

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

Session 1: Introduction to Philippians

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This is Matthew S. Harmon in his teaching on Philippians, Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is session 1, Introduction to Philippians.

Welcome to this course on Philippians.

I'm Dr. Matt Harmon. I'm a professor of New Testament Studies at Grace College and Grace Theological Seminary. And I'm excited to work through this great letter that Paul wrote to the Philippians.

And I will mention that a lot of what I talk about in this course comes from this commentary I wrote in the Mentor Commentary Series. And you'll find a lot more about Philippians in this commentary. So I invite you to check that out if you want to go even deeper than we're able to go in this particular course.

So when it comes to starting a course like this, I always like to give us a sense of what we are trying to accomplish here. What is our goal? And I would say we have two goals for this particular course on Philippians. The first is to simply grow in our love for and devotion to Jesus Christ. God gave us Scripture in order to reveal himself to us, in order to foster our love for God and our love for others.

That was really the point that Jesus made when he was asked, what is the greatest commandment? And he said, love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength. And the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself. And then he said, on these two commandments hang the law and the prophets, that all of Scripture is given to us to help us love God and love our neighbor.

And so the clearest revelation of who God is is found in Jesus Christ. And so that's our goal, even as we look at this particular letter that Paul wrote. The second goal is to grow in our understanding of and application of the gospel, in our ability to understand the depths of the gospel of what God has done for us, as well as how we put that into action in our everyday lives.

And so those are the two goals that we've got for ourselves here in this course on Philippians. And how are we going to accomplish this? Well, we're going to start by acknowledging our need for God and asking for his blessing and giving us wisdom by the spirit. Scripture is something that needs to be studied in depth and has many riches for us, but we need God's help to understand it rightly.

Another aspect is asking good questions. And although this is not an interactive kind of course, it still is a good habit for you to get into, to ask questions of the text. As you're

reading along, as you're digging into it, as you're studying it, think about good questions to ask of the text.

And then lastly, learning together. And again, this is not an interactive course in that sense, but I really want to encourage you that as you have opportunity to interact with others, to share what the Lord is teaching you in your study of Philippians. So those are big picture things.

Those are an element of every class that I want to teach. So that's setting the groundwork for us. Now let's dive into orienting ourselves to the letter that Paul wrote to the Philippians.

Anytime you approach a passage of Scripture, you want to make sure you're understanding it in the proper context. And so we want to think about three different types of context. The first type of context is what we'll call redemptive context.

In other words, where do we stand in the biblical story? What is going on as we find this letter? Because Scripture is a grand metanarrative from Genesis to Revelation, we want to make sure we have a good grasp of where we are in that story with this particular letter. And so some of this might seem almost straightforward, but it's important to remind ourselves of it. The first thing is that this letter is written after the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

That the promised Messiah has come, he has accomplished the salvation of his people, and now he is ascended to the right hand of the throne of the Father where he rules over creation. Second, the Spirit has been poured out on God's people to dwell inside of us. So we live in a period of time that is similar to when the Philippians were receiving this letter, in that the Spirit has been poured out to dwell inside of God's people.

Third, the church is expanding all throughout the world as the Spirit empowers the proclamation of the gospel. That was happening in the Philippians' day, and that's happening even in our day as we speak. Now there are a couple things though that are a little bit different from where we stand than where the Philippians were at in that redemptive story.

And probably the biggest difference is that at the point when Paul writes to the Philippians, the biblical canon is not yet complete. So we sit at a point in redemptive history now where we have the totality of God's revelation. And so we can compare what Paul wrote with what John wrote, with what Matthew and Luke wrote, and when the Philippians received this letter, they did not have that benefit.

They had probably access maybe to some other letters that Paul had written, but did not have access to the completed canon of Scripture. And one last similarity is that Christ has not yet returned. And so we, like the Philippians, find ourselves in this position of awaiting the return of Christ.

So that's where we find ourselves in the story of Scripture when the letter to the Philippians was written. So now let's talk a little bit about the historical and cultural context. How did the church in Philippi begin? And we won't take the time to read the entirety of the passage, but the key passage is Acts 16, verses 6 through 40.

It's a very lengthy passage, and it gives the backstory, the origins story, of how the church in Philippi came into existence. And so Paul and Timothy are part of a missionary team, and they receive this divine summons, so to speak, to come and proclaim the gospel in Macedonia. And this is taking place sometime around the year 49 or 50 AD.

So still somewhat soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the church is beginning to expand. And when you read Acts 16, one of the things that you notice is that God, up to that point in Acts 16, is preventing Paul from preaching the gospel in different cities. So he'd go to these different cities, and the text would say things like, but the Spirit of Jesus prevented us from preaching the gospel.

And you have to imagine how frustrating and even confusing that must have been for Paul as someone called to take the gospel to the nations, to the Gentiles, and yet the Spirit is saying, not here, not now, because he had the Philippians in mind and was waiting to get Paul to that point. So as you read through Acts 16, we'll actually take a look at this. In Acts 16, if you follow along, there's the story of the conversion of a woman named Lydia.

And so this is Acts 16, starting in verse 11. So setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days, and on the Sabbath day, we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we suppose there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.

And she prevailed upon us. And so the first known convert here in Philippi is this woman named Lydia. And as a result of her conversion, it seems that Paul and his team were housed by Lydia, again indicating that she was probably a woman with some significant means to be able to house Paul and his entire team.

Now, when you continue on in that account, there's an additional story that Luke tells us about an event that takes place. So as Paul is preaching the gospel in the city of Philippi, it stirs up a good bit of controversy. And the breaking point is when Paul casts out a demon from this slave girl, and that causes great issues for the slave girl's owner, because they were profiting off of what this slave girl was saying.

She had a demon that was enabling her to say things and gain benefit for her slave owners. And of course, once that's gone, as a result, these influential slave owners bring Paul and Silas to the authorities. And as a result, Paul and Silas are thrown into prison for the night.

And you think, oh, well, this is a disaster for the spread of the gospel in Philippi. And in fact, it was just the opposite, because the Lord had a plan to proclaim the gospel in a powerful way. So as Paul and Silas are in the prison, they are singing hymns and a giant earthquake takes place.

And all of a sudden, the chains are broken, and they are free to escape. And when the jailer discovers this, he thinks, oh no, they're going to escape, and I'm responsible for it. And he's about to harm himself when Paul says, wait, we're all in here.

And then you have this beautiful passage here in Acts chapter 16, where the jailer calls for lights- this is verse 29- rushed in, and trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And Paul responds in verse 31, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household." And so they proclaim the gospel to him; they explain it. The jailer takes Paul and Silas into their home and cares for them.

And then the next morning, when the city authorities come to actually release Paul and Silas, Paul and Silas refuse to go willingly at first because they demand an apology. And they reveal, we are Roman citizens, and what you did to us is actually illegal according to Roman law. So of course, when the Roman authorities hear that, they are terrified of what Paul and Silas might do.

And so they approach them, apologize, and then allow them to go on their way. So that's the basic kind of narrative of what happens with the founding of the church in Philippi. So there's the miraculous release from jail and the conversion of the jailer and his household.

And Paul and Silas asked to leave. Now here's an interesting little tidbit that if you read the book of Acts carefully, you'll notice. One of the features of the book of Acts is what's called the we passages, meaning that the author of Acts describes things in the third person, they and him.

And then you get these passages like in Acts 16, where suddenly he starts using pronouns like "we" and "us" and "our." And the conclusion to draw from that is that Luke is indicating I was part of those events. I was with Paul.

And what's fascinating is that one of those "we sections" begins here at the story of Paul being summoned to Philippi. And then it stops at the end of Paul's time in Philippi. Paul goes on, and suddenly again, it's back to the "they" and "them" and "he" and "him."

Third person pronouns rather than first person pronouns. And what that seems to suggest is that when Paul and Silas moved on, Luke probably stayed behind for some period of time and was actively serving in the church at Philippi. So that's just an interesting tidbit that comes about as a result of what we see there in the book of Acts.

So that's the origin story of when the church in Philippi began. Now, we need to talk a little bit more about what this ancient city of Philippi was like. And again, we have to be careful and at least acknowledge these are estimates. These are best guesses based on historical information that we have.

And we need to be careful about being too dogmatic about some of these conclusions. But from the best estimates that I'm familiar with, it seems like the population was probably about 10 to 15,000 people in Philippi. And although it was a village, a city that had a

population of military veterans and it was a Roman colony, still less than 5% of the population were, in fact, Roman citizens.

Sorry, less than 40% were Roman citizens. And that comes into play later in the book, in chapter 1. So Acts itself tells us that Philippi was a leading city of the district of Macedonia. And it was on a major trade route in the ancient world.

And so lots of goods and commerce passed through there. And so it was very cosmopolitan in that sense. Lots of people coming in and coming out.

And as a Roman colony, the idea of this city, Philippi, was that it was supposed to be a miniature version of Rome. Latin was the official language, but realistically Greek was also spoken very widely as well. There was a population of military veterans and also farmers in the sort of surrounding fields area, which made for an interesting combination of individuals there in Philippi.

Now one thing that's true, and this is true of every major Greek and Roman city in Paul's day, very pluralistic. Very pluralistic. Some of the more popular deities that were worshipped there were Silvanus, Dionysius, and Aulinides.

And there's evidence as well that the imperial cult was present as well. And this is a somewhat debated topic in scholarship as to the extent to which the imperial cult was there, meaning the worship or the adoration of the Roman emperor. And it makes sense that if Philippi was a Roman colony, that this would be something that would feature very strongly in the sort of civic life of the city of Philippi.

Now one of the striking features that you may not have noticed as significant is that when Paul arrives in Philippi, there's a little bit of a departure from his standard practice. Meaning, when Paul would arrive in these cities in the ancient world, the first place he would go in most cases would be the synagogue. He would look for a Jewish synagogue and look for an opportunity to preach the gospel there.

But in Philippi, there was no synagogue. In fact, all that's mentioned is this place of prayer, which was likely near a river outside of the city of Philippi. And although you have to be careful about drawing too much of a conclusion from this, it seems reasonable to conclude that there weren't enough Jewish men to form a synagogue in Philippi.

And if that's the case, what that tells us, according to Jewish traditions, is that you needed ten men, ten Jewish men, to form a synagogue. And if you didn't have that, then the custom would be to meet for prayer, often near a body of water, on the Sabbath for prayer and worship. And so the fact that that's what happens here in Acts suggests that there was almost zero or very minimal Jewish population in Philippi.

And if you remember the story, one of the charges that is brought against Paul, so when the slave owners bring Paul before the authorities, this is Acts chapter 16, they say in verse 20, these men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice. And so even in the way that they accuse Paul and Silas, Acts tells you that they are, in one sense, playing on the fact that, oh, these are

Jews and there really aren't Jews here in Philippi, and they're bringing in these foreign customs that are contrary to the way that we think and believe as Romans.

And then lastly, this location here in Philippi is the first expansion of the gospel that we're aware of into modern-day Europe. So up to this point, the gospel's been spreading in and around the Middle East, and now as Paul enters into Philippi, this is the first known expansion of the gospel into modern-day Europe. So that's a little bit about the city of Philippi.

Now let's talk about the church in Philippi. And again, we're gleaned this both from what we find in the book of Acts, as well as what we find in the letter to the Philippians. The first thing we've already kind of talked about, predominantly Gentile.

So the congregation was made up mostly of Gentile believers. When Paul establishes this church around 49 or 50 AD, by the time he writes this letter, it's about a decade later. And so by the time that we see the letter to the Philippians, we are encountering what I would refer to as a stabilized church.

The period of initial sort of turmoil and chaos has passed, and now the church is stabilized to the point where they even have overseers and deacons. So there's structure, there's authority in place, which indicates that the church has taken on a sort of stabilized phase. One of the things that stands out when you read Philippians, and we'll come across this multiple times, is that the church at Philippi was an incredibly generous church.

They, as Paul will point out, gave more than once to Paul's needs to help expand the reach of the gospel. And this really seems to set the church at Philippi apart, even from other churches that Paul planted. That there was from the beginning an overflowing generosity, where they wanted to be a blessing to Paul and to others.

And then lastly, although the general tone of the letter is one of joy and one of gratitude, there are some indications that there are some challenges within the church at Philippi. One of the most striking features in this letter is the fact that Paul calls out two particular people by name and tells them to get along, figure it out, stop your arguing with each other, and agree in the Lord. That's not an especially common feature in Paul's letters, typically.

He will talk about factions and divisions and that sort of thing, but it's not especially common for him to call out by name those individuals. And so that tells you that this was more than just some sort of personal conflict, that it was starting to have ripple effects within the body there at Philippi. And Paul is saying, you've got to fix that.

You've got to figure out a way to reconcile with each other. Another challenge that seems to be present is some measure of persecution. And Paul doesn't detail what kind of persecution that is.

But as we'll see when we get to that passage in Chapter 1, I think it's probably more likely to be on the economic end of things. And so Paul has to warn them about the need to stand firm in the face of persecution. And then he also mentions the potential danger of false teachers.

By this point in Paul's life, he is familiar with false teaching cropping up that he has to kind of inoculate his churches against. And then lastly, he refers to this group of people that he refers to as enemies of the cross. And we really don't know a lot about who he has in mind specifically in that chapter.

But when we get there, we'll talk about kind of what they were interested in and what they were probably promoting. Now, despite that, I would suggest that those are still pretty muted elements of the letter. The overall tone and theme is definitely one of joy and of gratitude.

And just to see the difference, if you read Philippians right next to, say, Galatians, there's a very different tone, a very different feel. Or read it next to 1 Corinthians. Very different tone and feel.

And so Paul is addressing some of these concerns, but the overall picture that emerges of the church at Philippi is of a stable, healthy, generous church that Paul is deeply grateful for. So now we need to talk about what the circumstances were when Paul actually wrote this letter. And we can break this down into a series of things that we can be confident about, and then we'll have to kind of fill in some gaps along the way.

So let's start with the first. Paul is imprisoned in Rome. And I should stop there and just note there is some scholarly discussion and debate that suggests that maybe Paul wasn't imprisoned in Rome, but instead others have suggested Ephesus or Corinth or Caesarea.

And all of those are possible, but in my estimation, not the most likely scenario. So we will move forward on the assumption that Paul is in prison in Rome. So somehow the Philippians find this out.

They find out that Paul is in prison in Rome. And then they send Epaphroditus, a member within the church there at Philippi, with a gift for Paul. So they send him off from Philippi to Rome to give him this gift.

And this is one of the reasons why some scholars question whether this is during Paul's Roman imprisonment, because it would have been a long journey. But nonetheless, I think it's feasible that Paul is in Rome. The Philippians send Epaphroditus with this gift.

And somewhere along the way, Epaphroditus becomes sick, and the Philippians hear about this. Now eventually, Epaphroditus does make it to Rome, and yet Paul tells us that Epaphroditus was distressed. He was concerned that he was causing grief and discouragement to the Philippian church, and they would be concerned.

Well, is Epaphroditus going to be able to deliver the gift that we sent? We too often take for granted in our contemporary world how easy and potentially safe and secure it is to send money to people in need or something like that. In the ancient world, Epaphroditus would have been carrying that money himself and risking being attacked, having it stolen from him. And so you can understand how the Philippian church would be concerned about the possibility that the money that they had gathered to be a blessing to Paul had been stolen and not reached its destination.

But Epaphroditus reaches Rome, and Paul is sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi with this particular letter. And that's the sequence of events that leads up to the Philippians receiving this particular letter that Paul wrote. So when it comes to a date, assuming a Roman imprisonment when Paul writes this, somewhere between the years 60 and 62 AD is when this would have been written.

And so that sets the stage for the historical context. We've looked at the redemptive context, and now we're just going to take a brief look at the literary context. It's always good to have a sense of the general scope and movement of the entire letter.

So what's the structure of Philippians? We can break it down into three broad sections. We've got an introduction essentially, and then a main letter body, and then the conclusion. And so in the introduction, Paul focuses on the progress of the gospel.

As we'll see, he's going to talk about how the gospel is still moving forward. It's advancing, even though he is confined in Rome. And then as we get to the main letter body, he's going to talk about the necessity of living as kingdom citizens in a manner worthy of the gospel.

And we'll see how Paul develops that argument. And as we get to that section, we'll also spend a good bit of time on the so-called Christ hymn. That's kind of the center point, the focal point there in Philippians 2. This glorious picture of who Christ is and what he's done for us and how God has exalted him.

And that is really the focal point of that main letter body section. And then as we come to the end, I've labeled this growth and gratitude in the gospel. So Paul will give his final encouragements and admonitions, as well as express his gratitude for the gift that the Philippians sent him.

So that gives you the big picture, kind of a 50,000-foot overview. And we'll dive much more deeply into each of those as we go in this course. To help set the stage for what we're doing, I want to give us just a glance at several key themes that come out over the course of this particular letter.

And one of the themes that strikes people immediately when they read through Philippians is this characteristic note of joy and rejoicing. And part of what makes that so striking is the fact that Paul is writing while under house arrest in Rome. So it's not as if everything in his life is going smoothly. And he's writing from this position of all the circumstances of my life are exactly how I'd want them. And so it's easy to say rejoice. No, in fact, Paul is writing from a situation that could end up in his death. And yet he's calling for the Philippians to rejoice.

A second theme is more broadly the gospel. In other words, the centrality of who Jesus is, what he's done for us, and how it applies to our everyday lives.

And then, of course, the gospel itself is about Jesus Christ. And we will see that in Philippians 2, we get one of the most breathtaking descriptions of Christ. Of his life, of obedience, of even the fact that he existed before his incarnation. And we'll just dive into that and really feast on that.

Fourth one is the day of Christ. And this pops up at several points along the way, this day of Christ. This idea that at the end of human history, Christ will be the one who executes God's judgment. Which is striking because in the Old Testament, the phrase is regularly the day of the Lord. And Paul adapts that and says it's actually also the day of Christ. And the need for us to be ready for the day of Christ, to live in light of that last day, is an emphasis that pops up at several points in Philippians as well.

Fifthly, fellowship, partnership. English translations render this group of words in different ways, but it's this idea of shared participation in the benefits of the gospel and shared participation in all that God has done for us.

And then one last key theme - there are more, but one last key theme is what we'll refer to as the proper mindset that we are supposed to have. And this is more than an intellectual outlook. So it does include what we tend to think of with the term worldview, but it's broader than that.

It includes our shared values, shared priorities, and a way of life. And so it's not just having the right set of intellectual beliefs; it's a whole approach to one's life that we are to adopt as believers. And what Philippians will tell us is that it's actually the mindset of Christ that we are to adopt into our lives.

So one last thing before we wrap up our introduction to Philippians here, and that's the use of the Old Testament. And although Philippians doesn't have nearly as many Old Testament quotations as, say, Galatians or Romans, the Old Testament is alluded to and drawn upon to talk about three broad categories. The first is the person and work of Christ.

And we'll see that when we get to the Christ hymn in chapter 2, verses 5 through 11. The second is the identity of God's people. So that Paul draws upon the Old Testament to help us as Christians understand who we are and how we are to live.

And then lastly, we'll see him draw upon the Old Testament when it comes to understanding his apostolic ministry. And if you'd like more on that, I've got a short article that you can track down in the Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament that walks through several areas of the way that Paul uses the Old Testament here in Philippians. So that gives us a good orientation to get us started.

And I'm looking forward to diving into the text itself in our next session.

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