

## **New Testament Survey – Ephesians and Philippians**

### **Preface**

We could easily have called the title of this book ‘Letters from Prison’ as they deal with two of the books of the New Testament written by Paul while he was in prison in Rome. The two books are quite different as they deal with different Churches and different circumstances.

The opening chapters of Ephesians give us a breath taking look at the whole doctrine of salvation taking us back to when God planned his rescue for sinners even before time began. It is in many ways beyond our human comprehension, but tremendously comforting and reassuring. The second half of the book gives us very practical teaching on how to live our daily lives as the true followers of Jesus.

The letter to the Philippians is one of the most personal books which Paul wrote because of the very obvious love and concern that united him with that Church through Christ. It is a very rich book and again is designed to strengthen believers as well as dealing with a number of problems.

This volume in our series surveying the New Testament is based on the radio talks prepared by Roger Prime for Serving Today and I am again very grateful to Roger for the thoughtful way he has covered this part of Scripture.

His years in pastoral and seminary teaching come out throughout.

It is our prayer that this book will encourage you to study Ephesians and Philippians in more detail and that the Lord will help you to share the spiritual treasures in them with others.

Derek French  
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### **Chapter 1 – Ephesians**

#### **Background.**

Ephesus was a large city on the western coast of modern day Turkey and was at that time an important port on the Adriatic Sea. We know from Acts 18 that Paul arrived in Ephesus towards the end of his second missionary journey and preached the gospel in the Jewish synagogue there before going back to Caesarea and Antioch. The people wanted him to stay longer but, whilst he could not remain there, he promised to return to them. When Paul left, Priscilla and Aquila remained in the city and they were able to help Apollos in his understanding of the Gospel when he arrived in the there. Acts 19 records Paul returning to the city on his third missionary journey, where he spent around three years preaching the gospel. Paul began in the Jewish synagogue, but after three months his message was opposed and he left the synagogue to preach

in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. During that time, not only was a Church established in Ephesus, but as people from that western part of Turkey visited the city and heard Paul preach, the Christian message spread to the whole area.

We read in Acts 19 v 10, *“This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.”* Such was the impact of Paul’s preaching in Ephesus that the silversmiths, who made silver shrines of the goddess Artemis, were losing so much trade they caused a riot against Paul and he had to leave the city.

### **Date of writing**

We certainly know from Ephesians 6 v 20 that Paul was in prison at the time he wrote this letter. Luke records at the end of Acts that after Paul finished his third missionary journey, he went to Jerusalem, where he was arrested and eventually was sent to Rome, where he was imprisoned under house arrest. We believe it was at this time Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians.

### **A circulated letter**

It is interesting to note that even though Paul spent so long in Ephesus and must have got to know many of the believers personally, that there are very few personal references in this letter. One of the probable reasons for this is that the letter may have been intended to be read not just by the Church at Ephesus, but also circulated around other Churches in the area that had been established

through Paul’s preaching in Ephesus. We know from Revelation chapters 1 to 3 that there is reference to seven Churches in that area and we also know of the Church at Colosse.

There is another reason for believing this letter is of a more general nature, rather than solely for the Church at Ephesus. Unlike the letters to the Corinthians and Galatians which deal with specific issues being faced by those Churches, Ephesians does not seem to address specific problems or issues facing the Church at Ephesus and may, therefore, be intended to be more widely read.

### **The purpose and main themes**

The main theme of the letter is ‘The glory of the Church’. In this letter Paul uses a wide variety of illustrations to depict the Church. It is likened to the household of God, the temple of God, the family of God, the body of Christ and the bride of Christ. All of these pictures help us to dwell on the glory of the Church. It is likely then, that Paul’s purpose in writing was firstly to teach the believers on the glory of the Church and then to remind them of their solemn responsibility to live in a way that was worthy of their calling as the Lord’s people.

In addition Paul has important teaching on the eternal plan and purposes of God, as we will see as we look into the book, and he also includes teaching on the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer and the Church. Another thing Paul stresses in this letter is the unity of the Church.

He sees Jews and Gentiles being brought together and united by Christ in the Church because in his work on the cross Christ has removed the barriers that divide them. It is also important to note the vital teaching on salvation through the grace of God found in chapters 1 and 2.

### **The big picture**

In chapter 1 Paul introduces us to this great theme of the glory of the Church. After his initial greeting Paul writes in verses 3 to 14 of God's glorious purposes in salvation. He is so excited by what he writes here that in the original Greek language this is one long sentence. Paul praises God for his eternal purposes in choosing a people for himself before time ever began; a people who would be adopted as his sons through Christ. This will be accomplished through the work of Christ on the cross and is freely given through the grace of God. This salvation is received as we hear the message of the gospel and believe in Christ and receive the Holy Spirit as the guarantee of our ultimate inheritance in glory. Paul stresses that all this is accomplished according to the sovereign will and purpose of God, whose ultimate goal is to unite the whole of his creation under the headship of Christ. The remainder of chapter 1 from verse 15 is taken up with Paul's prayer for the believers he writes to. Paul prays they might know God better, have a greater understanding of their hope in Christ and of the power that is available to them. It ends with a wonderful picture of Christ's present exaltation.

The opening verses of chapter 2 are a wonderful explanation of how God saves us by his grace. Paul sees the believer was once like all mankind, spiritually dead in sin, living in disobedience to God under the power of Satan, under the wrath of God and unable to save ourselves. But then, in his great love and mercy, God has graciously acted to give spiritual life to his chosen people through Christ and the glorious hope of being seated with him in heaven, so that the wonderful grace of God in saving sinners might be displayed for all eternity. Paul stresses that this salvation is by grace alone through faith in Jesus, and that even this faith is the gift of God (Eph 2:8 and see also 2 Pet 1:1). Whilst the believer has done nothing to earn this salvation, we have been saved by God for a life of good works that will bring glory to him (Eph 2:10).

We see that after writing about the believer's salvation by grace Paul uses the word 'therefore' in chapter 2 v 11. Whenever that word occurs in the Scripture we have to ask what it is there for. Paul not only wants these believers to remember what they once were before they were saved by Christ, but he also wants them to see what they are now. So, in view of what God has done to save them, he teaches that they are now united in Christ in one Church, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. The things that once divided them have gone and they not only have peace with God, they also have peace with one another as believers in Christ. Paul uses two illustrations here. Firstly, he sees all believers as members of God's household and then he

likens them to a building which has been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:19-20). Ultimately Christ is the foundation of the Church (1 Cor 3:11), but it is the Christ who is revealed to us in the Scriptures through the testimony of the apostles and prophets. That is why they are mentioned with Christ in this foundation. This building which is made up of all believers in Christ is likened to a spiritual temple in which God lives by his Spirit.

In chapter 3v1 Paul is about to offer another prayer for these believers, but you will see that he delays this prayer until v14 and writes about the way the mystery of God's purposes has been made known through the Gospel. Paul writes as the apostle called to preach to the Gentiles and he marvels at God's wonderful purpose to include Gentiles along with the people of Israel as members of one body, the Church, and to share in God's promises in Christ. Paul is humbled to be given the privilege of preaching this gospel to the Gentiles. God's purpose is that through the unity of his people in the Church both Jews and Gentiles, the wisdom and grace of God revealed in his plan of salvation will be displayed to the whole of creation (Eph 3:7-13). Although he has digressed from his prayer to teach about God's glorious purpose for his Church there is a strong link between the two. Paul's reason for praying is this wonderful unity God has created in his Church through Christ. He prays, therefore, that they will be strengthened by God's Spirit in love and unity, so that God will be glorified through them.

Chapter 4 begins what we might call the practical section of the letter as Paul deals with matters of conduct in both the Church and the individual believer. We note that in the first 16 verses he again picks up this theme of the unity of the Lord's people. We see that having written about the wonderful unity God has created in bringing Jew and Gentile together into the one Church, Paul now tells the believers they are to live in a way that is worthy of this calling and tells them they must make every effort to keep this unity God has created. One of the ways this unity is expressed is to recognise that Christ has given various gifts to his Church and that growth in love and unity comes as each part fulfils its purpose in the body. Paul is also concerned to show how they must live in the world as those who have been made new people in Jesus.

In chapter 4 from verses 17 to 32 he reminds the believers they must no longer live as they once did before their conversion. They are now new people in Christ and they must live holy and righteous lives. Paul tells them what their attitude must now be towards lying, anger, stealing and the way they speak. He then continues on this theme in chapter 5 v 1-17 where he shows they must live as those characterised by love, purity and wisdom. When we come to chapter 5, verse 18, Paul exhorts the believers to be filled with the Spirit. We need to understand that this is not some special experience. The sense of the original words is that the believers are to keep on being filled with the Spirit. The Bible teaches that all believers receive the

Spirit in our conversion, but we are to allow the Spirit continually to fill our lives as we live in obedience to God's Word. A life filled by the Holy Spirit will produce a number of spiritual fruits. We see here in Ephesians 5 that our lives will be marked with thanksgiving and joy as we worship God together, and also a willingness to submit to one another in the fellowship of the Church. We see at the end of chapter 5 that being filled with the Spirit of God will affect the way husbands and wives relate to each other in marriage, and at the beginning of chapter 6, the way parents and children behave in the family and the way slaves and masters behave in their relationships with each other. So being filled with the Spirit affects the way we live in everyday life as well as in the Church.

In chapter 6 Paul writes about the Christian's armour. It is only with the Lord's help and the armour he has provided that the Christian will be able to live as a new man in a sinful world which is under the power of Satan. Paul then closes with a request for prayer for his own ministry and final greetings in which he commends Tychicus, who appears to have been the messenger to take this letter to the believers at Ephesus.

### **Sermon suggestions**

There are many themes in this book which we can preach from and the following are a selection. For example, you might like to preach on God's wonderful plan of salvation by grace from chapters 1 and 2. You could also do a series looking at Paul's teaching on the unity of the Church from

this letter. Chapters 4 and 5 and the first 9 verses of chapter 6 would make a very helpful series on the theme of living as God's people. You could also do a series on prayer, looking at Paul's prayers in chapters 1 and 3 and then Paul's encouragement to pray and request for prayer in chapter 6 v 18-20. Finally, you could do a helpful series on the Christian's armour from chapter 6.

### **An example of a sermon outline**

Having said that we could preach a series on the Christian armour from Ephesians 6, here is an outline on the importance of preparing ourselves as Christians from Ephesians 6 v 10-20. This could be a sermon you preach on its own or it could be used to introduce a series on the spiritual armour.

We might call it **Preparing for battle**

#### **Introduction.**

You could make reference to the wars that sadly trouble our world today and then introduce the thought that as Christians we are always in a spiritual warfare, so we need to prepare for battle. Then the following points could be made:

#### **1) Be strong**

We would base this on chapter 6 verses 10-12, showing the true nature of the spiritual battle we are in. Often our struggles appear to be against flesh and blood, but the real enemy is Satan and we can

only prepare for battle by recognising we can only fight in God's strength. So we are to 'be strong in the Lord'. Paul tells us in v11 that we can only stand against the devil by putting on God's armour.

## **2) Put on**

Based on verses 13-17 stressing the importance of putting on the armour God has provided in order to stand against the attacks of Satan. If this is introducing a series on the armour, the details can be explained in later messages, otherwise I would want to comment on the individual pieces of the armour God has provided.

## **3) The importance of prayer**

We need to emphasise the importance of prayer in the spiritual warfare and comment on Paul's words on prayer in verses 18-20. It is only as we depend on God in prayer can we know his strength in the spiritual warfare.

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## **Chapter 2 - Philippians**

### **Background**

The Church at Philippi was established during Paul's second missionary journey and those events are recorded for us in Acts 16. We are particularly familiar with the conversion of Lydia, the deliverance of the slave girl and the conversion of the jailer. The founding of the Philippian

Church was a major step forward in the work of the Gospel. On his first missionary journey Paul had preached the Gospel in Cyprus and the area that we know as Turkey today. On his second journey Paul revisited the Churches that had already been established in that area and as he tried to extend his ministry there the Holy Spirit closed the door and Paul was called to cross over into Macedonia to preach the Gospel there. He arrived at Philippi, where he continued his missionary work and the Lord established the first Church in Europe in the city. This was a big step forward for the spread of the Gospel.

Philippi was a very important city. At the time it was a leading city in Macedonia. It was also a Roman colony and its inhabitants enjoyed all the privileges of being Roman citizens. The history of the city goes back, however, to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC when it was established as a result of the gold mines in that area. It was named after Philip, the father of Alexander the Great and the gold from those mines was used to finance much of the Greek empire that expanded under Alexander. In Paul's day Philippi was an important centre for trade and it stood on the main highway leading to Rome. Many people would visit Philippi on their journeys or to trade and this enabled the Gospel to spread out from the city. This missionary strategy Paul used in preaching in the important cities is, of course, illustrated by the fact that Acts 16 records the first convert at Philippi was Lydia, a lady from Thyatira in Turkey who travelled to Philippi to sell her purple dyed cloth.

Following his first visit Paul kept close contact with this new Church. It would seem on that second missionary journey Paul sent Timothy and Silas back to visit the Churches established in Macedonia while he went on to Athens. We know from Philippians 4 v 15-16 that these new believers at Philippi sent gifts to support Paul in his missionary work. Paul also visited Macedonia on his third missionary journey when he made probably two further visits to Philippi as recorded in Acts 20. This continued contact gives us the background to Paul writing his letter to the Philippian Church.

### **Reason for the letter**

We see from Philippians chapter 1 that Paul is writing while he is being held as a prisoner for the sake of Christ. It is likely this letter was written at the same time as the letter to Ephesus, when Paul was being held under house arrest and guarded by soldiers in Rome. News of this had reached the believers at Philippi and such was their concern for Paul that they sent one of their own members, Epaphroditus, to visit Paul in Rome and take a gift to support him financially. It would appear from Philippians 2 v 25-30 that he stayed on longer in Rome than anticipated, ministering to Paul's needs on behalf of the Philippian Church. However, during that time he became seriously ill and almost died. News of this reached the believers at Philippi and they naturally became concerned for Epaphroditus. At this time the Lord in his mercy restored Epaphroditus to health and Paul, knowing of their

concern, sent him back to Philippi so that the believers there might be reassured of his well-being. He used the occasion of the return of Epaphroditus to write this letter and send it with him.

### **A close bond with the church**

Right in the opening verses of chapter 1 Paul thanks God for the Philippian's partnership with him in the Gospel, which had been expressed in their prayers and financial support of the Apostle. Paul had also heard that they were concerned his imprisonment had brought his missionary work to an end, but he reassures them of the many opportunities he still had to preach the Gospel and the Roman soldiers who guarded him and many others in Rome were hearing the Good News of Jesus from Paul. We see from chapter 4 v 22 that there were even converts from among Caesar's household. Paul himself hopes he will soon be released from prison and looks forward to visiting the Philippians again. We see that at the end of chapter 1. In the meantime he tells them he is sending Timothy to visit them and commends him to them in chapter 2 v 19-24. Then in chapter 4 Paul expresses his thanks for the financial gifts they had sent to support him in his missionary work as well as the gifts they had sent through Epaphroditus. We certainly get a picture of a very close and warm relationship that Paul had with this Church at Philippi.

**Issues needing help**

It would seem there was a danger of disunity creeping into the Church which Paul appears to address at the beginning of chapter 2, where he gives instructions concerning their attitude towards one another and then sets before them the example of Christ in his humility. This danger of disunity is particularly seen in chapter 4 v 2, where Paul pleads with two women in the fellowship who were quarrelling to agree with each other in the Lord. The other issue affecting the Church was the danger of being influenced by false teachers who wanted to impose Jewish practices such as circumcision on the believers. We see in chapter 3 that Paul warns them very strongly to be on their guard against this danger. He describes these false teachers as dogs, those who are trying to harm the believers.

**Major themes**

We could sum up Paul's teaching in this letter with two words - joy and peace. You will notice that the theme of joy and rejoicing comes up quite frequently in the letter and is best summed up by Paul's words in chapter 3 v 1 and 4 v 4 "...rejoice in the Lord." Paul constantly points us to the Lord Jesus and all he has done for us as the source of our joy as believers. The other theme is the peace we have as those whose faith is in the Lord Jesus. This is expressed particularly in chapter 4 v 6-9 where Paul refers to the peace of God guarding the heart and mind of the believer and also assures us that the God of peace will be with us. It is that peace from God which enables Paul to be content with his circumstances in life, a contentment

reflected throughout the letter and summed up in chapter 4 v 10-13, where Paul is able to say "*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.*"

**The big picture**

We mentioned earlier the close relationship between Paul and the believers at Philippi that is reflected in chapter 1. There he expresses his thanks to God for these believers at Philippi and reveals the deep love he has for them and his confidence that God will continue and complete the work he has begun in their lives. Paul also wants to reassure these believers that his experience of imprisonment has turned out for the advance of the Gospel. In chapter 1 v 15-18 there were some people who seemed to be envious of Paul and were preaching the message of Christ out of selfish ambition, hoping they could stir up trouble for Paul in his imprisonment. This is a rather unusual passage and the important thing to notice is that whilst their motives may have been wrong, their message was not wrong. They were still preaching the Good News of Jesus. Because they were being true to the message, even though they preached with selfish motives, Paul rejoiced that Christ was being preached.

It seems from the way Paul writes in chapter 1 v 19-26 that he anticipates his imprisonment is coming towards its end. He senses that he is soon to know the outcome of his time in prison. Whilst he knows it might end in martyrdom Paul has no fear of this. He says in v 21 that to die will be gain and in v 23 he expresses the tension he feels between his

desire to depart to be with Christ and his responsibility to remain and continue his service for the Lord. It seems from this passage the likely outcome Paul anticipates is that he will be spared and released from his captivity to continue his service for the Lord, particularly that he will visit the Philippian believers again to encourage them in their faith. The way Paul writes here really challenges all of us called to serve the Lord to have that same attitude of sacrificial service for our Saviour, being willing to submit our lives to his will knowing that to live is Christ and to die will be gain.

At the end of chapter 1 Paul encourages the believers to stand firm as one man for the faith of the Gospel. In those words we see the first suggestion of the struggle they were having against false teachers and Paul urges them to be united in their stand for the truth. The importance of this unity comes out in the beginning of chapter 2 where he urges the believers to be humble and unselfish in their attitudes towards one another. This, of course, leads Paul into the wonderful passage from verses 5-11 about the example of Christ in his humility and selfless attitude. This really is an outstanding passage showing to us the amazing grace of God in Jesus coming to this earth as a man for our salvation. The truth Paul teaches here is that as the Son of God the Lord Jesus is in his very nature God, one with the Father and Spirit. Even though this was true he was willing to leave his position in heaven and all the glory that was his there to become fully man, taking the position of a servant and humbling himself to die on a

cross to save from sin all who believe and trust in him. Jesus never ceased to be fully God, but through the incarnation he became fully man, the two natures perfectly united in the Lord Jesus Christ. Following his death, God the Father raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to his position and glory in heaven that he had laid aside in his incarnation. The day will come when every knee will have to bow before Jesus and every tongue confess that he is Lord. In chapter 2 verse 12 Paul uses the word '*therefore*'. This means that in the light of what Christ has done for us, this is what we are to do. Paul then goes on to show that as believers we must respond to what Jesus has done for us by living out our salvation as we live holy and godly lives.

In chapter 3 Paul deals with the issue of the false teachers who appear to have been trying to influence the Church. He warns of these Jewish teachers who were trying to impose circumcision onto the believers at Philippi. Paul reminds them that at one time he was a devout Jew, placing all his confidence in outward ritual and religious zeal to earn God's favour, but all that is now worthless. This is because the only righteousness God accepts is that which is found through faith in Jesus, not from our own achievements to keep God's law. Paul has left behind that old way of life and he presses on to know Christ more so that one day he will enter into the eternal life of heaven Christ has secured for him through his death. He urges his readers to have that same attitude, recognising their true citizenship is to be found in heaven.

In chapter 4 Paul takes up the theme of peace we mentioned earlier as well as that of joy. We see how Paul not only writes about the peace of God that guards the hearts and minds of the believer, he also demonstrates how that peace works out in his own experience as he has learnt to be content in all the circumstances of life. We see from verse 13 that Paul testifies he can cope in every circumstance of life through Christ who gives him strength. Paul also takes opportunity to thank the believers at Philippi for their giving to support him in the work of the Gospel.

### **Sermon suggestions**

This is not too long a letter so we might try preaching a series through the whole book. We could also pick up on the theme of joy and show how in both his teaching and example Paul shows Jesus as the true source of joy in life. We could also speak on the other main theme of peace and how Paul was able to content himself in every circumstance of life. Chapter 2 is a wonderful passage in helping us see the glory of Jesus in both his humility and exaltation and also the way we can learn from his own example how we should live our lives. Chapter 3 also contains important teaching showing how the only way to be accepted as righteous by God is through faith in Christ and not our own efforts to earn his favour.

### **A sermon outline**

This is based on Philippians 2 v 5-11. We will call it ‘**The man who is God**’.

## **1) The attitude of Christ v 5-8**

Paul highlights three things here.

### **a. Jesus’ humility**

This is seen in his leaving the glory of heaven to become a servant.

### **b. Jesus’ humanity**

This is seen in his becoming man to be our Saviour.

### **c. Jesus’ humiliation**

This was displayed as he went to the cross to suffer and die for our sin.

## **2) The exaltation of Jesus**

Again Paul emphasises three things

### **a. Jesus’ resurrection**

He was raised from death and exalted in heaven

### **b. Jesus’ reign**

He is given the highest place in heaven from where he reigns

### **c. Jesus’ return**

When every tongue in heaven and earth will confess he is Lord.

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