

PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE PHILIPPIANS

1:1–2. Paul's Salutation to the Saints in Philippi

Paul's letter to the Saints living in Philippi, a province of Macedonia, begins with a standard opening in letters from the Hellenistic period: the name of the sender, the identity of the recipients, and some sort of greeting—usually the word *chairein* (“greeting”). In this instance Paul's greeting uses the related word *charis*, often translated “grace.” Contrary to previous understandings of the word, a recent study has shown *charis* not to be just a one-sided gift from God but to include notions of covenantal relationship and obligation between two parties.¹

The letter to the Philippians is generally regarded as the warmest of all Paul's letters. While the Saints in that community had their share of fears, troubles, and even crises, they do not appear to have challenged Paul's authority nor strayed from doctrinal foundations as had some of the other communities that he writes to. A strong sense of mutual friendship and love is evident (see, for example, Philippians 1:3–5, 8; 4:1). The Philippians' loyalty, love, and support for the Apostles is an example for Church members of any era to follow.

Paul, his companions Silas and Timothy, and likely Luke (who inserts himself into this moment by using the first-person plural *we* when he writes of the Philippian ministry in Acts 16) established this community of Saints around AD 51 during Paul's second missionary journey. After receiving a vision to continue west and preach to the Macedonians, Paul and the others travel from Troas to Philippi and have initial success after speaking with a group of Jewish women who gathered there (Acts 16:9–15). Paul and Silas are jailed while in Philippi but convert their jailer and eventually depart the city, likely leaving Luke behind to care for the fledging congregation (Acts 16:16–40). As Paul continued his missionary efforts, the Philippian Saints often sent material and other assistance to aid him, even when they themselves had very little (see, for example, 2 Corinthians 8:1–5; Philippians 4:15–16). There is scholarly debate, but it is believed that Paul (with Timothy, who was visiting at the time) wrote this letter during a possible

imprisonment in Ephesus during his third missionary journey or shortly after his third mission while imprisoned in Rome awaiting his appeal to Caesar.

1:3–11. That Love May Abound

Paul clearly has tender feelings for the members of the Church in Philippi due, in part, to their steady fellowship and shared participation in the gospel from the “first day until now” (Philippians 1:5). Specifically, Paul declares them as sharing in both his prison bonds (an allusion not only to the material support they sent while he is in prison but also to their oneness—when Paul suffers, they suffer, and vice versa) and in the “defense [Greek *apologia*] and confirmation [Greek *bebaiōsei*, ‘establishment’] of the gospel” (verse 7). Perhaps due to this consistent faithfulness, Paul declares his confidence that God, who began this good work in them (or through them), will bring it to completion at “the day of Jesus Christ” (verse 6). This can be read to mean either that the works of the gospel that God has wrought through the Philippians will come to full fruition in the millennial day of Christ (or in the eschatological judgment that such a day represents) or, more likely, that the work that God has begun in the lives of the Philippians themselves will come to full fruition in that future day. It is made clearer that Paul is referring to the Philippians when he tells them he prays that their “love may abound [Greek *perisseuē*, ‘overflow, go beyond the expected measure’] yet more and more” in connection with knowledge, understanding, and truth so that through this balance of both love and truth they can better determine excellent things, remain pure, and continue to bring forth righteous works until the day of Christ (verses 9–11).

1:12–18. Both Good and Bad Work Together for the Glory of God

Paul admonishes the Saints in Philippi not to worry that the seemingly bad things that have happened are hindering the work in any way—quite the contrary. All those in the palace (Greek *praitōriō*, “palace guard”) and others understand now that Paul’s bonds are “in Christ,” or for being a Christian, presumably because Paul has had the opportunity to teach them even if only while defending himself (hence the use of the legal term *apologia*, “defense,” in verse 7). Further, his bonds have given courage to many Church members to be bolder in their declarations of the gospel. While some of these preachers of Christ are bolder for selfish ambition (now that Paul is out of the way) and are stirring up trouble, even this has had a net positive in helping the word of God become better known.

1:19–26. Whether to Live or Die for Christ

Paul expects that his imprisonment will come to an end because of the Spirit’s aid and because of the prayers of the Philippian Saints. But he also knows that whether through his life or his death (presumably

as a martyr), Christ will end up being praised. Further, for Paul both life and death are blessed states since living is the very embodiment of Christ, the God of life, and death allows him to be with Christ (Philippians 1:21; compare verse 23). Upon this thought, Paul muses on which would be better: dying and being with Christ or living and bringing forth fruit (or good works) that would help the Saints (verses 23–24). Convinced that there is still a need to help the Saints, Paul knows he will go on living and thus be released from imprisonment.

Paul’s musings over the benefits of both life and death echo the desires of the Apostles John and Peter as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 7. When Jesus asked John what he desired, he said he wanted power over death so that he could live and bring more souls to Christ. Peter’s answer to such a question, on the other hand, was to speedily come to Christ in His kingdom (as one would expect at death). Christ granted them both their desires, “for ye both joy in that which ye have desired” (Doctrine and Covenants 7:8).

1:27–30. Struggle Together with One Mind to Keep the Faith

Paul encourages the Philippian Saints to be always true to the gospel so that no matter how near or far Paul is, he will hear of their steadfastness and common struggle in behalf of the faith. He also hopes that they will never be frightened by others who say that their loyalty to the faith will cause them destruction since it will instead bring them salvation. Indeed, not only believing in Christ but also suffering *hyper Christou*, “in Christ’s stead,” just as Paul has, is a gift precisely because such can lead to salvation. To suffer in Christ’s stead appears to be a literary device Paul uses to suggest their oneness with the Savior—that just as He suffered for them, they can suffer for Him.

2:1–4. Full Joy Comes through Selfless Unity

Unity comes to the foreground (introduced in Philippians 1:27) as Paul makes an appeal that if any consolation in Christ, comfort in love, or fellowship in the Spirit, affection, or compassion exist in their lives, then let these experiences and virtues compel them further to truly become one in heart and mind. For Paul, a fullness of joy comes from true unity, and true unity comes when disciples care for others and their things as deeply, if not more, than they care for themselves and their own possessions.

2:5–11. As Jesus Showed, Equality with God Comes through Full Humility

Continuing his theme of selflessness from Philippians 2:4, Paul tells the Philippian Saints to think the same way as Jesus, who being in the form of God did not view His equality to God as robbery (Greek *harpagmon*, “something to be grasped”). In other words, Jesus was not grasping at things that made Him equal with God but rather “made himself of no reputation” (Greek *heauton ekenōsen*, “emptied himself”;

verse 7). He made Himself like a servant and even submitted to death by crucifixion (verses 7–8). In consequence of these acts of humility, God exalted Jesus so that every knee shall bow to Him in heaven, on earth, and in the world of the dead and that every tongue shall confess that He is Lord. In other words, the true equality with God is to not labor for one’s own benefit but to serve others as God does.

2:12–18. Obedience Leads to Salvation and Joy

Paul urges the Philippian Saints to continue in the obedience they have consistently manifested and thereby bring about their own salvation, recognizing that God gives them the desire and the ability to do His work. They should also do everything without murmuring or disputing so that they may be considered blameless and pure and even be a light in the world. If they hold on to the word of God and obey His word, Paul will have reason to rejoice in the day of Christ, or the Millennium, knowing his labor was not in vain (Philippians 2:16). Paul then likens his life and labor to a drink offering that accompanies the temple altar sacrifices (see Numbers 15:5, 7; 2 Chronicles 29:35), which he likens to the faithful struggles of the Philippians, noting that their complementary offerings will bring them joy and will help them rejoice in each other.

2:19–30. Sending Epaphroditus Back to the Philippian Saints

Timothy was a companion to Paul when he first established the Church in Philippi (see commentary for Philippians 1:1–2), and as Paul notes here, Timothy has equal feelings and genuine care for the Philippian Saints (2:20). Paul hopes to send Timothy to them very soon and looks forward to the comfort Timothy’s report of the Saints will bring him (verse 19). However, Timothy will need to wait until Paul has a better understanding of his own situation (verse 23). Paul even expresses confidence that he himself will be released soon and will be able to come to them (verse 24). But for now, Paul needs Timothy, as Timothy is very close to him and has faithfully demonstrated the values Paul outlined earlier about truly being willing to put the Lord and others first as Jesus did (verses 20–22).

Paul’s initial statement that he hopes “under the lordship of Jesus Christ” to send Timothy is “not a stock phrase such as ‘the Lord willing,’ tacked on unthinkingly. . . . Rather its presence here was to remind the Philippians of what Paul believed and practiced in good times and bad, that all his hopes and aspirations, his plans and expectations were subject to the Lordship of Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 14:14; 1 Cor 7:39; 1 Cor 16:7; Philem 22).”²

Until Timothy and Paul can make their way again to Philippi, Paul indicates that he is sending Epaphroditus. It appears that Epaphroditus was initially sent by the Philippian Saints to bring aid and minister to Paul in his need (Philippians 2:25). Paul confirms that Epaphroditus had indeed become indeed very ill, nigh unto death even, during his visit (verse 27). This must have caused the Philippian Saints great concern when they originally heard about this because Paul mentions that Epaphroditus was distressed

even more for causing his friends in Philippi to worry and longed to ease their concern (verse 26). The verb for “distress” here is *adēmoneō*, which occurs elsewhere only in relation to Jesus’s suffering in Gethsemane.³ The implication is that such distress is related to empathy, or feeling deep sorrow because of the pain others are experiencing. Paul is happy to be able to send Epaphroditus back in the meantime, presumably with Paul’s letter to them, so they can rejoice and thank God for his recovery (verse 28).

3:1. Rejoice in the Lord

Paul indicates that it is not grievous to “write the same things” to the Philippians, for it is safety to them. It is not clear whether he is referring to some previous letter with similar warnings to those he is about to give concerning Judaizers or to the words he just wrote (“Rejoice in the Lord”). Joy and rejoicing are things that Paul has already emphasized in this letter,⁴ but mentioning it again, given as an imperative in this moment, is no burden to Paul. Further, the true joy and hope one feels due to a proper understanding and application of the gospel of Jesus Christ is indeed a safety to the Saints, for it allows them to endure any trial or affliction they may pass through.

3:2–3. Beware of the Judaizers

Warning the Philippian Saints about Judaizing tendencies creeping throughout the Church seems to be a concern of Paul. The Judaizers were Jewish converts to the Christian faith who felt that Gentiles who joined the faith needed to submit themselves to Jewish practices such as circumcision and dietary restrictions associated with the law of Moses to qualify for salvation. Church leaders had already met and issued a policy on this matter during the Jerusalem Council outlined in Acts 15, yet some persisted to teach that such was required of gentile converts. Paul speaks out strongly against those who advocate for it, presumably in opposition to Church leaders, and warns the Saints to beware of “dogs,” “evil doers,” or “the concision” (in other words, “the mutilation,” referring to the Judaizers’ requirement for circumcision; Philippians 3:2). Paul exclaims, “We are the circumcision!” In other words, those who worship God in spirit and glory in Christ have circumcised their hearts, not placing confidence in the flesh or outward things (verse 3). No matter what outward rites a Christian may engage, such should not supersede in importance what they are meant to foster within the heart of the worshipper.

3:4–11. Paul’s Treatise on the Importance of Christ, Not Just Outward Forms

To illustrate his point from Philippians 3:3, Paul outlines all the outward justifications he could make for obtaining heaven: he was circumcised as a baby, and he is a Benjamite Israelite, born of Hebrew parentage, making him a descendant of Abraham and thus heir to the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant (verse 5).

As a Pharisee, he was a keeper of the law, even to great zealotry, and based on the outward requirements of the law, he was blameless (verses 5–6). But now, Paul understands, it is not these outward things that ultimately will save him; rather, it is Christ (verse 7). Paul’s goal now is to cast off everything else to “gain Christ” of being “found in him,” not earning righteousness through the law (verses 8–9), and ultimately “knowing Christ” both “in the power of his resurrection” (to truly experience the power of His Atonement that gives life) and “in the fellowship of his sufferings” (to labor and suffer as He did in helping others). Indeed, he wants to continually strive to conform himself into the likeness of Christ’s death by giving his life for others so that he can have the hope of attaining the likeness of Christ’s Resurrection (verse 10).

To “gain Christ,” to be “found in him,” and to “know Christ” could be understood as a progressive sequence Christians follow as they (1) initially cast off all ungodliness and accept the Savior; (2) allow themselves to become perfect in Christ through His sufficient grace, not the law; and finally (3) are fully sanctified through Christ, becoming holy, whereby one can truly know Him because they have become like Him (compare Moroni 10:32–33).

3:12–21. Until We Know Christ Fully, Keep Pressing Toward the Mark

Paul admits that he has not fully achieved his goal and that he is not a finished product. Rather, he strives to take hold of that goal, just as Jesus had taken hold of him (Philippians 3:12). He will not let remembrances of the past get in the way but will exert himself and keep running toward the mark, the prize contained in Christ that God promised Paul in calling him to the work (verses 13–14).

Those who are already considered perfect (a legal status, not an actual state, presumably due to their covenant relationship with Christ) must keep pressing forward and live up to the progress they have already made (verses 15–16). They need to keep following their apostolic leaders who, like Paul, live according to the pattern given, because there are deceivers, like the Judaizers, who live as though they are enemies of the cross, focusing on food laws and circumcision and setting their minds on earthly things. In contrast, the Saints are citizens of heaven and await the Christ, who will be the one who transforms our bodies (in contrast to the ritual of outward circumcision) by subjecting everything to Himself.

4:1–9. Some Ways to Stand Firm in the Lord

As Paul concludes his letter, he offers a few parting thoughts on how the Philippian Saints specifically can stand firm “in the Lord”:

(1) He urges Euodia and Syntyche, two women that seem to have had a disagreement, *to auto phronein en Kyriō* (“to be the same mind in the Lord”). The sense of *phronein* is more than just coming to a compromise and includes to have a unity of feeling toward one another, made possible through Jesus Christ. When there are troubles in any part of the body of Christ, Paul apparently believes the whole body should

care for it, so he asks his “loyal yokefellow” to help them. This could be a singular person like Paul’s wife, as Clement of Alexandria reports, or a collective term referring to the whole church of Philippi. The two women (along with Clement, who was perhaps a local leader but was not the same as the aforementioned Clement of Alexandria, and others in the town) had previously assisted Paul in spreading the gospel when he first visited Philippi and may have been among the initial group of women Paul encountered there (see Acts 16:13). The cause of their division is unstated and was likely reported to Paul in previous letters or by Epaphroditus (see Philippians 2:19–30). Paul seems to trust the maturity of these women and the Saints in Philippi generally to address this issue so publicly, attesting to the closeness they must all feel for one another. In spite of their present division, Paul affirms the status of all as ones whose names are written in the book of life, indicating that he believes even current weakness or sin does not automatically blot someone out of the book. Because of their covenant relationship with Christ, they are still in “the book of the names of the sanctified, even them of the celestial world” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:2; compare 128:6–7).

(2) He gives a simple imperative, “Rejoice in the Lord at all times,” repeated for emphasis. Paul understands that finding and persisting in the joy that comes from a relationship with Christ is what gives one strength to stand firm in the Lord.

(3) He admonishes the Saints to let their gentleness or moderation be manifest to all. They simply have to make their needs known to God through gratitude-filled prayers and God’s peace will guard their minds and hearts, helping them avoid being overly anxious or worried about things.

(4) Finally, Paul counsels the Saints to let their minds dwell upon things that are true, praiseworthy, pure, lovely, and admirable, and to keep living the principles that Paul has taught or shown them in word and deed. This admonition is the basis for the Latter-day Saints’ thirteenth article of faith and echoes the Lord’s command to let virtue garnish their thoughts unceasingly in order for their confidence to wax strong in the presence of God (Doctrine and Covenants 121:45).

4:10–23. I Can Do All Things in the Lord

Paul concludes his letter by speaking of the joy he feels because the Philippians’ care for him has been realized one more time (Philippians 4:10). The arrival of their representative Epaphroditus with more than enough resources to help Paul is likened to a sweet-smelling temple offering given to the Lord (verse 18). Not only does the altar of incense have a sweet smell due to its perfumes but the altar of sacrifice is also described as possessing a sweet-smelling aroma to God.⁵ That Paul likens their support for him to a temple offering for the Lord signals his belief that their efforts are acts of consecration whereby they are giving their all to the Lord to build up His kingdom. Paul goes on to recount some of the previous times that they aided him and prays that God will likewise provide for their every need through the riches of Christ—a reciprocal truism about consecration that Jesus taught (see Matthew 6:31–34; Philippians 4:15–16, 19).

Even though circumstances prevented the Philippian Saints from doing everything they wanted to do in the past, Paul tells them not to worry. He has learned to be content with whatever his circumstance are and to trust that he can do all things because of the strength that Christ gives him (verses 11–13).

Notes

- 1 See Brent Schmidt, *Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015).
- 2 Gerald F. Hawthorn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983).
- 3 Matthew 26:37; Mark 14:33; Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 139.
- 4 See Philippians 1:4, 18, 25–26; 2:16–18, 28.
- 5 See Genesis 8:21; Exodus 25:6; 30:7, 34–38; Leviticus 1:9, 13; 2:2.

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