

# The Year of St. Paul



## The Letter to the Philippi-

The letter to the Philippians has been called not only the tenderest letter that Paul ever wrote, but also the most delightful. It brims over with expressions of praise, confidence and rejoicing, despite the fact that this is one of Paul's prison epistles, written in Rome during his first imprisonment.

### THE CHURCH AT PHILIPPI

The Gospel came to Philippi sometime around 48 to 52 AD. On the Second Missionary Journey, Paul and Silas were "kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the Word in the province of Asia" (Acts. 16:6). They tried to go into Bithynia, "but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them" (Acts 16:7). They finally reached the coast at Troas, where Paul had a vision of Macedonia begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). Paul took this as God's call.

In Philippi, Paul and Silas met some women praying on the Sabbath at the river, led by Lydia, "a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God" (Acts 16:14). She welcomed Paul's message, was baptized with her household, and invited the missionaries and a cluster of believers into her home, where the tiny church began to grow.

One day they were met by a slave girl who prophesied from an evil spirit. Finally Paul turned to her and

said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her." With their slave girl no longer able to prophecy, her owners had Paul and Silas flogged and thrown in prison for "throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us

Romans to accept, or practice" (Acts 16:20-21). At midnight an earthquake

opened the prison doors and the jailer was converted and baptized with his household in the middle of the night. At daylight, Paul and Silas were thrown out of town, but not before a church had been established.

After Paul and Silas left, Luke may have stayed in Philippi. Paul kept in touch with the Macedonian churches through Timothy (Acts 19:21- 23); Philippians 2:19-20) and visited them twice more, probably during the autumn of 54-55 and again in the spring of 55-56 (Acts 20:1-3). The church at Philippi provided financial and material support several times during Paul's journeys. He bragged to the Corinthians about their generosity. "We want you to

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know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability... They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will" (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). They shared with Paul a "partnership in the gospel from the first day" (Philippians 1:5). Paul recalls, "In the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of

giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need" (4:15- 16). The warm letter to the Philippians is strong evidence to this deep love between the apostle and some of his dearest converts.

The letter is divided into four chapters which represent, for once, natural divisions within the text. The subject or theme of this letter is Jesus Christ and his availability for coping with the problems of life. The church at Philippi to which Paul wrote was not beset with serious doctrinal problems but only the normal, usual problems of everyday, commonplace existence — Christians who did not get along with one another, and incipient divisions within the church created by certain persons who were trying to mislead others with ideas not quite in accord with the Christian faith. To deal with these problems, Paul designed this epistle as a guide for ordinary living. It faces the normal problems a Christian has, and proclaims the victory which a Christian can appropriate in overcoming these problems. The recurring theme, running throughout the letter, is that of joy and rejoicing. Repeatedly the apostle uses phrases like "Rejoice, and again I say rejoice, rejoice in your sufferings, rejoice in your difficulties." This becomes, then, a letter in which we are instructed how to live victoriously and joyfully in the midst of the normal difficulties of life.

### **The "Christ-Hymn" in St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians (2:6-11)**

5. *Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus.*
6. *Who, though he was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God something to be grasped.*
7. *Rather, he emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance,*
8. *he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.*
9. *Because of this, God greatly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name that is above every other name,*
10. *that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth, and under the earth,*
11. *and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

*This is an early Christian hymn that St. Paul uses concerning the humiliation and exaltation of Christ the Servant of God. And it provides for us an understanding of the beliefs of the early Christian Church.*

*Paul is basically saying, "Jesus, who is equal to God, chose, for our sake, to abandon his equality with the Father, in perfect obedience, and take on the suffering of a shameful death on the cross. This was done for our sake.*

*Because of this, we have offering of self, Jesus is exalted above all else, and all of creation is now free to give proper homage to the Lord and Savior of all creation.*

*Our attitude, therefore, as Paul emphasized with the Church at Philippi, must be one of humbling service to one another, regarding others as better than ourselves. Greater humility and respect among the members of this early Church was expected. It is no different for the Church today.*

*The question for us is: Can we accept the humble task of serving others as readily and completely as Jesus did for us? If not, are we truly giving proper homage to Jesus as our Lord and Savior?*