



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## All In It Together

Philippians 1.1–2

David Anguish

### Introduction

When we read Philippians 1.1–2, we immediately expect this epistle to be different from the others Paul wrote. There was apparently no need to invoke his authority as an apostle—unlike Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1–2 Timothy and Titus. His themes were apparently not so urgent that he felt the need to introduce them in the greeting—unlike Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and Titus; the greeting in Philippians is shorter and more to the point. Finally, he includes more in the address than references to the church or saints as a group; in this letter, he specifically addresses the “overseers and deacons.” Only in Philemon do we see something similar.

Now, few readers who have familiarity with the epistle are surprised to hear Philippians is different from the others. That it is different is the reason many consider it their favorite. There is no heavy theology or complicated argument here (cf. Romans, Galatians). There is little that demands prolonged background study to bring us up to speed on references to ancient practices that are strange to us (cf. 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians). There are also no strong rebukes or corrections (cf. 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians). Instead, Paul’s approach and message are generally positive. Philippians is the epistle known for the words *rejoice* and *joy* (14 times in just 104 verses). It is also known for sayings that would make good bumper sticker quotations (Phil 1.21; 4.4, 6. 13).

The positive feelings are good, for we all face times when we need comfort from Scripture. But we do wonder: since life is not always comfortable, how valuable is Philippians for *real* life? One of the epistle’s most famous passages connects rejoicing and worry-free living with the expectation of answered prayer (4.4–6). But of what comfort is that when we wonder if our prayers are being heard? And what of those times when we are struggling with our faith (Mark 9.24)? When we don’t seem to be making progress? When it seems we’re taking at least one

step backward for every two we take forward? When part of our problem is that we are unsure about what we want things to be?

Furthermore, as we struggle in the trenches of a world of temptations and distractions—challenged by advocates of completely different worldviews and values—how does a positive writing like Philippians really help? Of what value is it on days we don't feel like we can accomplish the first thing in our routine, let alone “*all things*” (Phil 4.13)? Positive reassurance is fine, but aren't there other sections of Scripture that will help more? In the end, is Philippians too idealistic as we face trials that sap our strength and rob our joy?

To begin to be confident that it can in fact help us in hard times, we need to see that the concerns I've just identified were not derived by looking around at conditions in our world. They are a paraphrase of the circumstances the church in Philippi was facing.

- It was a church born of diversity and begun with trouble (Acts 16.6–40).
- It was a community called to go against the grain of the world in which it lived, “composed of people from different socio-economic levels and ethnic groups... Paul [initiated] a remarkable experiment in a world in which groups were normally united by family ties, professional associations, or ethnicity” (Thompson 2007, 299).
- It was a church called to persevere in spite of opposition from its surrounding community (cf. Phil 1.28–29), pressure that would have probably increased with the news that their beloved Paul had been imprisoned for the gospel (1.7, 16).
- As such, it was a church where joy was not a reflection of a lack of trouble, but grew *from* trouble, where the pressure from without would be joined by tensions within.

In other words, Philippians was not a first century version of Bobby McFerrin's “Don't Worry, Be Happy.” It is among the most profound of Paul's writings, honestly facing the day-to-day rigors of life and ministry.<sup>1</sup> Before we look at its parts in more detail, let's work on seeing that bigger picture more clearly.

## Paul's Hope for the Philippians

It is important to begin with an overview of Paul's purpose and goal (Phil 1.5–11). He wanted to bring to completion (ἐπιτελεω, *epiteleō*) the good work God had been doing in them since the first days of their existence as a church (vv. 5–6). That growth would include the kind of spiritual character development that came to understand “what is excellent” (v 10; διαφέρω, *diapherō*, translated “best” in NIV, NRSV; and “what things really matter” in REB). Verse 11 shows what would follow: “the full harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (REB).

The goal announced in verse 11 points to the main idea found in a word used twice in the letter (in verb and noun forms). Because it is translated more explicitly the second time, we'll focus first on its use in 3.20 where Paul concludes an argument (note the connecting word γάρ, *gar*) by affirming that Christian faith is to be very different from all other alternatives: “But our *citizenship* is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” “Citizenship” translates πολίτευμα (*politeuma*), a state or commonwealth.

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*Politeuma* was an important word in the Roman colony of Philippi. Its immediate context here is 3.17–19 where Paul speaks of those whose priorities are focused on the world. Before that, in verses 12–16, he calls them to mature behavior that imitates his own. He summarizes what is entailed in that behavior in verse 7 where he says he has counted his former way of life as “loss” (ζημία, *zēmia*; damage, loss; cf. REB’s “assets I have written off”) in order to know Christ.

But the remarks in chapter 3 are only part of the context for Paul’s thesis. They are part two of an argument he begins in 1.27 where the verbal form of the word *citizenship* appears. There he tells the Philippians, “Whatever happens, conduct [πολιτεύομαι, *politeuomai*] yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (v. 27a NIV). After expanding on that initial exhortation (vv. 27b–30), he shows what it should look like by referring to the example of Jesus as the solution to division (2.1–11), exhorting the church to shine as lights (2.12–16), and pointing to himself, Timothy, and Epaphroditus as examples of the life he recommends (2.17–30).

### Potential Pitfalls

To fully appreciate the practicality of Paul’s expressions of hope, we should stop to consider that, along with their worthy example in supporting Paul and remaining faithful over time (cf. 4.10–20), the church at Philippi did face challenges. We have already noted the opposition they experienced (1.28–29), partly due to the fact that they were different from their surrounding community.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, feelings of despair may have increased at the news of Paul’s imprisonment; so, we see him making a concerted effort to reassure them that his imprisonment was actually a benefit to the gospel (1.12–14).

But the challenge was not just that of perseverance in tough times; there were also some tensions within the church (2.1–4, 14; 4.2–3). Since it would be natural for these pressures to cause some to wonder if it was worth it, we are not surprised by this. The diverse make-up of the community would probably also contribute to it.

### Understanding the Priority

With the above in mind, we are ready to examine Paul’s priorities for the letter. He announces his own commitment in Philippians 1.21: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” But that statement can be understood only in the context of 1.12–26 where he declares that everything is about the gospel (vv. 12–14). For that reason, he says that, should he continue living, he will see to it that the gospel is preached (v. 21). And should he die, he will be with the Lord, an outcome that will serve to further glorify him (see Holladay 2005, 373–374).

He elaborates on this beginning in 1.27. If everything is about Christ, then *nothing* is more important than living in a way that was worthy of the good news of Jesus (1.27–30; his readers, in the Roman colony [*politeuma*] of Philippi would have seen the implications with regard to the Empire). The solution to the suffering and tensions they were experiencing is highlighted in 2.5–11: remember what Christ thought and therefore did and the difference that made in their lives, and then live accordingly (2.12; note that “your” is plural).

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## Conclusion

As we think about Paul's counsel, we circle back to where we began.

- Do we face difficulties in daily living? Paul wrote from prison (Phil 1.7, 16).
- Do we sometimes wonder whether it's all worth it? Whether the world's ways are not too strong to resist—or at least whether they will leave us lonely if we persevere? Paul thought the gospel was better off *because* of his troubles (Phil 1.12–14; 3.19).
- Do we experience difficulties in dealing with others who question our motives, or do things we know are not right? Paul was right there with us (Phil 1.17–18).

Yet, he said he would go on rejoicing (1.18) and would press on despite the trouble (3.12–14) because he had made an uncompromising commitment to Jesus. He understood that Christ's way is completely unlike and often harder than the world's way. But he also believed that any other way was nothing more than rubbish (3.8). So, he enlisted others who were growing in their knowledge of Christ—the overseers, the deacons, the saints at Philippi—calling them to work with the God who continued to work with them (2.12–13).

Are you engaged in that life? Are you determined to press on as Paul did?

[www.davidanguish.com](http://www.davidanguish.com)

## Works Cited

- Carl R. Holladay. 2005. *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ*. Abingdon Press.
- James Thompson. 2007. "Preaching to Philippians." *Interpretation* 61 (3): 298–309.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Or, as Carl Holladay wrote, "Philippians ... shows how ordinary congregational and ministerial concerns ... become the occasion for theological insight and reflection" (Holladay 2005, 371).

<sup>2</sup> James Thompson comments: "Paul's advice not to 'be intimidated by the adversaries' (1:28) is intelligible against the background of the community's vulnerable place in the city. As the reference to the community's suffering suggests (1:29), these adversaries are not opponents who advocate a doctrine different from Paul's, but people from the local populace who have manifested hostility toward this house church. As a minority group composed of people whose conversion was an offense to the honor of their families and an apparent threat to the cohesion of society, they are vulnerable" (Thompson 2007, 299).