

Paul's Epistle to the Philippian

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Paul's Epistle to the Philippians is one of the most personal and theologically concentrated of Paul's letters. It is a relatively short (less than 2100 words with 104 verses) letter, but it provides answers to such important questions as: Christian identity, Christ's humility and exaltation, the Church community, Christian joy and prayers and the ultimate Christian hope.

A believer's identity is in Christ, not in personal achievements or religious credentials. Paul says in Phil 1:21 "for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain". This means that life means serving Christ; suffering means identifying with Christ; ministry means proclaiming Christ; and death means being in Christ. Death is "gain" because it brings Paul into the presence of Christ. Paul lists his worldly achievements and religious credentials (a Hebrew of Hebrews, circumcised on the eighth day, concerning law a Pharisee, concerning righteousness in the law blameless) and considers them rubbish when compared with the surpassing worth of knowing Christ and experiencing the power of His resurrection. (Phil 3:5-10).

Paul poetically presents Christ Jesus as the pre-eminent exemplar of and means of selfless sacrifice (Phil 2:5-11). Christ's path was: humiliation before exaltation; service before recognition; obedience before glory; and sacrifice before reward. As a result, God the Father exalted Him above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow (Phil 2:9).

Paul exhorts all believers to have the mindset of Christ and in the church community to stand firm in one spirit, harmoniously striving together for the gospel (Phil 1:27). Nothing should be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but humility each should look out for one another's interests, not just one's own (Phil 2:1-4). Paul provides two examples from the Philippians church: Timothy, genuinely cares about the interests of others and Epaphroditus who nearly died for the work of Christ (Phil 2:19-30).

Unity in the Church is also important. When interpersonal conflicts arise, we should be settled by reconciliation in the Lord. Paul gives the example of two sisters in Philippians: Euodia and Syntyche, and urged them to agree in the Lord. He also enlisted a coworker, Clement, to help (Phil:4:2-3). Resolving such conflict would prevent damage to the unity of Christ's body and help to advance the gospel mission of the church.

Believers have the privilege of talking to God in prayer—a joyful, relational activity which involves making requests to God, along with offering praise and thanks. "Do not be anxious about anything but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil:4:6-7). The foundation of our boldness in prayer is that "the Lord is near" and is concerned about the things that make us anxious (Phil 4:4-5).

Joy is another important message Paul wants to convey in Philippians. He mentions it at least four times: joy in suffering (Phil 1:1-30); joy in serving (Phil 2:1-30); joy in believing (Phil 4:2-23). In particular, in Philippians 4:4, Paul says "rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice." Christian joy is rooted in God's character, Christ's salvation and the believer's relationship with Christ, not on circumstances.

Paul reminds believers that "our citizenship is in Heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the power by which He is able even to subject all things to Himself" (Phil 3:20-21). Our resurrection depends on Christ's sovereign power. Paul urges believers to live out our lives and heavenly citizenship worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Paul's Epistle to the Philippians is an important letter. Its central message is: because Jesus Christ is the Lord, Christians are called to centre their entire existence on Him, to live humbly and sacrificially with one another, to remain faithful amid suffering, and to rejoice because their ultimate citizenship and hope are in Christ.