



## **Introduction to a Letter We Greatly Need**

*Series: Philipians – To Live Is Christ*

Philippians 1:1-2

May 31, 2015

Pastor Nick Shaffer

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You know, beloved, my original plan for when we finished the sermon series on worship was to preach through the book of Hebrews. But the more that I prayed about it, the more my heart was drawn to Philipians – and I didn't know why, but as I have been studying to preach this book, now I do.

It is no secret that, as a church, we have been through a great deal over the last year. We have had people come and go from this body, some of them in heart-breaking and grievous ways. We've had to deal with some very difficult circumstances – with sin and rebellion, with discipline issues that did not turn out as we had hoped, with the temptations to leave this church and pursue something new and the new-found freedom we've heard other people talk about, even with continuing attempts by some people to try to weaken and further injure this body. On a personal level, it has been painful and heart-wrenching to have to reassure brothers and sisters who are being told that “there is some secret thing wrong with the church or with the elders or with me.” And it's hard whenever it comes from within the body. We all know what has happened and we have all been affected in different ways. I feel it beloved and I know you do too. My heart has been broken and I know yours has been too.

These aren't the kind of things that you just shake off. Even if we have not been directly affected, all of us have felt this in one way or another. It is these things that have led some of us to discouragement, to a kind of uncertainty about things. It has led some of us to question the power of the gospel to really change and transform people. It has caused some of us to be suspicious of others, to doubt people's hearts and character, to be reticent and hesitant to trust one another, to believe the best about one another, to be tentative to fully invest our lives in this church once and for all and commit to faithfulness. I feel it. I

know you do. There have been times I have wanted to give up, to ask myself, “Why am I even doing this. What difference does it make?” We have all had those moments.

But there are three things that keep me from giving up, from quitting, from walking away – Jesus Christ, my wife and children, and you all. Church, I meant what I said last Sunday. I love you and I believe that your heart’s desire is to be a faithful, united, and pleasing church to the Lord. I believe that you really do desire to honor Christ and serve Him and love Him and worship Him. I believe that you really do believe in the reality and the power of Jesus Christ in this church and in our lives. I believe that you want to live lives of love for Christ and for one another. I really believe it. And I want that, too. I am longing for us to all take our place in the great ship of the church and that we would all pull the oars in the same direction, putting away self-interest, with the only agenda Jesus Christ and His kingdom, our hearts and minds united, all of us firmly and humbly established in this church in which God has placed us together– not superficially, but in real ways. A season of joy and peace in the midst of the battle.

And that’s why this letter to the Philippians is so important. Sometimes we view the churches in the NT through rose-colored glasses, imagining them as perfect, imagining that people were getting saved like clockwork, that things were always idyllic, that there was never any struggle or hardship, or seasons of testing and trial. And it’s simply not true. In studying a great deal of source material for this sermon series, the picture of Philippian church is one of a church in the midst of a very difficult season. You remember the way that the church began – Acts 16 recounts how that happened. Paul was on his second missionary journey together with Silas, Timothy and Luke. Philippi had not been their intended destination, but moved by a vision from God they went to this predominantly Gentile Roman colony to preach the gospel. There was no synagogue in Philippi – there were not enough Jews there to have one – and so they searched for God-fearers or Jews down by the riverside, at a place of prayer. There they found Lydia, a seller of purple, whose heart the Lord opened to believe the gospel. A short time later, God, through Paul, delivered a demon-possessed slave from her spiritual captivity to service to Christ. Her owners, who used her for divination and to make money, were mad and dragged them before the authorities and Paul and Silas were thrown in jail. Then came that unforgettable picture of the worship service in jail, in which God sent an earthquake that caused the prisoners’ chains to fall off and their jail cells to be opened. But no one fled. When the jailer saw what had happened, the jail cells all open and thinking all had escaped, he sought to kill himself but God intervened, the jailer believed the gospel, he and a number of his family believed and

they were baptized. The church began 10 years or so earlier by the conversion of Lydia, the slave-girl and the Philippian jailer and his family – a pretty amazing start.

But by the time that this letter is being written, the church was going through hard times. There was in the church in Philippi a tangible sense that things were sort of running off the rails. Paul was in jail facing a death sentence. The church was on edge, facing the opposition of the unbelieving world on one hand and the encroachment of false doctrine on the other. The church that had started so promisingly was now facing factions and divisions in the body, secession and abandonment by people once in the ranks of the church. There was active among them those whom Paul describes as **“enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”** (Philippians 3:18–19, ESV) These were not enemies doctrinally – they knew the doctrine of the atonement and were well-educated Scripturally – but enemies ethically and morally. They made gods of their fleshly appetites, gloried in and celebrated their sin, with their focus and direction, their allegiance to earthly things and not the Kingdom.

This was leading to dismay, trouble, fear in the hearts of the saints in Philippi. Anxiety was spreading through the membership as they were questioning whether their faith in Christ was sufficient to sustain them and if there were something wrong with their church. Facing great adversity, the Philippian saints had lost their sense of joy and were tempted to just give it all up. And all these factors were combining to discouragement, distrust, disagreement and a poisonous spirit of self-preservation, self-interest, self-seeking and selfishness. They could have been tempted to give up. So Paul writes this letter as a divine tonic, as a means to reinvigorate a flagging church, and to refocus the Philippian church on Christ and His Kingdom. It is a letter that Paul writes from the heart and it’s a letter that I want to preach in that same way. It is a letter that is filled with some great gospel themes, life giving and soul enriching truth that both the Philippians needed and we need to hear.

**Major Themes in the Letter to the Philippians** There are a number of themes that we will see in this letter, but I want to give to you as a framework for understanding this letter, five of them – five grand themes that are woven throughout the letter as we read it. Just flip through with me as we look at this. The first one I want to talk about is the theme of

**Joy** – Lots of people talk about the letter to the Philippians as the epistle of joy, but we need to understand what that means. That joy that is spoken of in Philippians is not superficial happiness, not some sort of care-free, ignorant, or naïve “God will work it all” kind of bliss. The joy of which Paul speaks is a joy that is firmly rooted in theological truth. This letter calls us to a particular kind of joy, a joy that is forged in trial, heartache and trouble. In Paul’s case, it was a joy that was forged as Paul was in Roman captivity, facing the death penalty, while his ministry was being contested and attacked by those in the church.

Just listen to his words: **“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.”** (Philippians 1:12–20, ESV) And then in chapter 2, he says, **“Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”** (Philippians 2:17–18, ESV) We often think of joy as being found in the absence of affliction or the lack of trial, but that’s clearly not Paul’s view of joy at all. The Christian life is a fight for joy – not superficial satisfaction, not shallow or cheap delight, not momentary relief, but joy. A second theme that figures prominently in Philippians is that of

**The High Priority of the Unity of the Local Church** – Paul extolls the value, the absolute necessity and gospel requirement of true unity in the church at Philippi and in every church. A unity that is to be expressed in real ways, for instance, in partnership in the gospel -- **“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.”** (Philippians 1:3–5, ESV) A unity that is the fruit of a common experience of grace -- **“It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of**

**the gospel.” (Philippians 1:7, ESV) A unity expressed in love -- “For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,” (Philippians 1:8–9, ESV) It is a unity that is expressed in humility toward and true concern for one another -- “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:3–4, ESV) It is unity that expresses itself in biblical reconciliation -- “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.” (Philippians 4:1–3, ESV)**

Why is this of such importance to Paul? Why do we see this theme in so much of what he writes? It is because disunity threatens the heart of the gospel, that weakens the church, destroys its effectiveness and makes it impotent against a hostile world. Unity is something for which we have to be actively working and striving, striving for blended harmony with everyone, killing selfish ambition and conceit, looking to the interests of others, just as Christ did, so that we honor the work and the person of our Savior. Single-minded, single-hearted unity is not easy to live out. Our first inclination, most times, when things do not go our way is to harbor bitterness or to pull up stakes and move on, rather than working it out in Christ. God has designed us for togetherness and created us for community. This is how we work out our walk in Christ... together.

**The Importance of Pursuing Sanctification** Paul is concerned that the gospel theology that the Philippians professed would be worked out in their own lives and rule the way that they interacted with each other and with the world – real sanctification. A sanctification that expressed itself in confidence in God’s faithfulness to accomplish His purposes in them -- **“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6, ESV)** Paul speaks of a sanctification that is expressed in personal striving -- **“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:12–13, ESV)** It is a sanctification that was rooted in pursuing Christ, not a set of rules, not by making the outside of the cup clean, but by pursuing Christ -- **“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own,**

**because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:12–14, ESV)** Paul speaks of a sanctification that would lead to joy and peace -- **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:4–7, ESV)**

**Perseverance and Endurance** – Here is one of the key themes in the entire letter. Staying faithful, pressing on, not bailing on Christ, not bailing on His church, not quitting because of circumstances or seasons of trial and hardship – a temptation for all of us, but instead, persevering and enduring. I was talking with Wayne Bright this week about Philippians and he made the observation that while joy is one of the themes of this letter, a greater theme is endurance, and he is right. Paul speaks of perseverance that comes by holding to what is good and righteous -- **“so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” (Philippians 1:10–11, ESV)** He speaks of a perseverance that is energized by living confident of God’s sovereign purposes and being willing to suffer that Christ is proclaimed as we saw in Phil 1:12-18 when we talked about joy in trial a few moments ago.

Paul speaks of a perseverance that make us able to stand firm despite suffering and the conflict that invariably comes from being faithful to Christ -- **“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” (Philippians 1:27–30, ESV)**

It is a perseverance and endurance that can only be sustained by mastering your emotions -- ***“Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.”*** (Philippians 2:14–16, ESV) It is a perseverance and endurance that can only be sustained by being on guard for spiritual deceivers -- ***“Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.”*** (Philippians 3:2, ESV) It is a perseverance that can only be sustained by taking our cues from those who are sold out to Christ -- ***“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”*** (Philippians 3:17–19, ESV)

It is an endurance that is fed and strengthened by godly thinking and godly practice -- ***“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”*** (Philippians 4:8–9, ESV)

And it is an endurance that comes from being content in Christ -- ***“I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”*** (Philippians 4:12–13, ESV)

**Jesus Christ, Himself** – Of course the chief theme throughout the entire letter is that Christ must be our life, our all in all. Jesus Christ is our all. The very title for this sermon series comes from Phil 1:21-- ***“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”*** (Philippians 1:21, ESV) His mind is to be our own -- ***“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*** (Philippians 2:5–8, ESV) He is all our hope and glory -- ***“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every***

**name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9–11, ESV)** We must seek His interests – **“I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 2:19–21, ESV)**

He is the One we must know-- **“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:8–11, ESV)**

He is our king and the One to whom we must look – **“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” (Philippians 3:20–21, ESV)** Every one of our needs is met in Him as we rely on His grace – **“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus... The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.” (Philippians 4:19–23, ESV)**

These are words, themes, divine truths that the Philippian church desperately needed to hear in their demoralized state and they are words that we need beloved, not just to hear, but to believe. These are fit words for us, where we are, right now. Proverbs says, **“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” (Proverbs 25:11, ESV)** These words from Philippians are just that. For just a few moments, let’s look together at Paul’s introduction to this letter, and I want for us to focus our attention on three verses that make all the difference in the world.

**Paul’s Introduction (1-2)** Read verses 1-2 with me: **“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:1–2, ESV)** This is sort of the standard form for introductions in letters of that day – who it’s from, who it’s to, a greeting – but to see this introduction as standard is to miss a great deal. Let me show you what I mean.



Paul introduces he and Timothy as **servants**, literally as slaves **of Christ Jesus**. The fact that Paul doesn't speak of himself as an apostle is an evidence of the familial warmth and partnership that existed between he and the Philippian believers but it is also a picture of the view that Paul had of himself. Look, we all know the deal with Paul, right? He was the foremost apostle in church history, the codifier and expositor of all of the major doctrines in the NT. He was brilliant, wise, faithful, dedicated, selfless – but he also knew what he once was – a slave to sin. Christ's grace, His pursuing love, Jesus' willing substitutionary sacrifice, His dying in Paul's place for Paul's sin captivated Paul's heart and mind. He saw himself no longer as he was, as a slave to sin, but a man set free to be a slave to Christ.

He was a doulos of Christ and a doulos has no life of his own, no will of his own, no purpose of his own, no agenda of his own, no glory of his own, and no plans of his own. Paul was not his own, he had been bought with a price, the blood of Jesus Christ. He had been the recipient of inconceivable grace and so He viewed himself as the possession of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His slave exclusively. Paul lived always with the conviction that God in Christ had delivered him out of the miry clay of sin and put his feet upon the rock of righteousness, putting a new song in his heart and so he was committed to being the slave of Christ with all that was in him. That commitment did not temper with time or with a change in his circumstances. Paul was bound to Christ.

That is what fueled his joyful obedience to Christ. But that should not only be Paul's testimony but ours as well. Every real Christian is a doulos of God. Paul wrote: **You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1Co 6:19-20)** You were ransomed from the slave market of sin not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ. Jesus has purchased you if you are a Christian. When you declare "Jesus is Lord," you are declaring that you are the slave of Christ. There is no other way to view it.

This designation that Paul gives to himself and to Timothy, I have to tell you, has been to me, over the last week or so, a source of incredible comfort and encouragement. How can I say that? How can a designation like "slave" give any kind of comfort to me? Beloved, I confessed to you earlier struggling mightily with the thoughts, "Why am I even doing this. What difference does it make?" And the answer to those questions is simply this – I am a

slave and a slave is someone whose life belongs totally to someone else. A slave lives to serve his master. He has no will of his own. I have no other option. None. I need that reminder. I'm a sinner and an American one to boot. It is far too easy for me to think in terms of individual self-interest, to think in terms of what makes me feel good, to think in terms of entitlement, to think in terms of what I think I deserve, to believe that others are to serve me and meet my needs, to think in terms of everything but that of a slave in Christ. I need this reminder and if you are honest, you do too. We need this reminder.

The only way to endure and persevere, and to have a life marked by joy, is a realization that I am, that you are, a slave to the most loving Master in the universe – set free from sin's mastery for His mastery. When you find yourself a slave to Christ, you don't have to move from one fad to the next, from one gap-filler to the next, to reinvent yourself over and over in the elusive pursuit of happiness, trying to feel happy, trying to make your life mean something. The only designation you need is slave to Christ. Beloved, in just this one sentence, my heart is renewed, my joy is restored, but there is more.

Paul writes to ***all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons***. He reminds us what all of us are in the eyes of God – His saints. That's a word that has been often confused and misunderstood. Don't be misled by the mistaken idea that sainthood is something that is conferred upon dead people who were particularly pious by some ecclesiastical body. According to God's word, all Christians are saints. Saint just means "holy one," someone who is set apart by God for His purposes. Saints are plain, ordinary people who have passed through an extraordinary experience – flesh and blood sinners - who have been saved by the grace of God the praise of his glory.

The word "saint" carries with it the idea that we have been separated in a very real sense from the life of the world. Our life is in Christ and we are in Christ. We don't belong to the world any longer. If we are truly Christ's, we have a new nature, a new set of loyalties, a new agenda; we belong to a new kingdom. Taken to its logical end, although being a saint does not primarily refer to being a good person, all saints will in increasing measure show forth the character of Christ. If we are in Christ by faith in Him, all of us are saints. That, again, is great encouragement to my soul. We belong to Christ and He is ultimately responsible for us. We are not left as orphans in this world, not left on our own in any way. We are Christ's and He holds us in His heart and in His hands. Two sentences, two soul-stirring reminders.

And then last we see this greeting from Paul, ***Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*** Then tendency, of course, is to read these words as an individual blessing, right? To read Paul as saying to each of us individually, “May each of you who has personally experienced God’s grace through faith in Christ continue to experience the blessings of His grace in a number of other ways in your life. May you grow in your sense of peace, a peace that started on the day of your salvation, and may to continue through all the days of your life.” That is an individualistic understanding of Paul’s words. And it is true as far as it goes, but to read it in that way misses the heart of what Paul is saying.

Really, the thrust of this blessing is corporate. The idea is something like this: “May you, the saints in Philippi who have received the grace of God in salvation, now experience and express that grace toward one another in a corporate way, being gracious in your dealings with one another. May your words and actions be filled with grace to the rest of the body. And may the peace with God that you have come to experience personally in the atonement of Jesus Christ now work itself out in the church corporately. May you be at peace with one another, with no dissention or strife found among you. Be at peace with God in Christ and with each other through Christ.”

This is exactly what we need to hear. What do we need as the people of God, in order to endure, in order to persevere, in order live for Christ, in order to live humbly and faithfully with one another, to live lives of love for Christ and for one another, to all take our place in the church and pull the oars in the same direction, putting away self-interest, with our hearts and minds united in Jesus Christ and His kingdom, firmly and humbly established in this church in which God has placed us together? We need grace and peace. And they are both of them, ours in Christ. Again, this is the source of great encouragement to my soul today, and I pray to your own as well. We have not been left lacking by God, but everything that we need we have been given in Christ – the grace and peace we all need. That gives my soul hope to press on and I pray it does yours as well.

We can’t give up or throw in the towel. We are slaves of Christ – He owns and commands us. We are saints in Christ – We are Christ’s and He holds us in His heart and in His hands. And He promises us grace and peace – We have not been left lacking by God, but everything that we need we have been given in Christ.

We see these truths reflected in the table that we share today as a family in Christ... This table a picture of the body broken and blood of Christ poured out for us, so that we, by God's grace could be made the people of God, forgiven of our sins and made to be at peace with the Lord. And we don't eat this meal with Christ alone, do we? It's not just you and Jesus at the table. It's all of us, together with Christ. This table is one of grace, peace, and commitment to Christ and to His people.

That's why when we come to this table we come commanded to examine our hearts and our lives, to examine the reality of our profession of faith in Jesus Christ...

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