

“The Epistle of Joy (Part 1—Introduction)”

The Apostle Paul didn't procrastinate in doing the Lord's work and will even though he often endured very unfavorable circumstances. If he had waited for his unpleasant circumstances to improve before he got on with the Lord's business, we may not possess the jewels of Scripture that God used him to produce from a prison cell. Approximately 15 years after Saul/Paul was dramatically converted to Christianity, he and his ministry team went to Philippi (see Acts 16). This marked the first entry of the Christian Gospel onto the continent of Europe. Philippi was a Roman colony and a leading city of that whole area. They were very proud of their Roman citizenship in Philippi.

As Paul shared the Christian Gospel with those who had gathered by the river on the Sabbath, the Lord opened Lydia's heart to respond to Paul's message. She and the members of her household were baptized, and persuaded Paul and his team to base their ministry there in Philippi out of her home. On another occasion, Paul and his team crossed paths with a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. Paul commanded the spirit to come out “in the name of Jesus Christ,” and the spirit left her! Upset at their loss of income, the owners of the slave girl seized Paul and Silas, dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities where they were stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison. Around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. Suddenly there was a violent earthquake that shook the foundations of the prison. At once all the prison doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose. When the awakened jailer realized all the prisoners under his watch were escaping, he decided to kill himself. But Paul shouted, “*Don't harm yourself! We are all here!*” He fell trembling before Paul and Silas and asked, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*” They replied, “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.*” Immediately he and all his family members were baptized. He washed their wounds, brought them into his home and fed them. The jailer was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God! Paul and his team left Philippi, continuing with their Missionary and Gospel work in various parts of the world.

Roughly, about 10 years after leaving Philippi Paul found himself in a Roman jail waiting for his appeal to Caesar to be heard. He made good use of his time there, even though he was bound by chains. One of the things Paul did during his imprisonment was write letters to several churches. His letters to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians are known as “the prison epistles.” He also wrote some personal letters during this time, which are also canonized in the New Testament (i.e. 1 & 2 Timothy). After about 2 years into this Roman imprisonment, the Apostle Paul was beheaded and died as a Christian martyr.

I'm so grateful that Paul didn't wait until he got out of prison to get around to writing the God-breathed words the Holy Spirit was inspiring him to write. And so, toward the beginning of his imprisonment in Rome, thinking of his dear friends with deep affection in Philippi, he wrote them a letter as he was carried along by the Holy Spirit. This letter was inspired by the Holy Spirit and canonized as one of the 27 Books in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians for the following reasons: 1) To thank them for the gifts/support they had sent to him;

2) To give a glowing testimonial for Epaphroditus. He was the one who had brought the Philippians' gifts to Paul, and he was going to re-locate to Rome to help care for Paul during his imprisonment. But he fell ill, so Paul sent him home. But Paul didn't want the Philippians to think that Epaphroditus was a quitter, so he went out of his way to give his full endorsement for this brother's total commitment to Christ; 3) To encourage them in the trials they were going through; 4) To warn them about the enemies of the cross of Christ; 5) To appeal for unity and exhort them to excellence.

Discussion Guide/Action Steps

1. Consider reading the entire Book of Philippians in one setting (Philippians 1:1-4:23).
2. Look at the attached highlights of things covered in today's message (from the last page of Pastor's notes).