

Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Introduction to Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ

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Abstract

This introductory session establishes the redemptive, historical-cultural, and literary contexts of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. Dr. Matthew S. Harmon explains how the church was founded in Philippi around 49-50 AD, as recorded in Acts 16, starting with the conversions of Lydia and the Roman jailer. The session details the stable and generous nature of this predominantly Gentile community despite facing external opposition and internal conflicts. It concludes with an overview of the letter's structure and core themes, including enduring joy, the mindset of Christ, and the advancement of the gospel.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Course and Goals

- A. Growing in love and devotion to Jesus Christ
- B. Growing in understanding and applying the gospel
- C. Learning methods: prayer, asking good questions, and community interaction

II. Three Essential Contexts for Understanding the Letter

- A. Redemptive Context (Where we stand in the biblical story)
 - 1. Post-ascension of Christ, who rules at the right hand of the Father
 - 2. Holy Spirit poured out to dwell within God's people
 - 3. Active global expansion of the church through the gospel
 - 4. Differences/similarities: incomplete canon in Paul's day vs. shared wait for Christ's return
- B. Historical and Cultural Context (Backstory and the ancient city)
 - 1. Origin Story of the Philippian Church (Acts 16:6-40)
 - a. Divine guidance preventing and directing Paul's missionary team to Macedonia (c. 49-50 AD)
 - b. Conversion of Lydia, a wealthy seller of purple goods and the first known European convert
 - c. Imprisonment of Paul and Silas after casting out a demon from a slave girl
 - d. Miraculous jailbreak via earthquake, leading to the conversion of the jailer and his household

- e. Luke's eyewitness presence indicated by the 'we' passages in Acts

2. Profile of the Ancient City of Philippi

- a. Estimated population of 10,000 to 15,000 people
- b. Pluralistic Roman colony and military outpost serving as a 'miniature Rome'
- c. Civic religious climate dominated by pagan deities and the imperial cult
- d. Minimal Jewish presence evidenced by the lack of a formal synagogue (requiring meeting at a riverside)
- e. Strategic first expansion of the gospel into modern-day Europe

C. Context of the Philippian Church

1. Composed of a predominantly Gentile congregation
2. Stabilized structure with overseers and deacons established over a decade of growth
3. Renowned for outstanding generosity in supporting Paul's missionary endeavors
4. Specific trials and pressures:
 - a. Interpersonal friction (e.g., individual arguments addressed directly by name)
 - b. Social and economic persecution requiring steadfastness
 - c. Threat of false teaching and 'enemies of the cross'

III. Circumstances of Paul's Writing

- A. Written during house arrest in Rome (c. 60-62 AD)
- B. Gift sent from the Philippians via Epaphroditus
- C. Epaphroditus's near-fatal illness, recovery, and anxiety over the church's concern
- D. Paul sending Epaphroditus back with this letter of gratitude and guidance

IV. Literary Context and Structural Overview

A. Three-Part Structure

1. Introduction: Explores the progress and advancement of the gospel
2. Letter Body: Highlights the necessity of living as kingdom citizens (anchored by the Philippians 2 'Christ Hymn')
3. Conclusion: Emphasizes growth and expressions of gratitude for the gospel

B. Six Core Themes

1. Radical Joy: Enduring rejoicing in the face of suffering and imprisonment
2. The Gospel: Centrality of Christ's work and its practical application to daily life
3. Christology: The pre-existence, humiliation, and exaltation of Jesus Christ
4. The Day of Christ: Living in readiness for Christ's return and final judgment
5. Fellowship (Partnership): Mutual participation in the grace and work of the gospel
6. The Mindset of Christ: Adopting the values, priorities, and shared worldview of Jesus

C. Integration of the Old Testament

1. Illumination of the person and work of Christ

2. Clarification of the true identity of God's people
3. Explanation of Paul's apostolic ministry