: But I think it is necessary to send back to you, Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs.***).
- D. Correct Disunity in the Church. As far as we know, the Philippian church had no major doctrinal problems, but there was a spirit of division among some of the members, especially among two women who had a personality conflict (***Phil. 4:2: I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.***). Paul exhorts to unity throughout the whole epistle. (***Phil. 2:14: Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life...***). NOTE: Division and strife can ruin the testimony of a local church. This is one area in which the Devil has a "hey-day."
- E. There was the possibility that heresy might creep into the church so Paul writes to warn them (***Phil. 3:2: Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.***)

IV. THEME

- A. Specific Theme. The specific theme of the book is "a joyous Christian experience." Constant references, some sixteen times, to rejoicing in Christ are made. NOTE: This is particularly important, for Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter but he could rejoice in his circumstances. He did not let circumstances master him but he allowed Christ to rule the circumstances for him. He rejoiced in the gospel (***Phil. 1:18: But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.***) He rejoiced in poverty (***Phil. 4:10, 12: I rejoice greatly in the Lord.... I know what it is to be in need,***

and I know what it is to have plenty.) He rejoiced in all things (*Phil. 4:4: Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*). NOTE: In the midst of great adversity, he writes this letter which glows with radiance, joy, confidence and strength. It is a great encouragement to any downcast or discouraged heart to read this letter to the Philippians. If you are going through times of pressure and trial, I urgently propose you read this little letter. It will encourage you greatly, especially if you remember the circumstances out of which it comes. Paul rose above his negative circumstances and was able to experience joy.

Do we respond to trials this way? Do we let negative circumstances get the best of us? When your teenager calls up and says, “Dad, I just wrecked the family car”, does your whole world fall apart for a few hours, a day or a week? Do you have kids yelling, screaming and messing up the house all day rather than just after school? Do these circumstances defeat you? Are you facing these circumstances with joy, optimism and confidence? Perhaps you work in an office – the boss is on your back, your secretary is irritable and uncooperative. Do you live above these circumstances and face them with confidence? Perhaps you find out that you have a serious illness. How well can you face this news? A little over nine years ago, I was told I might have cancer, and I admit it was tough to face that situation with joy. It took me twelve hours before I could come to grips with this issue. Then I found out after two days that I did not have cancer. How we face problems is the answer. Attitude will affect our actions. Whether we get under the circumstances or above them depends on how we relate to Christ by faith. NOTE: The Book of Philippians instructs us on how to live victoriously and joyously in the midst of the normal difficulties of life.

B. General Theme. The general theme of the letter is Christ. He is mentioned as Lord or Jesus Christ over fifty times in this little book. The name “Christ” or “Jesus Christ” occurs seventeen times in the first chapter alone. The message for Christians is that Jesus Christ is available for helping Christians cope with the problems of life. Christ can solve the normal, usual, commonplace problems of life for the Christian. The key to the general theme is given to us in four verses:

1. Christ our Life (*Phil. 1:21: For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.*). This is not the cry of a man fed up with life and longing for heaven. It is the rejoicing of a man who has learned to live life with its continual adventure and excitement, for Christ is living the life with him. For Paul, death is just the crowning of the fullness of life in Christ.
2. Christ our Example (*Phil. 2:5: Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*). In context, this is about learning the humility of Christ in our daily lives. Christ sacrificed himself for others. He came to serve others (*Mark 10:45: For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*). We Christians are to pattern our lives after the perfect example Jesus Christ.
3. Christ our Confidence (*Phil. 3:10: I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*) Christ is our confidence or motivating force. He is the one who moves us to want earnestly what we ought to want and who makes us confident that it can be achieved. NOTE: People today need confidence about life. All the man-made courses on personality

build-up or improving the self-image are designed to try to give us the spark that energizes, that motivates us, that makes us want to do what we ought to do and would like to do. All this can be ours when we seek to know Christ and the power of His resurrection.

4. Christ our Strength (*Phil. 4:13 I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*). Christ is our strength or energizer. Not only does He move us to want the right things, but He makes it possible for us to do them. He provides the dynamic that fulfills the desire. Christ motivates and gives us the power to accomplish. NOTE: Frustration is the result of having motivations but not having the power to carry these motivations to their fulfillment. Frustration is mental torture because we know to do right but can't fulfill our desire. Yet Christ can put one's feet on the ground, motivate and empower for a specific task.

V. CONCLUSION

- A. What the Apostle Paul is trying to tell all men in the Book of Philippians is that Christ is the answer to life. He can actually enter into a person's life and change it for the good. Christ can become a reality and one can be conscious of His presence at all times. Christ can give meaning, purpose and stability to life. Christ can actually take the strain off living and give one a steady foundation when external circumstances seem impossible.
- B. You without Christ, are you really happy? Do you want something better for your life? You can find the answer to life only in Christ, for Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)