

# *Off the Shelf*

## *Sunday School Lesson*

### *Philippians 1*

#### **Background**

Paul wrote Philippians around 60AD while he was a prisoner in Rome. He had visited Philippi during his second missionary journey (49-52AD). Philippi was a Roman colony in Macedonia (northern Greece) named after the father of Alexander the Great. When Paul wrote this letter, the church was well established. This epistle is a thank you letter from Paul, after receiving a gift of money from the church. This letter is full of joy and rejoicing. It contains positive themes and encouragement, stressing unity, humility and self-sacrifice.

#### **Thanksgiving (1:1-7)**

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.*

1. Paul begins by calling himself a servant of Christ. This is a humble way to begin this letter and contrasts with some of his other letters, in which he refers to his authority as an apostle. *Why do you think he does this? How does this set the tone for this letter?* (1 Cor 1:1; Col 1:1)
2. Born-again believers in Jesus are saints. Saints are people who have been made holy by the blood sacrifice of Jesus. They are also set apart to be his witnesses and to do good works. Saints are special because God makes them so. (Eph 2:9-10; 1 Pet 2:9-10) *How does this Biblical teaching compare with popular thinking about saints?*
3. Paul mentions that there were overseers and deacons in the church. Overseers might be elders or bishops, who were mainly concerned with teaching, spiritual

growth and discipline. Deacons were likely mainly concerned with mercy ministries and the physical needs of the church. *How does this model compare with your church?*

4. Paul gives thanks for their faithfulness in preaching and living according to the gospel. Born-again Christians can be sure that God is working in them, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our seal, our deposit and our assurance that God is with us. God will keep his promises to save us and redeem our bodies at the resurrection. (Mt 22:29-30; Jn 14:15-17; 1 Cor 6:19-20; 2 Th 2:13-17) (*How does knowing God's promises make you feel?*)

### **Paul Rejoices Despite Difficulties (1:8-19)**

*God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.*

1. Paul expresses strong affection for the Philippian Christians, who were a diverse group of Jews and Gentiles. The love of God and the changes brought about by the Holy Spirit break down barriers due to ethnic, racial, social class, appearance and other differences, that cause hatred and strife. The Bible teaches that the identity of Christians is now Christ. We have unity and a common identity that surpasses all other superficial differences. (Gal 3:26-28) *Have you experienced this wonderful love and unity that comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit?*
2. Spiritual knowledge and insight come from studying the Bible and prayer. These are essential for spiritual growth and to enable us to identify and keep

away from evil. (Ps 25:4-5, 119:133; Eph 6:12-17)

3. Paul says that God has used his imprisonment to advance the gospel. This seems contrary to what you might expect, since Paul is not able to travel and meet people. The validity of the gospel and his preaching are increased by the fact that this is the only reason for his imprisonment. Also, he is able to share the gospel with his guards and everyone in the palace. Other Christians are stepping forward to spread the gospel, instead of relying upon Paul.
4. Romans 8:28-30 says that everything that happens to Christians is for their good and the advancement of the gospel. It may not always be evident, but God is sovereign, and he is committed to doing what is best for us. *What have you learned through trials and hardships? How has this brought you closer to Jesus?*
5. Some Christian leaders saw Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to increase their own status. They were motivated by envy, greed and pride. Paul still rejoices because the gospel is preached, despite evil motives. What is important is that people hear about Jesus and accept him as Savior and Lord.
6. Paul is confident that he will be delivered from his imprisonment. This deliverance could be freedom from jail or death. *How does the work of the Holy Spirit give us peace and help to free us from the fear of death?* (Ps 32:7-8)

### **Certain Expectations (1:20-30)**

*I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with will all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now*

*hear that I still have.*

1. Hope for Christians, in the promises of God, is not wishful thinking but a certain expectation of the future fulfillment of what God said he will do for us. Paul says that, no matter what happens to him, he has the expectation that God will lead him and provide for him. Paul's strength and commitment to glorify God are based in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to help him. *How has the Holy Spirit helped you in difficult times to glorify him?*
2. Paul's philosophy of life is summarized in his statement: "To live is Christ and to die is gain." What motivates him is to become like Jesus. This requires dying to selfish desires, when they conflict with what God is calling us to do and to become. (Lk 9:23-25) Ultimately, death is not a loss but a gain. *How is this so?*
3. Paul says that they must stand firm in their faith and unified in their witness for Jesus, despite trials and opposition. This is a sign to unbelievers that they are doomed to destruction. *How have the deaths of Christian martyrs been a convicting and convincing witness to unbelievers?*

## ***Off the Shelf***

### ***Sunday School Lesson***

### ***Philippians 2***

#### **Unity and Humility (2:1-11)**

*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

1. Christians are to be unified in their core beliefs and seek to live in peace with other Christians in disputable matters. The core beliefs of Christianity are summarized in the Nicene Creed. Unity does not mean uniformity in thinking or opinions about disputable matters. However, demands for uniformity is what has split Christianity into denominations. *Can you think of some disputable matters that have separated Christians?*
2. Christians of one denomination sometimes consider themselves to be superior to other Christians. Paul says we are to strive to be like Jesus and to focus on advancing his kingdom. We are not to focus on disputes with other Christians over disputable matters. Such disputes often arise from selfish ambition or vain conceit.
3. Paul says that we are to think of other Christians as being better than us. This goes against our human nature. We are to be concerned with the welfare of others and not just ourselves. *What changes in us does the Holy Spirit have to make to enable us to do these things? Why is this so difficult?*
4. Jesus is our Lord, and he is our role model. *How did the life of Jesus model humility, love and concern for others? How was Jesus rewarded? How does this type of humility precede honor and glory for us?* (Prov 15:33, 22:4; Mt 23:11-12)

## **Jesus is Lord of Our Lives (2:12-30)**

*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me. I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon. But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed*

*because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help that you could not give me.*

1. Paul says that God is working within every born-again Christian to change them into the likeness of Jesus. This begins by faith when we are born-again. Christians are infants at the time we were born into the kingdom of God. Like children, we grow spiritually into adulthood, which will be complete when our bodies are resurrected and perfected. (Eph 2:8-10; 1 Jn 3:1-3)
2. The Holy Spirit within Christians changes them so they desire to do God's will. God's presence within is an awesome and intimate union, that should inspire fear and trembling. Christians will not be condemned, but we will be judged according to our obedience. (1 Cor 3:11-16; Rev 22:12)
3. Christians are called to be salt and light. We are to live as examples of good and loving people, such that others want to know what makes us this way. (Mt 5:13-16)
4. Timothy has proven himself to be a faithful servant of the gospel through his whole-hearted and devoted service. He did not let his personal concerns keep him from obeying God. *How do personal concerns keep Christians from growing and obeying God? How does this affect our ability to be salt and light? How do you think this affects our relationship with Jesus and future rewards?*
5. Paul is sending Epaphroditus back to them. They sent him to Paul and they were worried about him, because he was ill and almost died while he was with Paul. The journey from Philippi to Rome was almost 700 miles. Epaphroditus was a messenger who brought financial and emotional support to Paul. There are many faithful Christians whose good works are ordinary, but God can use them to do extraordinary things to advance his kingdom. *Do you know some Christians who are low key and faithful servants of Jesus? Show them that you appreciate them and encourage them.*

***Off the Shelf***  
***Sunday School Lesson***  
***Philippians 3***

## **Faith not Legalism (3:1-9)**

*Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.*

1. The amazing provisions and promises of God that come from faith in Jesus are wonderful! The angels in heaven wonder at the great love and works of God to transform sinful humans into glorious royalty, in the image of Jesus. (1 Pet 1:10-12) The great things that God has done for Christians is our source of constant joy and rejoicing! *What are some of the things that God has done for us that give us endless joy and make us want to rejoice whatever the circumstances of life?*
2. Many early Christians were Jewish converts. There were some Jewish converts who taught that salvation was obtained from keeping the laws, plus faith. Paul calls these teachers evil doers. They put their confidence in their rituals, credentials and works. *What are some examples of false doctrines of works plus faith for salvation that are taught in present Christian churches?*
3. Paul says that born-again Christians have been circumcised spiritually by the Holy Spirit, not in the flesh by man. They have been given a new heart that is sensitive to God. Christians have the Holy Spirit who enables them to know and serve God according to his revealed will. (Jn 6:63; Col 3:9-14)
4. Paul says that, although he has great credentials based on his Jewish heritage, he considers this worthless. He has no confidence in credentials, rituals and the traditions of men. He sees them as obstacles to knowing God through faith in Jesus. The righteousness given by religious acts are trash compared to the glorious right-

eousness offered by God through faith in Jesus. *Why are religious traditions difficult to change?*

## **Live with Heaven in Mind (3:10-21)**

*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained. Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before now and say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*

1. The desire of every born-again Christian is to know Jesus more intimately, follow his example and love him more dearly. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. *Is Jesus the focus of your life? Do you think of him constantly? If not, what are some things that distract you?*
2. God has called each Christian and has given us the gift of faith to believe in Jesus and be born-again. (Eph 2:8-10) The Holy Spirit is working in us and he will perfect us at the time of the resurrection. Our task is to seek to know and obey God. The more we know him, the more we become like him, and the more we will want to do what he commands. The experiences we have of God transform us. *What are your most precious experiences of God and how have they changed you?*
3. Paul says that he does not dwell on his failures. He lives looking forward towards accomplishing the good works that Jesus is calling him to do. We need to never forget our sinfulness, but we must not let our guilt and shame affect us by dwelling on it. Jesus has freed us from the penalty of our sins. *How can looking back at our failings hinder our work for the kingdom of God?*

4. Some characteristics of false Christians are: they live for the pleasures of this world; material things are their goal and they love power and influence which feeds their egos and pride. These characteristics serve as a warning to every Christian not to become too entangled with the things of this world, that lead us away from knowing and obeying Jesus. (Heb 12:1-2)
5. Every born-again Christian longs to be with Jesus and to be perfected when he returns to reign on the earth. Our citizenship is in heaven. We are living in a world that is sinful and this makes us uncomfortable. The Bible says that we are on a pilgrimage to our promised land. (1 Pet 2: 9-12) *In what ways are Christians like pilgrims or strange people, who are passing through this world?*

## ***Off the Shelf***

### ***Sunday School Lesson***

### ***Philippians 4***

#### **Unity and Peace (4:1-9)**

*Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends! I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yoke-fellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, 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. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*

1. Paul describes those who have become Christians, because of his preaching, as his children, friends, brothers, his joy and crown. He calls them his crown because they are the evidence and fruit of what God has done through him. Paul knows that he will be rewarded for his work in spreading the gospel. (1 Cor 9:16-17) *What good works has the Holy Spirit inspired you to do?*
2. Euodia and Syntyche were two Christians in the Philippian church whose arguing

was disruptive. Christians frequently have minor disagreements, but we must remain united in our respect and love for each other. The desire to be unified and to be peace makers must not be overcome by pride and egos. In the case of Euodia and Syntyche, Paul suggests a mediator to help them reconcile. This indicates their dispute was not caused by a major doctrinal disagreement. If it was, the elders would be called upon to settle the matter. (1 Cor 1:10; 1 Pet 5:5-6)

3. When we pray, we should always do so with thanksgiving. *Why is this important?*
4. Paul says that, when we bring our requests to God in prayer, we should not worry that he isn't listening or expect that God will answer immediately. Prayer is conversation with God. As servants before a great king, we come with requests. God is sovereign, and his will and plans have been ordained throughout eternity. He does not change his mind or plans. Therefore, what we are praying for is that his will be done and that he will give us peace and understanding in all circumstances. (Mt 6:9-13)
5. *What do think about most often? Do you think about the worries of life?* If so, you will not have the peace of God. You are trying to bring about things that you either have no power to bring about, or you are likely going to try to manipulate things, rather than resting in God's will. *How is praying about the concerns of life and giving them to God, different than just worrying about them?*
6. Paul says we should set our minds on God and the things of heaven. Train your mind to pray to God continually. We should be focused on God and working to advance his kingdom. In this way, we experience the presence of God and learn to see and accept his will. This brings us peace, joy and greater love for God. (1 Th 5:16-18; 1 Jn 1:5-9)

### **God Meets Every Need (4:10-23)**

*I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it is good of you to share my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, 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. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, and acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send greetings. All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*

1. Paul has learned to be content in every circumstance of his life. As long as he is following God's will, as revealed by the Holy Spirit, he has peace even in trials and difficulties. He knows that God is working in and through him. This gives him great joy, even in suffering. *Have you experienced this joy while suffering?*
2. Paul is confident that he can do everything that God asks of him. This is because God always provides the means to accomplish his will. We may see it as impossible, but all things are possible for God.
3. Paul commends them for being generous and faithful in supporting him. The Old Testament laws required that a tenth or tithe be given to God. This answered the question: *How much do I have to give to God?* In the New Testament we are under grace, not the law. The question for us is: *How much do I dare to keep for myself?* Christians are called to practice self-denial for the sake of the gospel. We should look at ten percent as the least amount to give to God.
4. There is a principle that, the more generous you are to others, the less you find you need for yourself. You find joy in making others happy with money(,) rather than yourself.
5. Paul shared the gospel wherever he was. For him to live was to proclaim Jesus. It is not surprising that some of Caesar's guards, slaves or others who came into contact with him became Christians. *Do you share your faith with those around you?* God put people around you, in your family, work and travels. *Do you pray for them and try to witness to them?* (1 Cor 9:16-18)