PAUL'S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

The King's Unshakable Joy

Philippians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Unshakable Joy: Paul's Letter to the Philippians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

Here's a strange fact. The happiest letter Paul ever wrote was written from prison. He was chained to a guard, waiting for a trial that could end in his execution. Some of the preachers in his city were trying to make his life harder. One of his best friends had nearly died. And yet the words joy and rejoice show up again and again, more often, for its length, than in any other letter Paul wrote.

Philippians is a thank-you note to Paul's favorite church. The believers in Philippi had sent him money and a friend to take care of him, and Paul writes back to say thanks, to update them on how he's doing, and to encourage them to stay united and keep going. Along the way, he writes some of the most loved lines in the whole Bible: about living and dying, about Jesus humbling Himself to the point of death on a cross, about pressing on toward the goal, about not being anxious, and about learning to be content.

If you've ever thought joy depends on things going your way, Philippians will mess with your head. Paul's joy didn't come from his circumstances. It came from Jesus. And he says that kind of joy is available to you too, on good days and on terrible ones.

It's only four chapters. You can read it in fifteen minutes. Read it once before you start this book, and notice how often Paul rejoices. Then come back and find out why.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all four chapters of Philippians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Because the letter is short, each chapter here goes slowly, explaining what Paul is saying, the background behind it, and what it might mean for you.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene tells the story of the city of Philippi and how the church there began, in one of the most dramatic chapters in Acts. It also explains where Paul might have been in prison when he wrote, who Epaphroditus was, and why the Philippians sent Paul a gift. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes Philippians sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of Philippians first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, Romans, the Corinthian letters, Galatians, and Ephesians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through Philippians chapter by chapter. Because the letter is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation, with extra background and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Philippians raises a few questions that scholars discuss: where Paul was imprisoned when he wrote (Rome, Ephesus, and Caesarea have all been proposed); whether the letter as we have it combines two or more shorter letters; and whether 2:6–11 was an early Christian hymn that Paul quoted. I've presented these briefly and fairly, without trying to settle them.

Philippians speaks directly to issues many teenagers face: anxiety, comparison, conflict with friends, and the search for joy and contentment. I've tried to be honest that Paul's encouragement not

to be anxious is not a rebuke to those who struggle with anxiety, and that seeking help from parents, counselors, and doctors is wise and good.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover the joy that doesn't depend on circumstances, and the peace of God that guards hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A City with a Famous Name

Philippi was in Macedonia, in what is now northern Greece, about ten miles inland from the coast. It was named after Philip II, king of Macedon and father of Alexander the Great, who took over the town around 356 BC because of the gold mines in the nearby hills, and, naturally, renamed it after himself.

The city sat on the Via Egnatia, a major Roman road that ran across northern Greece, connecting the Adriatic Sea to the East. Travelers, soldiers, traders, and messengers passed through constantly.

A Little Rome

Philippi's big moment in history came in 42 BC. After Julius Caesar was assassinated, the armies of Mark Antony and Octavian (who later became Caesar Augustus, the emperor at the time Jesus was born) fought the armies of Brutus and Cassius, Caesar's assassins, on the plains outside Philippi. Antony and Octavian won. Afterward, they settled many retired Roman soldiers there, and Octavian later settled more.

Philippi became a Roman colony. That meant it was like a little piece of Rome planted in Greece. Its citizens had Roman citizenship, with all its privileges. Roman law applied. Latin was the official language, and many public inscriptions found there are in Latin, unusual for a city in Greece. People in Philippi were proud of being Roman.

That matters for reading the letter. When Paul tells the Philippians to conduct themselves in a way worthy of the gospel, the Greek word he uses is related to citizenship. And when he says our citizenship is in heaven, the Philippians would have caught the point immediately: you're a colony of heaven, living in a foreign land, representing your true home.

How the Church Began

Acts 16 tells the story. On his second missionary journey, Paul and his team were trying to figure out where to go next. Twice the Holy Spirit stopped them from going where they planned. Then, in the port of Troas, Paul had a vision in the night: a man from Macedonia begging him to come over and help them. They set sail immediately. This was the first time, as far as we know, that Paul preached the gospel in Europe.

Notice something in Acts at this point: the writer starts saying we. Luke, the author of Acts, seems to have joined Paul's team at Troas. The we sections stop in Philippi and pick up again when Paul returns there years later, so some think Luke stayed behind in Philippi to help the new church.

Lydia

Philippi doesn't seem to have had a synagogue. So on the Sabbath, Paul and his friends went outside the city gate to a river, where they expected to find a place of prayer. They found a group of women gathered there and sat down to talk with them.

One of them was Lydia, a businesswoman from the city of Thyatira, in what is now Turkey, who sold purple cloth. Purple dye was rare and expensive, worn by the wealthy and powerful, so Lydia was probably well off. She was a worshiper of God, a Gentile who

believed in the God of Israel. Acts says the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. She and her household were baptized, and she insisted that Paul and his team stay at her house. Her home probably became the church's first meeting place. The first known convert in Europe was a woman.

The Slave Girl

Then there was a very different woman. A slave girl followed Paul and his friends around the city for days, shouting that these men were servants of the Most High God telling people how to be saved. Acts says she had a spirit that let her predict the future, and her owners made a lot of money from her fortune-telling.

What she said was true, but Paul was troubled, perhaps because the spirit controlling her was not from God, and perhaps because she was being used. Finally, he turned and commanded the spirit, in the name of Jesus, to come out of her. It did. And her owners, realizing their income was gone, were furious. They dragged Paul and Silas to the city officials and accused them of causing trouble and promoting customs that Romans couldn't accept.

The crowd joined in. The officials had Paul and Silas stripped, beaten with rods, and thrown into prison, with their feet fastened in stocks.

The Jailer

Around midnight, Paul and Silas, bleeding and chained, were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. Suddenly there was a violent earthquake. The prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose.

The jailer woke up, saw the doors open, and drew his sword to kill himself. Under Roman law, a guard who lost his prisoners could face their punishment. But Paul shouted to him not to harm himself, because everyone was still there. The jailer rushed in, trembling, fell down before Paul and Silas, and asked, "what must I do to be saved?" They told him to believe in the Lord Jesus. That night he washed their wounds, and he and his whole household were baptized. He brought them into his home, gave them a meal, and was filled with joy.

The next morning, the officials sent word to let Paul and Silas go. But Paul revealed that they were Roman citizens who had been beaten publicly without a trial, which was illegal. The officials were alarmed, came personally to apologize, and asked them to leave the city. Paul and Silas visited Lydia's house to encourage the believers, and then left.

Think about who was in that first church: a wealthy businesswoman, a formerly enslaved fortune-teller (perhaps), and a Roman jailer with his family. Only Jesus could bring together a group like that.

Where Was Paul?

When Paul wrote Philippians, he was in chains, and he didn't know whether he would live or die. But where was he? Scholars have proposed three places.

Rome is the traditional answer. Acts 28 ends with Paul under house arrest there for two years, around AD 60 to 62. Paul mentions the palace guard (1:13) and those who belong to Caesar's household (4:22), which fits Rome well.

Ephesus is another possibility. Acts doesn't describe an imprisonment there, but Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11 that he was in prison many times, and he faced deadly danger in Ephesus. Supporters point out that Philippians describes several trips back and forth between Paul and Philippi, which would be much easier from Ephesus, a few days away, than from Rome, which was several weeks' travel. If so, the letter might date to around AD 54 or 55.

Caesarea, on the coast of Israel, is a third option. Paul was held there for two years in the palace of Herod (Acts 23:35), before being sent to Rome. Caesar's household could refer to imperial servants and officials anywhere in the empire, not only in Rome. We can't be sure, but the message of the letter is the same wherever it was written.

Epaphroditus and the Gift

The Philippians had a long history of supporting Paul. Right after he left them, they sent him money more than once while he was in Thessalonica, and again when he was in Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:9). Paul says no other church partnered with him that way. And they did it while they were poor themselves; in 2 Corinthians 8, Paul describes the churches of Macedonia giving generously out of extreme poverty.

When they heard Paul was in prison, they sent him another gift, along with a man named Epaphroditus to deliver it and to stay and help him. In the Roman world, prisoners often depended on friends and family for food and other basic needs, so this was a real lifeline.

But Epaphroditus became seriously ill and nearly died. The Philippians heard about it and were worried, and Epaphroditus was

worried that they were worried. When he recovered, Paul sent him back home, probably carrying this letter.

One Letter or More?

Some scholars think Philippians, as we have it, might combine two or three shorter letters Paul wrote to the church. They point to a sudden change at 3:1–2, where Paul says finally and then launches into a sharp warning about false teachers; to the thank-you for the gift coming near the very end, in chapter 4, which seems late; and to an early Christian leader named Polycarp, who, writing to the Philippians in the second century, mentions that Paul wrote them letters, plural.

Other scholars argue that Philippians is a single letter. They note that the word translated finally can also mean further or as for the rest, that Paul often changes tone suddenly in his letters, that many themes and words connect the different parts, and that ancient letter writers often put thanks at the end. Many readers today treat it as one letter. Either way, the whole thing is Paul, and it's all Scripture.

The Map

Chapter 1: Paul's situation in prison, his joy that the gospel is spreading, and his struggle between living and dying.

Chapter 2: A call to humility and unity, with the great hymn about Jesus humbling Himself. Updates about Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Chapter 3: A warning about those who trust in religious credentials, Paul's story of losing everything to gain Christ, and pressing on toward the goal.

Chapter 4: A plea for two women to make peace, instructions about joy, prayer, and peace, and a thank-you for the gift, with the secret of contentment.

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CHAPTER 1

To Live Is Christ

Philippians 1

Paul opens the letter with Timothy's name next to his own, and he calls them both servants of Christ Jesus. The word literally means slaves. In his other letters, Paul often reminds people that he's an apostle. Here he doesn't bother. The Philippians already trust him. He doesn't need to pull rank with friends.

He writes to all God's holy people in Philippi, along with the overseers and deacons. This is the only letter where Paul greets church leaders by their roles at the start.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Overseers and Deacons**
>
> The NIV footnote explains that deacons here are believers chosen to serve alongside the overseers, or elders, of the church in a variety of ways. Overseer translates a Greek word, episkopos, that later gave us the word bishop. Deacon comes from diakonos, which means servant. In the early church, overseers seem to have led and taught, while deacons took care of practical needs, like caring for the poor. Romans 16:1 calls a woman named Phoebe a deacon. Paul's greeting shows that even this early, the churches had some organization.

Then comes Paul's thank-you, and it's warm. He thanks God every time he thinks of them, and he prays for them with joy. That's the first mention of joy in the letter. It won't be the last. Why is he so

grateful? Because of their partnership in the gospel, from the very first day until now.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Partnership**
>
> The Greek word is koinonia, which is often translated fellowship. But it means more than hanging out after church. It was used for business partnerships, where people shared resources and risks to reach a common goal. The Philippians weren't just Paul's fans. They were his partners. They prayed for him, gave money, sent people, and suffered for the same message. That's what fellowship really means.

Then Paul says one of the most comforting things in the Bible. He's sure that God, who started a good work in them, will keep at it and finish it on the day Jesus returns. If God has started something in you, He doesn't abandon projects halfway through. You may feel like a construction zone. That's okay. The builder isn't done yet.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Under Construction**
>
> Some people feel like they have to be perfect to be real Christians. Paul says the opposite. Growth takes time. You'll make mistakes. You'll have seasons where you feel stuck. But God's commitment to finishing what He started in you is stronger than your commitment to Him. Your confidence doesn't rest on how well you're doing. It rests on who's doing the work.

Paul says he holds them in his heart, and that God knows how much he longs for them, with the very affection of Jesus. Then he tells them what he prays for them. He asks that their love would overflow more and more, with knowledge and deep insight, so they can tell what really matters and live pure and blameless lives, full of the good fruit that comes through Jesus.

Notice that Paul doesn't pray for them to feel more loving. He prays for their love to grow smarter. Love that's wise knows how to help,

when to speak, when to listen, and what's actually good for someone. Love isn't just a feeling. It's a skill you can grow in.

Now Paul updates them on his situation, and it's not what you'd expect. He wants them to know that what has happened to him, his arrest and imprisonment, has actually helped spread the gospel. Everyone in the palace guard knows he's in chains because of Christ. And other believers, seeing his courage, have become bolder about sharing their faith.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Palace Guard**
>
> The Greek word is praetorium. In Rome, it could refer to the Praetorian Guard, the elite soldiers who protected the emperor. But the word was also used for a governor's headquarters in a province, like Herod's palace in Caesarea, where Acts 23 says Paul was held. That's why the NIV footnote offers whole palace as another possible translation. Either way, Paul's guards were rotating through, hearing his story, and some were apparently becoming curious, or even believers.

Then Paul admits something painful. Some people are preaching about Jesus out of envy and rivalry. They're trying to make Paul look bad, maybe hoping to grab some of his influence while he's out of the picture. Others preach out of love and support him.

And Paul's response is surprising. So what? he says. As long as Jesus is being preached, he's happy about it. He isn't worried about his reputation or who gets the credit. He's thrilled that people are hearing about Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Gets the Credit?**
>
> It's easy to be glad when good things happen, as long as you get some of the credit. It's harder when someone you don't like gets the attention. Paul's joy didn't depend on being noticed. If you can be happy for others, even rivals, when God uses them, you've learned something many adults never do.

Paul says he'll keep rejoicing, because he knows that through their prayers and the help of the Spirit, what has happened will turn out for his deliverance. The NIV footnote says the word could also be translated vindication or salvation. Paul might mean being released from prison, or being proven right at his trial, or his final salvation with God. He may mean all of these.

His deepest hope is that he won't be ashamed but will have courage, so that Jesus will be honored through his body, whether he lives or dies. And then he writes the words this chapter is named for. For him, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Think about what that means. If Paul lives, he gets more time to serve Jesus, love people, and see the gospel spread. If he dies, he gets to be with Jesus, which is even better. There's no losing option. When Jesus is the center of your life, even death can't take away what matters most.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Torn Between Two**
>
> Paul honestly doesn't know which to choose. He wants to depart and be with Christ, which he says is better by far. But he thinks it's more necessary for the Philippians that he stays. Departing was a word used for a ship pulling up anchor, or soldiers taking down their tents to move on. For Paul, death wasn't the end of the journey. It was leaving for home. And he's confident that he'll stay alive for now, to help them grow and give them more reason to celebrate when he visits again.

Whatever happens, Paul says, live in a way that's worthy of the gospel. Here Paul uses a word related to citizenship, as you read in Setting the Scene. He's saying: live like citizens of the kingdom you really belong to. Then, whether he comes to see them or only hears about them, he'll know they're standing firm, united in one Spirit,

and striving side by side, like athletes on the same team, for the faith of the gospel.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Side by Side**
>
> The word Paul uses for striving together comes from athletics or the battlefield. It's the picture of teammates working together, or soldiers fighting shoulder to shoulder. The NIV footnote says the phrase in one Spirit could also mean in one spirit, meaning unity of attitude. Either way, Paul's point is that Christians are a team. Nobody wins alone.

Don't be frightened by those who oppose you, Paul says. Then he says something hard but important. It's been given to them, as a gift, not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for Him. The Philippians were apparently facing opposition, maybe pressure from neighbors, loss of business, or trouble with local officials. Paul says they're going through the same struggle they saw him go through when he was beaten and jailed in their city, and now hear that he's still facing.

Suffering for Jesus isn't a sign that God has abandoned you. It's a sign that you belong to Him. That doesn't make it easy. But it means it's not meaningless.

KEY VERSE

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Philippians 1:21 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says God will finish the good work He started in you. How does that change the way you think about your failures?
2. Paul was glad Jesus was being preached, even by people who didn't like him. Why is it so hard to be happy for people we don't like?
3. If you finished the sentence For to me, to live is ..., what would honestly come next? Money, friends, sports, grades, approval?
4. Have you ever faced opposition, even small, because of your faith? How did you respond?

TRY THIS *Write down the name of someone who has been a partner to you in your faith: a friend, parent, leader, or mentor. This week, tell them thank you, and be specific about what they've meant to you.*

CHAPTER 2

The Mind of Christ

Philippians 2

Paul starts chapter 2 with a string of ifs. If being united with Christ gives you any encouragement, if His love brings you any comfort, if you share anything in the Spirit, if you have any tenderness and compassion, then make Paul's joy complete. How? By being united: having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

Of course, Paul knows the answer to all those ifs is yes. He's saying: since you have all these things in Christ, live like it with each other.

Then he gets specific. Don't do anything out of selfish ambition or empty pride. Instead, be humble and value other people above yourself. Don't just look out for your own interests, but also for the interests of others.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Selfish Ambition**
>
> The Greek word Paul uses originally described people who worked for hire, and then came to mean someone who campaigns for themselves, like a politician who only cares about winning. It's the attitude that says, what's in it for me? Paul used the same word in chapter 1 for the people preaching to make trouble for him. Selfish ambition destroys teams, friendships, and churches. It's one of the most common sins, and one of the hardest to see in ourselves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Humility**

In Philippi, a proud Roman colony, people cared a lot about status: titles, honors, positions, and being seen with the right people. Public inscriptions listed people's achievements. Humility was considered a weakness, the attitude of a slave. Paul flips that upside down. Valuing others above yourself doesn't mean thinking you're worthless. It means thinking about yourself less, and about others more.

How do you do that? Paul says: have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. And then he writes one of the most important passages in the whole New Testament.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Hymn about Jesus**

Many scholars think verses 6 to 11 are a hymn or poem, maybe one the early Christians sang in worship. The lines have a rhythm and structure that's different from Paul's usual writing, and they fall into two halves: Jesus coming down, and God lifting Him up. Some think Paul quoted a hymn the churches already knew; others think Paul wrote it himself. If it was already in use, it means that within about twenty or thirty years of Jesus' death, Christians were singing that He was equal with God. That's one of the earliest pictures we have of what the first believers thought about Jesus.

Here's what the hymn says. Jesus was in very nature God. The NIV footnote offers another way to say it: He was in the form of God. That doesn't mean He just looked like God. It means He was truly God, with all His glory.

But He didn't think of His equality with God as something to use for His own advantage. Instead, He emptied Himself, Paul says, or made Himself nothing. He took the very nature of a servant, a slave, and became a human being.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Made Himself Nothing**

The Greek word is kenoo, which means to empty. Some Christians have taught that Jesus emptied Himself of being God when He became human. But most Christians throughout history have understood it differently. Jesus didn't stop being God. He emptied Himself by taking on something: human nature, with all its weakness, and the role of a servant. He didn't hold on to His rights. He set aside His privileges, not His divinity.

And it gets lower. As a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient, all the way to death. And not just any death, but death on a cross.

In Philippi, everyone knew what crucifixion meant. Roman citizens were normally exempt from it. Crucifixion was a punishment for slaves, rebels, and the lowest criminals, the most shameful way to die. The proud citizens of Philippi would have been shocked: the King of the universe went all the way down to the bottom of the social ladder, to a slave's death.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Ladder**

Picture a ladder of status in the Roman world. At the top: the emperor, the gods. At the bottom: slaves, and below them, crucified criminals. Most people spent their lives trying to climb up. Jesus did the opposite. He started at the very top and climbed all the way down, on purpose, for us. That's what Paul means by having the mindset of Christ.

Then the hymn turns. Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name. And one day, at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue will declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Every Knee**

This line echoes Isaiah 45:23, where God says that before Him every knee will bow and every tongue will swear allegiance. In Isaiah, that honor belongs to the Lord, the one true God, alone. The hymn gives it to Jesus. For early Christians who believed in one God, that's an amazing claim. And for people in Philippi, where everyone was expected to honor Caesar as lord, saying Jesus is Lord was a bold, even dangerous, thing to say.

Paul draws the lesson. Since Jesus did all that, keep working out your salvation with fear and trembling, because God is the one working in you, giving you both the desire and the power to do what pleases Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Work Out Your Salvation**

This doesn't mean work for your salvation. Paul has spent whole letters saying we can't earn it. Work out is more like working out at the gym, or working out a math problem: bringing out what's already there. God has already saved you and put His Spirit in you. Now you live it out, carefully and seriously. And even the desire to grow comes from God. You don't do it alone.

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, Paul says. That sounds small after the hymn, but it's not. Complaining and fighting are exactly what destroys unity. Paul wants them to be blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a twisted and crooked world. He's borrowing words from Deuteronomy 32, where Moses described the grumbling Israelites in the wilderness. Paul wants the Philippians to be the opposite.

If they live that way, Paul says, they'll shine like stars in the night sky as they hold on to the word of life. In a dark world, a person who doesn't complain, gossip, or fight is noticeable. People will see the difference.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Like Stars**

In the ancient world, without electric lights, the night sky was full of stars, and travelers and sailors used them to find their way. Paul says believers shine like that. You don't have to be loud to shine. You just have to be different, in a good way, in a world that's often dark.

Paul says he's being poured out like a drink offering. In the Old Testament, and in Greek and Roman religion, a drink offering was wine poured out over a sacrifice. Paul might be hinting that he could soon be executed, his life poured out for them. And yet he says he's glad, and he wants them to be glad with him.

Then Paul talks about two friends. First, Timothy. Paul hopes to send him to Philippi soon. He says he has no one else like Timothy, who genuinely cares about them. Everyone else looks out for themselves, but Timothy has served with Paul like a son with his father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Timothy**

Timothy was from Lystra, in Galatia. His mother was Jewish and his father was Greek (Acts 16:1). He joined Paul's team as a young man, and he was with Paul when the church in Philippi was founded. He became one of Paul's most trusted coworkers. Two books of the Bible, 1 and 2 Timothy, are letters Paul wrote to him. In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul tells him not to let anyone look down on him because he is young. God uses young people.

Second, Epaphroditus. Paul calls him his brother, coworker, and fellow soldier, and the Philippians' messenger. He'd been sent with their gift to take care of Paul. But he got sick, so sick he almost died. God had mercy on him, Paul says, and on Paul too, sparing him grief on top of grief. Now Epaphroditus is homesick and upset because his church heard he was ill. So Paul is sending him back.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Epaphroditus**

His name comes from Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, so he probably came from a non-Jewish family. Paul calls him their messenger, and the Greek word is apostolos, the same word as apostle, meaning someone sent on a mission. Paul tells the church to welcome him with joy and honor people like him, because he risked his life for the work of Christ. The word for risked was a gambling term, meaning to roll the dice. Epaphroditus gambled his life for Jesus. He's one of the Bible's quiet heroes.

Notice how this chapter moves from the hymn about Jesus to real people. Timothy and Epaphroditus are examples of what the mind of Christ looks like in ordinary life. They put others first. They served. They took risks. That's the point. The mindset of Jesus isn't just for admiring. It's for living.

KEY VERSE

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Philippians 2:3–4 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Where do you see selfish ambition at school, on teams, online, or in yourself?
2. Jesus went all the way down the ladder. What would it look like for you to go down a rung or two this week for someone else?
3. Why do you think grumbling and arguing are so destructive to a group?
4. Timothy and Epaphroditus were ordinary people who served faithfully. Who in your life is like them?

TRY THIS *Go one whole day without complaining, about anything. Each time you catch yourself, replace it with a thank-you, out loud or in your head. See how long you can last.*

CHAPTER 3

Pressing On

Philippians 3

Paul starts chapter 3 by saying finally, and telling them to rejoice in the Lord. He adds that he doesn't mind repeating himself, because it's good for them. (As you read in Setting the Scene, this is one of the places where some scholars think a different letter may begin, because of what comes next.)

Because suddenly, Paul's tone changes completely. Watch out for those dogs, he says, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.

Whoa. Who is he talking about? Probably the same kind of teachers Paul fought in Galatians, people who told Gentile believers they needed to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses to really belong to God. We don't know if they had already arrived in Philippi, or if Paul was warning the church in advance.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Dogs**
>
> In Paul's world, dogs weren't cute pets. Most were wild scavengers that roamed the streets and ate garbage. Calling someone a dog was a serious insult. Some Jewish people used it for Gentiles, who were considered unclean. Paul flips it around. He says the people insisting on circumcision are the real dogs. It's harsh language, aimed at false teachers who were threatening the church, not at Jewish people in general.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Wordplay**

In Greek, the word for circumcision is peritome, meaning cutting around. The word Paul uses for mutilators is katatome, meaning cutting to pieces. It's a pun, and a sharp one. Paul is saying that circumcision done to earn status with God isn't a holy sign anymore. It's just cutting. True circumcision, he says, belongs to those who worship by God's Spirit, boast in Jesus, and don't trust in their own flesh.

Then Paul does something interesting. If anyone wants to compete on religious credentials, he says, he can win. He lists his résumé.

He was circumcised on the eighth day, as the law required, which meant he was born Jewish, not a convert. He was from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Hebrew born of Hebrews, from a family that kept its language and traditions. When it came to the law, he was a Pharisee, part of the strictest group. His zeal was so intense that he persecuted the church. And when it came to keeping the law, he says no one could find a fault in him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Tribe of Benjamin**

Benjamin was the youngest son of Jacob, and his tribe had a proud history. Israel's first king, Saul, was from Benjamin, and Paul's Hebrew name, Saul, was probably given in his honor. When the kingdom split after Solomon, Benjamin stayed loyal to Judah and the line of David. Jerusalem itself was on Benjamin's border. For a Jewish person, being a Benjaminite was a mark of honor.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pharisees**

The Pharisees were a Jewish group devoted to keeping God's law carefully, including the traditions about how to apply it to everyday life. They were respected by many ordinary people. In the Gospels, they often clash with Jesus, but not all Pharisees were the same. Some, like Nicodemus and Gamaliel, are presented sympathetically. Paul had studied under Gamaliel

(Acts 22:3). Paul never says being a Pharisee was evil. He says it couldn't make him right with God.

That's a pretty impressive résumé. But then Paul says all those things he once counted as gains, he now counts as losses, because of Christ. In fact, he considers everything a loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus. He's lost everything for Him, and he considers it all garbage, so he can gain Christ.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Garbage**

The Greek word is skubala. It was used for food scraps thrown out for the dogs, or, more bluntly, for dung. Some older translations used the word dung. Paul is being deliberately shocking. His impressive religious achievements, compared to Jesus, are worth about as much as the stuff you'd scrape off your shoe.

Why would Paul say that? Because he wants to be found in Christ, not with a righteousness of his own that comes from keeping the law, but with the righteousness that comes from God through faith. The NIV footnote, as in Galatians, offers another possible translation: through the faithfulness of Christ. Either way, Paul's point is clear. He doesn't stand before God on his own record. He stands on Jesus'.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Your Résumé**

What's on your résumé? Maybe grades, sports, followers, looks, popularity, talent, or even being a good church kid who never misses youth group. None of those things are bad. But if they're what you're trusting in to make you valuable, Paul says they're garbage compared to knowing Jesus. Your worth doesn't come from your achievements. It comes from Him.

Paul's goal is to know Christ. Not just know about Him, but know Him personally. He wants to know the power of Jesus' resurrection,

and to share in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, so that somehow he will reach the resurrection from the dead.

That's an unusual wish list. Most people want the power, but not the suffering. Paul understood that you can't have one without the other. Following Jesus means following Him through the hard places, too, with the confidence that resurrection is on the other side.

Then Paul admits he hasn't arrived yet. He's not perfect, and he hasn't reached the goal. But he presses on to take hold of the very thing for which Jesus took hold of him. He says there's one thing he does: forgetting what's behind and straining toward what's ahead, he keeps pressing on toward the goal, to win the prize God is calling him to.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Race**

Paul pictures a runner in a race, leaning forward, straining every muscle toward the finish line. A runner who keeps looking back will slow down, or trip. The Greek world loved athletics, and races were held at festivals throughout the empire. Winners received a wreath and were honored by their cities. Paul says the prize he's running for is far better: Jesus Himself.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Forgetting What Is Behind**

Paul had plenty behind him to forget. His achievements, which could make him proud. And his failures, especially persecuting the church, which could have crushed him with guilt. Forgetting doesn't mean pretending they never happened. It means not letting them define you. Your past wins don't make you righteous, and your past failures don't disqualify you. Keep running.

Paul says that those who are mature should think this way, and if anyone sees things differently, God will make it clear to them. In the meantime, they should live up to what they've already learned.

Then he invites them to follow his example, and to pay attention to others who live the same way.

Then, with tears, Paul warns them about people who live as enemies of the cross. Their god is their stomach, he says. They brag about things they should be ashamed of, and their minds are set on earthly things. Paul may mean people who claim to be Christians but live only for pleasure. Their end, he says, is destruction.

But then Paul gives one of the best reminders in the letter. Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly wait for a Savior to come from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Citizens of Heaven**
>
> In Philippi, Roman citizenship was a huge deal. It gave you legal rights, protection, and status. Paul himself was a Roman citizen and had used that fact to protect the church in Philippi (Acts 16:37). But he reminds them that their true citizenship is somewhere else. Just as Philippi was a colony of Rome, the church is a colony of heaven. And just as the emperor was called savior and lord, Paul says the true Savior and Lord is Jesus, and He's coming.

When He comes, Paul says, Jesus will transform our weak, mortal bodies to be like His glorious, resurrected body, by the same power that lets Him bring everything under His control. The Christian hope isn't floating on clouds as ghosts. It's resurrection, new bodies, and a renewed creation.

KEY VERSE

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's on your résumé that you're tempted to trust in to feel valuable?
2. Paul wants to know the power of the resurrection and share in Christ's sufferings. Why do you think they go together?
3. Is there something behind you, a success or a failure, that you need to stop letting define you?
4. What does it mean to you that your citizenship is in heaven? How should it change the way you live now?

TRY THIS *Write your own résumé: everything you're tempted to be proud of. Then, across the top, write the words "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Pray, and give it all to Him.*

CHAPTER 4

The Secret of Contentment

Philippians 4

Paul begins chapter 4 with a burst of affection. He calls the Philippians his brothers and sisters, the people he loves and longs for, his joy and crown. So, he says, stand firm in the Lord.

Then he names names. He pleads with two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree with each other in the Lord. Apparently they had a disagreement, and it was serious enough that Paul heard about it in prison.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Euodia and Syntyche**
>
> We don't know what their disagreement was about. But we do know they were important. Paul says they fought side by side with him for the gospel, along with Clement and his other coworkers, whose names are in the book of life. These weren't troublemakers. They were leaders, probably in house churches. Their names have meanings: Euodia means something like good journey, and Syntyche means something like good fortune. Ironically, their relationship was on a rough road.

Notice how Paul handles the conflict. He doesn't take sides. He pleads with each one, separately, using the same word twice. And he asks someone he calls his true companion to help them reconcile. We don't know who that was. Some think the Greek word, syzygos, was actually a person's name. Others think it was Luke, or

Epaphroditus, or a church leader. Whoever it was, Paul believed conflict in the church needs help, not gossip.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Conflict Between Christians**
>
> Even good Christians disagree, sometimes strongly. Paul doesn't pretend it doesn't happen. But he doesn't let it slide either, because disunity damages the whole church. If you're in a conflict with another believer, remember that you're on the same team. Your names are written in the same book. Ask someone wise to help you work it out.

Then Paul says something he's been saying all letter, this time twice. Rejoice in the Lord always. I'll say it again: Rejoice!

Always? Even in prison? Even in conflict? Even in sickness? Yes, but notice the words in the Lord. Paul isn't telling them to pretend everything's fine or to feel happy all the time. He's telling them to find their joy in Jesus, who doesn't change, even when everything else does.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Joy versus Happiness**
>
> Happiness usually depends on what happens. When things go well, you're happy. When they don't, you're not. Joy, in the Bible, is deeper. It's a settled gladness that comes from knowing God is with you and for you. You can have joy and still cry. Paul wrote this letter in chains, with friends turning against him and possible execution ahead. His joy didn't ignore his circumstances. It was bigger than them.

Let your gentleness be evident to everyone, Paul says. The Lord is near. That could mean He's close to you right now, or that He's coming back soon. Either way, it's a reason not to fight for your own way.

And then come some of the most loved verses in the Bible. Don't be anxious about anything. Instead, in every situation, pray. Tell God what you need, and thank Him. And God's peace, which is beyond

anything you can understand, will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Guard**

The word Paul uses for guard is a military word. It describes soldiers standing watch over a city. Philippi was a city full of retired Roman soldiers, and there were probably still soldiers stationed there. Paul says God's peace is like a garrison of soldiers posted around your heart and mind, keeping out the things that would attack them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What about Anxiety?**

Some people read do not be anxious about anything and feel even worse, because they struggle with anxiety and can't just turn it off. Paul isn't scolding people who feel anxious. He's inviting them to bring their worries to God. Anxiety can also be a real health issue, like asthma or diabetes. Getting help from parents, a counselor, or a doctor isn't a lack of faith. God often works through people. Prayer and help go together.

Paul then tells them what to think about. Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or worthy of praise, think about those things. What you fill your mind with shapes who you become. And whatever they have learned, received, or heard from him, or seen in him, they should put into practice. Then the God of peace will be with them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Are You Thinking About?**

Paul's list sounds a lot like lists of virtues written by Greek philosophers, which the Philippians might have recognized. He's saying that whatever is truly good and beautiful, wherever you find it, is worth your attention. Think about what you watch, scroll through, and listen to every day. Does it pass Paul's test? You don't have to cut out everything fun. But you are what you think about.

Finally, Paul gets to the thank-you. He rejoices that they've shown their concern for him again. They always cared, he says, but didn't have a chance to show it. And then he adds that he isn't saying this because he needs anything. He's learned to be content, whatever his circumstances.

He knows what it's like to have almost nothing, and what it's like to have plenty. He's learned the secret of being content in every situation, whether he's well fed or hungry, has plenty or has nothing. And what's the secret? He can do all this through Jesus, who gives him strength.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Content**

The Greek word Paul uses was a favorite of the Stoic philosophers. It meant self-sufficient, not needing anything or anyone outside yourself. The Stoics thought you could reach that by training yourself not to care about anything. Paul uses the word, but changes its meaning. He isn't self-sufficient. He's Christ-sufficient. His contentment doesn't come from not caring. It comes from Jesus, who gives him strength.

BACKGROUND CHECK **I Can Do All This**

Philippians 4:13 might be one of the most quoted verses in sports. You'll see it on shirts, eye black, and locker room walls. But in context, Paul isn't talking about winning games. He's talking about being content when he's hungry, in prison, or has nothing. The verse is less about doing great things and more about surviving hard ones. Jesus gives you strength not just to win, but to lose well, to go without, and to keep trusting.

Still, Paul says, it was good of them to share in his troubles. He reminds them that they were the only church that supported him when he first left Macedonia, and that they sent him help again and again in Thessalonica. He doesn't want their gifts for his own sake. He wants them to be blessed, like money credited to their account.

He's received everything Epaphroditus brought, and he has more than enough. Their gifts, he says, are a fragrant offering, a sacrifice that pleases God. Every time you give to help someone serving God, you're not just helping a person. You're worshiping God.

And then Paul makes a promise. My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus. Notice he says needs, not wants. And notice it comes right after the Philippians had given generously. They gave to meet Paul's needs, and God would meet theirs.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Caesar's Household**

In his final greetings, Paul mentions that all God's people send greetings, especially those in Caesar's household. That doesn't mean the emperor's family had become Christians. Caesar's household included thousands of enslaved people and freed workers who served the emperor as administrators, clerks, and servants, in Rome and around the empire. The gospel had reached right into the emperor's own staff. For the Philippians, proud of their Roman connections, that would have been exciting news.

Paul ends with grace, as he began. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. The NIV footnote says some manuscripts don't include the final Amen. But either way, the letter that began with joy ends with grace.

KEY VERSE

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6–7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Is there someone you're in conflict with? What would it look like to be of the same mind in the Lord with them?
2. What's the difference between joy and happiness in your own experience?
3. What are you anxious about right now? What would it look like to bring it to God, with thanksgiving?
4. Paul learned to be content with little or with much. Which is harder for you?

TRY THIS *Make a worry list and a thank-you list side by side. Pray through both. Then share one worry with someone you trust, a parent, friend, or counselor, so you're not carrying it alone.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's letter to the Philippians. At its heart is a song about Jesus: the One who had every right to glory, but who came down, served, and died, so that He could lift us up.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He wants you to know Him.

Paul says nothing compares to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus. You were made for that relationship.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus came all the way down.

The Son of God became a human being, served, and died on a cross for our sins. Then God raised Him and gave Him the name above every name.

> *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!* **Philippians 2:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Paul gave up all his religious achievements, because the only righteousness that counts is the one God gives to those who trust Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. He began a good work, and He'll finish it.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus came down, humbled Himself, and died on the cross for me, and that You raised Him from the dead.*

I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You for starting a good work in me. Give me Your joy and Your peace. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Philippians straight through, and circle every time you see joy or rejoice. Then read Colossians, the next letter in the New Testament.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Paul called the Philippians his partners. You need partners too. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Bring Him everything, with thanksgiving. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, there's a joy that no prison can lock up, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Philippians 4:4 (NIV)