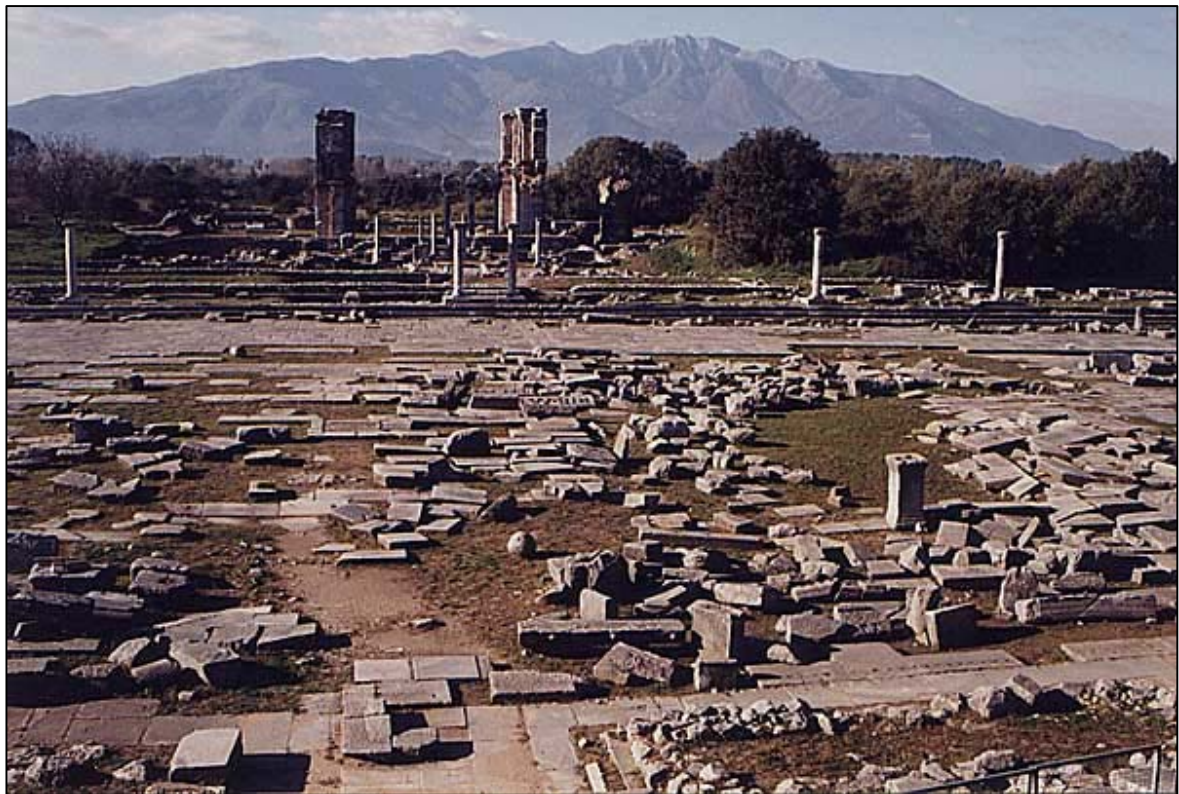


Holy Trinity Claygate

Small Group Studies

Spring 2009

Philippians



Introduction to Philippians

The city of Philippi was a prosperous Roman colony in Macedonia. They prided themselves on being Romans, dressed like Romans and often spoke Latin; this is the background to Paul's reference to the believer's heavenly citizenship in 3:20-21. The story of how the church came into being is found in Acts 16:11-40. They were also one of the generous Macedonian churches praised in 2 Corinthians 8.

Many people would regard Philippians as their favourite New Testament letter. And it may well be that they were Paul's favourite church; certainly he has lots of praise for them and is extremely grateful for the love and support they had shown him since hearing of his imprisonment. For Paul was in prison when he wrote the letter, either in Ephesus (around AD 53-55), Caesarea (around 57-59) or most likely, in Rome (around 61), and one of his aims in writing is to thank them for the gift they had sent him. He also wanted to encourage them how God was working powerfully despite Paul's situation.

Indeed Paul draws on his example to encourage the Philippians to stand firm themselves in the face of persecution, and to rejoice regardless of their circumstances. For the basis of true joy is a key theme in the letter, as are Paul's exhortations to humility and unity, and his warnings against both legalists and libertarians. We get a real insight into what Paul believes God has called us all to, and how we need to 'press on' towards that goal. We also learn how high a value Paul places on his relationship with Jesus.

Philippians is a very easy book to read, has no Old Testament references and is not addressing a particular heresy or problem. It is a general letter of encouragement to a church that is moving forward, and one that can inspire us too in our own exciting times.

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January 2008

Study 1: Joy That Lasts (1:1-14; 27-30)

1. If you had to set a personal goal for 2009, what would it be?

In this first chapter of Philippians, Paul reveals a lot about what he prays for other Christians and what he thanks God for. He also shares his confidence in God's sovereignty during difficult times. His example will raise challenging questions for us about what God most wants for our lives, and what he most wants us to be praying for. It will also suggest new possibilities for us about how **we** can have joy that lasts.

READ PHILIPPIANS 1: 3-11

2. What do you think Paul means by the Philippians' 'partnership in the gospel'? Why does it give him such joy? Is it a phrase we can use about ourselves today?
3. What is Paul so confident about in v6? Why?
4. In the light of Paul's example, do you think you are deriving your joy and your confidence from the right things? How do his words at the end of v7 help us?
5. How striking do you find Paul's prayer in vs 9-11? What does it tell us about God's goal for **our** lives?
6. Which parts of Paul's prayer in vs 9-11 do you most need to pray for yourself?
7. How would making those things your prayer and your goal increase the likelihood of joy in your life?
8. Has this changed your view on the benefits of consciously praying the prayers of scripture?

READ PHILIPPIANS 1: 12-14; 27-30

9. What do vs 12-14 suggest about God's sovereignty? What encouragement can we take from this?
10. How do you feel challenged by Paul's instructions in vs 27-28? What, in the light of this chapter, do you think conducting 'yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' includes?

For Personal Reflection

- In what ways do you need to change the things you pray for yourself and for others?
- Do you think you need to change the criteria by which you evaluate whether things are going well in your life?

Study 2: Unity and Humility (2:1-11, 19-30)

1. How highly do you think our contemporary society values the quality of humility?

In these first 11 verses of Chapter 2, Paul addresses what seems to be his biggest concern about the Philippian church. He does it by painting a contrast with the attitude of Christ. This passage will raise some challenging questions about how we love each other and how we cope with disagreement. It will also get us thinking about the sort of culture we want to develop, and aspects of our secular culture that we want to leave behind.

READ PHILIPPIANS 2: 1-11

2. What impression do you get about the Philippian church from what Paul writes in vs1-4?
3. What do each of the things Paul mentions in v1 mean? Which of them can you identify with?
4. What are the things Paul wants the Philippians to unite around in v2? What exactly do they mean? What would that mean for us in HTC?
5. 'Better' in v3 does not mean superior or more talented, but simply worthy of preferential treatment, as clarified by v4. Is this a challenging instruction for us? Why?
6. Paul says our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus (v5). What would that mean practically for us?
7. What do we learn from this passage about Jesus' identity and status?
8. What stops us adopting the attitude of Jesus? What could you do to help create a 'culture of humility' in your group?
9. What problems in the world, in communities and in churches would be solved by people putting v5 into practice?
10. Look ahead to 2:19-30. How do the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus illustrate Paul's teaching in 2:1-5?

For Personal Reflection

- In what situations in your life do you most struggle with humility? What can you do to improve it?
- In what situations in your life do you most struggle with unity with other Christians? What can you do to improve it?

Study 3: Shining Like Stars (2:12-18)

1. Do you think people would guess you were a Christian, if they didn't know?!

Paul's ambition for the Philippians is that they would be distinctive from the world around them, by becoming 'blameless and pure'. He introduces the powerful metaphor of being like stars shining in the universe, visibly reflecting God's light by the way we get on with each other and by sharing the 'word of life'. He warns that this will require intentional effort on our part, and allowing God's power to work in us.

READ PHILIPPIANS 2: 12-18

2. What does 'working out your salvation' (v12) mean? How does it relate to grace?
3. Why are we to do it with 'fear and trembling'? What does Paul mean by this?
4. How encouraging or discouraging do you find v13?
5. How common is it to find people putting v14 into practice? Do we normally think of complaining and arguing as a sin? Why do you think Paul feels so strongly about it?
6. Why are the instructions of vs 14-15 so important as we 'hold out the word of life' (v16)?
7. How inspiring do you find the metaphor of 'shining like stars'?
8. In what ways you could hold out the word of life more effectively?
9. Why, even in the context of v17, is Paul glad and rejoicing? Should we then be glad and rejoicing?

For Personal Reflection

- Are you doing everything without complaining or arguing?
- What would have to change in you for a 'shining star' to be an appropriate metaphor?
- What would have to change in you for you to be glad and rejoicing in difficult circumstances?

Study 4: No Confidence in the Flesh (3:1-11)

1. What sorts of things do people take pride in, in Claygate?

Paul had a background to be very proud of, within his community. But he has some very shocking things to say about how he regards those things now. This helps us understand a little bit more about the differences between Judaism and Christianity, but it also challenges us to think about how we regard those things that might distract us from our relationship with Jesus.

READ PHILIPPIANS 3: 1-11

2. Why is Paul's advice in v1 a 'safeguard' for the Philippians? What difference would it make to your life if you put his advice into practice more often?
3. Who is Paul talking about in v2?
4. What does v3 tell us about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity?
5. Why does Paul write v7? How do we feel about things that distract **us** from rooting our identity firmly in Christ? What are those things?
6. What do 'gaining Christ' and 'being found in him' (v8-9) mean? Do **you** place as high a value on them as Paul does? What could change that?
7. What does v9 tell us about the differences between Paul's previous Judaism and his Christianity?
8. What does Paul mean in v10? Do we want this? If the answer is no, are we overlooking anything that Paul is motivated by?

For Personal Reflection

- Are there things you need to 'consider loss' because they are hindering your relationship with Christ?
- How do your ambitions need to change in the light of Paul's example?

Study 5: Pressing On Towards the Goal (3:12-4:1)

1. Share one remaining ambition that you have for your life.

Paul is very clear about the goal he has for **his** life: the one for which Christ Jesus 'took hold of him'. Yet perhaps even more challenging than the goal, is the determination and perseverance with which he pursued it. And he is very definite that 'all of us who are mature' should follow his example. He reinforces this message by reminding us that we are 'citizens of heaven'.

READ PHILIPPIANS 3: 4:1

2. What is Paul pressing on towards (vs 12-14)?
3. What does Paul mean by 'forgetting' in v13? Assuming he did not suffer from amnesia, why is Paul intentionally doing this?!
4. So what does 'pressing on' mean? Is this something that happens naturally? What can we do to help each other press on?
5. Why is sharing Paul's attitude a sign of maturity (v15)?
6. What does v17 suggest is an important element in our efforts to grow in godliness? Do you think you need to be more intentional about this?
7. What can you discern about the thinking and behaviour of the people Paul warns about in v19? Why does Paul warn the Philippians about them again? Do you think he would give us similar warnings?
8. Why do you think Paul wants to remind the Philippians of their heavenly citizenship (v20)? Would we benefit from thinking more about it?
9. What have you learnt from this passage about God's goal for your life?
10. What have you learnt from this passage about how you can progress towards that goal more quickly?

For Personal Reflection

- What's stopping you pressing on towards the goal that Christ has called you to?

Study 6: Peace and contentment (4:2-13)

1. What makes you anxious? What makes you contented?

In this passage Paul shares what he sees as the secrets of happiness. However, it involves doing some things we may not naturally want to do: being reconciled with those who annoy us, intentionally rejoicing, praying about everything, meditating on the things of God and learning to be content in all circumstances. This study is going to leave us with a very challenging question in our minds: how we would feel if we actually did what he is advocating?

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:2-13

2. What can you discern about the situation between these two women in the Philippian church (vs 2-4)?
3. What does 'agreeing with each other in the Lord' mean, and what does it not mean?
4. How do you think Paul expected his readers to help these women?
5. Why do you think Paul urges his readers to 'rejoice in the Lord always'? Would the same advice help us?
6. How would following the instructions of vs 4-5 help address the problems of v2?
7. Does Paul think you can stop yourself being anxious (vs6-7)? What part does God play? Share with the group any experience you have had of this.
8. How significant do you think Paul's advice is in v8? Share any experience you have had of putting this into practice.
9. What is the 'secret of being content in any and every situation' (v12)? How does your own attitude compare with this?
10. What does Paul mean in v13? Does it also apply to you? Do you take any encouragement from that?

For Personal Reflection

- What are the things you need to think about more to bring you peace, joy and contentment?
- What do you need to think about less?