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Philippians from a Messianic Perspective

To Evelyn, my great-granddaughter. Although she is only five years old now, may she grow in the fear of ADONAI. Lord, give her wisdom every day, and fill her with the Ruach Ha'Kodesh. Guide her parents to love her and discipline her so she can make a decision to trust in You.



As John MacArthur states in his commentary on **Philippians**, people today are consumed by the passionate pursuit of happiness. Self-help books, motivational speakers, and advice columnists claim to offer the key to happiness, but for many people the door remains locked. Unable to control their circumstances, they find themselves instead controlled by their circumstances. When their job, relationship, or family fails to make them happy, they dump it and look for a new one. But on the merry-go-round of life, they can never quite seem to reach the brass ring. Having fruitlessly pursued happiness through pleasure and self-gratification, they arrive at the jaded view of life expressed by the Teacher in **Ecclesiastes 1:2: Pointless, pointless, everything is pointless** (see the commentary on **the Life of Solomon to see link click [Cc](#) - The Failure of Earthly Things**).

But if happiness, the fleeting feeling of exhilaration, is elusive . . . **joy** is not. Biblical **joy**, the settled conviction that **God** sovereignly controls the events of life for believers' good and **His** glory, is available to all who obey **Him**. In fact, **God** commands believers to rejoice (**2:18, 3:1, 4:4**, cf. **2 Corinthians 13:11** and **First Thess 5:16**). As a result, divine **joy** is the theme of **Philippians**. The Greek word for **joy**, in both the noun and verb forms, appears a dozen times

in **its** four chapters (**1:4, 18, 25; 2:2, 17, 18, 28, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10**).

The circumstances of both the writer and the recipients of this brief letter were not those that would be expected to produce **joy** and happiness. When **the apostle Paul** wrote this letter to **his** beloved **Philippian** congregation, **he** was a prisoner in Rome. Little in **his** turbulent life since **his** dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road three decades earlier (see **Acts Bc - Sha'ul Turns from Murder to Messiah**) would have been expected to produce **joy**. **He** had faced fierce and unrelenting opposition, both from Gentiles and from **his** unbelieving Jewish countrymen (**Second Corinthians 11:23-30**). After **Paul's** arrest (see **Acts Co - Paul's Arrest in Jerusalem**), and **his** subsequent journey to Rome (see **Acts Cl - Paul's Journey to Rome**), **he** wrote **Philippians** in **his** fourth year of custody awaiting Emperor Nero's final decision in **his** case.

The church at **Philippi** was a spiritually healthy congregation. **They** were productive and hard working. It was **their** blessed condition that prompted **Paul** to write this letter. **The Philippians** did not have the problems that **the Corinthians** or **the Galatians** had. **They** were solidly grounded in **the Word of God**, which they guarded so well. So, through the years **they** had become the delight of **the apostle Paul**. Nevertheless, **they** also had their share of problems. Its members were desperately poor, so much so that **Paul** was surprised at their contribution to the offering that **he** collected for the poor in Jerusalem (see **Second Corinthians Bn - A Biblical Model for Giving**). Like **Paul**, **they** were being persecuted for the cause of **Messiah (1:27-30)**. Even worse, **they** were being attacked by **false teachers (3:2, 18-19)**. On top of everything else, a feud between **two** prominent **women** in the congregation threatened to shatter the unity of the church (**4:2-3**, cf. **2:1-4** and **14**). Yet, despite the circumstances of both **the writer** and **recipients**, **joy** permeates **Philippians**, so much so that it may be called the letter of **joy**. Those who study its teachings and apply its principles will, like the human author, learn the secret of having **joy**, peace, and contentment in every circumstance of life.

The city of Philippi: **Philippi** was an important city in eastern Macedonia (northeastern Greece). It was located on the fertile alluvial plain of the Strymon River, near the deep, swift-flowing **river** known as the Gangites (**Acts 16:13**). **Philippi** owed its importance to its strategic location along the Via Egnatia which ran right through **Philippi**. The city was also important because of the gold mines in the nearby mountains.

It was those same gold mines that attracted the interest of Philip II of Macedon (the father of Alexander the Great). He annexed the region in 356 BCE and fortified the small village of Krenides (“the little fountains” so named because of the nearby springs), renaming it **Philippi** (“the city of Philip”) after himself. After the Romans conquered Macedonia in the second century BCE, **Philippi** was incorporated into the Roman province of that name. The city languished in relative obscurity for more than a century until 42 BCE when it became the site of one of the most crucial battles in Roman history. In that battle known in history as the battle of **Philippi**, the forces of Antony and Octavian (Caesar Augustus in Luke 2:1) defeated the republican forces of Brutus and Cassius. The battle marked the end of the Roman republic and the beginning of the empire (the senate declared Octavian emperor in 29 BCE after he defeated Antony and Cleopatra in the battle of Actium in 31 BCE). Antony and Octavian settled many of their army veterans at **Philippi**, which was given the coveted status of a Roman colony (**Acts 16:12**). Later, other Roman army veterans settled there.

As a colony, **Philippi** had the same legal status as cities in Italy. Citizens of **Philippi** were Roman citizens, were exempt from paying certain taxes, and were not subject to the authority of the provincial governor. The **Philippians** copied Roman architecture and style of dress, their coins bore Roman inscriptions, and Latin was the city’s official language (although Greek was the common language).

The church at Philippi: The **Philippian** church was the first church **Paul** founded in Europe. The apostle came to **Philippi** on his second missionary journey (see **Acts Bu - Paul’s Second Missionary Journey**) being directed there by **the Ruach Ha’Kodesh** in a most dramatic way (see **Acts Bx - Paul’s Vision of the Man of Macedonia**). Though the initial converts were Jews or Jewish proselytes (see **Acts Bb - An Ethiopian Asks about Isaiah**), Gentiles made up the majority of the congregation. That there was no synagogue in **Philippi** (or else the women **Paul** initially encountered would not have been meeting outside the city on the Sabbath) is evidence that the city’s Jewish population was small. Two dramatic conversations, those of the wealthy proselyte **Lydia** (see **Acts By - Lydia’s Conversion in Philippi**), and a **jailer** (see **Acts Bz - Paul and Silas in Prison**), marked the birth of the church.

The **Philippians** had a deep affection for **Paul**, as **he** did for **them**. Though they were poor, they alone supported him financially at one state of his ministry (**4:15**). Now, after many years, they had once again sent **the apostle** a generous gift in his time of need. Half a century later, the **Philippian** church would show the same

generosity to the church father Ignatius, who passed through their city on his way to martyrdom at Rome. **Paul** wrote **his** letter to **his** beloved **Philippian** congregation to thank **them** for **their** generous **gift (4:10-19)**, explain why **he** was sending **Epaphroditus** back to **them (2:25-30)**, inform **them** of **his** circumstances (**1:12-26**), and warn **them** about the danger of **false teachers (3:2 and 18-19)**.

The human author: The divinely inspired text of **Philippians** introduces **Paul** as the author (**1:1**), thus making **his** authorship indisputable. In fact, except for a few radical nineteenth century critics, the **Pauline** authorship of **Philippians** has never been questioned. Today most scholars, no matter what their theological persuasion, accept it as a genuine **Pauline** letter. Internal evidence will appear to most readers to prove that **Paul** is the author beyond any doubt. This evidence is of two kinds, positive and negative. On the one hand, the letter completely reflects **Paul's** mind and character even in the finest details. On the other hand it offers no motive which could have led to a forgery. Only the natural outpouring of personal feeling as a result of his immediate circumstances makes any sense. The information the writer gave about himself (**3:4-6**) harmonizes perfectly with **Paul's** life. Lastly, the writings of early church fathers attest to **Pauline** authorship.

Date and place of writing: **Paul** wrote **Philippians** in 61 ACE (see the commentary on **Galatians Ae - The Dates of Book in the B'rit Chadashah**) from prison along with **Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon**. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the church accepted that the four "Prison Letters" were written during **the apostle's** imprisonment in Rome (see **Acts Df - Paul's Keeps Spreading the Good News**). In recent times, however, both Caesarea and Ephesians have been proposed as alternative locations. The evidence that **Paul** wrote **Philippians** from Rome is impressive. The terms **praetorian guard (1:13)** and **Caesar's household (4:22)** are most naturally understood as references to the emperor's bodyguard and servants stationed in Rome. The details of **Paul's** imprisonment as recorded in Acts harmonize well with those in **Philippians**. **Paul** was guarded by soldiers (**Acts 28:16** and **Philippians 1:13-14**), allowed visitors (**Acts 28:30** and **Philippians 4:18**), and was free to preach the gospel (**Acts 28:31** and **Philippians 1:12-14**). That there was a large church in the city from which **Paul** wrote (**1:12-14**) also favors Rome. The church in the Imperial capital was undoubtedly much larger than that in either Ephesus or, especially Caesarea. However the most convincing argument that **Paul** wrote **Philippians** from Rome lies in the decisive nature of the verdict the apostle

expected. **He** would either be set free, as he confidently hoped (**1:19** and **24-26, 2:34**) or be executed (**1:20-21** and **23**). Either way, the decision in **his** case would be final, and there would be no appeal. That fact appears to rule out both Caesarea and Ephesus, since as a Roman citizen **Paul** could, and did, exercise **his** right to appeal to the emperor from those cities (see [Acts Cw - Paul's Appeal to Cesar](#)).¹

The historic occasion: When the **Philippian** believers heard about **Paul's** imprisonment at Rome, they sent **Epaphroditus** who may have been **their** pastor, to minister to him. **Epaphroditus** personally comforted **Paul**, expressing to **him** the affection of the believers at **Philippi**. And **he** brought **Paul** a financial contribution from **them** so that **his** confinement would be more comfortable (**4:18**). Three times before – twice when **Paul** was at **Thessalonica**, and once when **he** was at **Corinth (Philippians 4:15-16 cf Second Corinthians 11:9)** – the believers ministered to **his** needs. Thus, the book of **Philippians** was a thank-you letter for **their** generous **gifts**. While **Epaphroditus** was in Rome, **he** became so sick that **he** almost died (**2:27**). After recovering, **he** took **Paul's** letter back to the church at **Philippi**.

The purpose of Philippians: The initial reason for writing, as indicated, seems to have been to thank the **Philippians** for **their** love **gift**. But **Paul** took the opportunity to address some of the problems in **their** church. Apparently rivalry and personal ambition were present among some in the congregation (**2:3-4** and **4:2**). **The Judaizers** were also gaining a foothold (**3:1-3**). In addition, an antinomian tendency was creeping into the church (**3:18-19**). Zuck, pages 647-648. However, in the final analysis, the real purpose of the letter lies with the phrase: **your progress in the faith (1:25)**, which for **Paul** ultimately has to do with the progress of the gospel, both in their lives and in their city. This is why **Epaphroditus** carried the letter with **him** back to **Philippi**, why **Timothy** would follow on shortly, and why **Paul** would return East rather than go West once **he** was released.²

The central role of the Messiah: On anyone's reading, **Messiah** plays the absolute central role in **Paul's** life and thought, and nowhere is that more evident than in **Philippians**. For **Paul**, **living means living for Messiah, and dying is even better (1:21)**, for **to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (Second Corinthians 5:8)**. **His** ultimate goal in life was **to be with Messiah (1:23)**, because everything else is considered **rubbish** only fit for dogs (**3:8**). Therefore, **Paul** declares: **I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Messiah Yeshua**

(3:14). For **him**, everything in life that mattered was either **in Messiah** or through **Messiah** in some way or another.³

What is a Messianic Synagogue? A Messianic synagogue is a place for both Jews and Gentiles who believe that **Yeshua (Jesus of Nazareth)** is the promised Messiah of the Jewish Scriptures. As a Messianic synagogue we also hold to the essential doctrines of the Bible, both in the TaNaKh (the Old Testament) and the B'rit Chadashah (the New Testament), such as mankind's need for spiritual redemption, and the provision of **ADONAI** through the life, death, and resurrection of **Yeshua** as the **Messiah (Isaiah 53 and Hebrews 9)**. What is distinctive about our congregation is that while we believe in **Yeshua**, we also believe in maintaining the inherent Jewish roots of the faith. Hence, we celebrate the biblical festivals (see the commentary on **Leviticus Dw - God's Appointed Times**) as well as many of the customs which are consistent with the Scriptures. For us, the Messianic synagogue is a practical way to express the B'rit Chadashah faith within the Jewish cultural framework from where it originated (Kehilat Ariel Messianic Synagogue, San Diego, CA).

Key verse: For to me, to live is Messiah, and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21).

The use of ADONAI: Long before **Yeshua's** day, the word **ADONAI** had, out of respect, been substituted in speaking and in reading aloud for **God's** personal name, the four Hebrew letters *yod-heh-vav-heh*, variously written in English as **YHVH**. **The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) made it a requirement not to pronounce the Tetragrammaton**, meaning the four-letter name of **the LORD**, *Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey*, since the ancient manuscripts do not give any vowel sounds, and this remains the rule in most modern **Jewish** settings. In deference to this tradition, which is unnecessary but harmless, I will be using **ADONAI** where **YHVH** is meant. In ancient times when the scribes were translating the Hebrew Scriptures, they revered the name of **YHVH** so much that they would use a quill to make one stroke of the name and then throw it away. Then they would make another stroke and throw that quill away until the name was completed. **His** name became so sacred to them that they started to substitute the phrase *the Name*, instead of writing or pronouncing **His Name**. Over centuries of doing this, the actual letters and pronunciation of **His Name** were lost. The closest we can come is **YHVH**, with no vowels. The pronunciation has been totally lost. Therefore, the name Yahweh is only a guess of what the original name sounded like. Both **ADONAI** and **Ha'Shem** are substitute names for **YHVH**. **ADONAI** is more of an affectionate name like *daddy*,

while **Ha'Shem** is a more formal name like *sir*. Therefore, **Jews**, being respectful of the Third Commandment, use these words as replacements. **The Talmud explains, “In the Sanctuary, the Name was pronounced as written; but beyond its confines a substitute Name was employed (Tractate Sotah VII.6). God** has only one name, **YHVH**. All **His** other “names” like **ADONAI Elohei-Tzva’ot, ADONAI Elohim, ADONAI Nissi, ADONAI Tzidkenu, and ADONAI-Tzva’ot**, merely reflect **His** attributes.

Contrary to what some religious groups believe today, no one can say with confidence how to pronounce **God’s Name**. The “name” Jehovah, for example, is a made-up word by a Franciscan monk in the dark ages. He took **YHVH**, and inserted vowels between the known letters to invent a new word: **YeHoVaH**. **Jews** never, NEVER, use this made-up word. The last book of the B’rit Chadashah tells us that when **Yeshua** returns to the earth, **He** will reveal **the Name that no one knew but Himself (Revelation 19:12)**. It seems best to leave this lost pronunciation unresolved until the **Messiah** comes.

The use of TaNaKh: The Hebrew word **TaNaKh** is an acronym, based on the letters **T** (for “Torah”), **N** (for “**Nevi’im**,” the Prophets), and **K** (for “**Ketuvim**,” the Sacred Writings). It is the collection of the teachings of **God** to human beings in document form. The term “Old Covenant” implies that it is no longer valid, or at the very least outdated. Something old, to be either ignored or discarded. But **Jesus Himself** said: **Don’t think I have come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish but to complete (Matthew 5:17 CJB)**. I will be using the Hebrew acronym **TaNaKh** instead of the phrase the Old Testament, throughout this devotional commentary.

The Use of the phrase, “the righteous of the TaNaKh,” rather than using New Testament saints: Messianic synagogues, and the **Jewish** messianic community in general, never use the phrase Old Testament saints. From a **Jewish** perspective, they prefer to use the phrase, “righteous of **the TaNaKh**.” Therefore, I will be using “the righteous of **the TaNaKh**,” rather than Old Testament saints throughout this devotional commentary.