Philippians: A Context for Joy (1:1-11) Memory Verse: Philippians 1:1

August 10, 2025 Scripture Reading: Romans 6:12-18

**[SLIDE 1]**

When was the last time you received a letter in the mail? We are always getting junk mail and bills in the mailbox, but can you remember the last time you received a letter from a friend or maybe a family member? It does not happen very often does it? We might get an email; we will surely received a text message. Those are similar. Those count as communication, but a letter represents more investment. A letter obviously takes time. We don’t call it snail mail for nothing! There is no instant response, there is only a message sent. A letter actually costs money. Postage always goes up, never down. Envelopes are not free. And have you sat down to write a letter? It’s hard! You have a blank piece of paper staring at you and you have to come up with some words to say, but which ones? Where do you start? What if I misspell the tricky words, and my handwriting is atrocious! It takes some effort to physically write out your thoughts and express them to someone else.

**[SLIDE 2]** The last letter I received, if you can call it that, was a simple thank you note from a high school graduate acknowledging our presence at their open house party. It was nice. It had a sentence in it, but it was handwritten, and it was addressed to me. I appreciated the effort especially considering the amount of cash we gave verses the amount of food my family ate at their house! I’ll let you decide which amount was greater. I should be writing them a thank you note.

Letters have lost their luster in our day and age. We would rather have a full-on conversation back and forth through text messaging wherein we send a quick thought or question and expect an instant reply. Gone are the days when we had to express ourselves in writing. But that is exactly what we see in **[SLIDE 3]** the Bible. The Bible includes many letters, and most of them are from the apostle Paul. And before we dive specifically into Philippians, we should clarify a few things: this is a letter. That does not sound very profound, but let’s think about what that means. First of all, it is scripture and we accept it as part of God’s word, but when it was written, Paul had his Philippian friends in mind, not Forest Hills church in 2025. Philippians is incredibly personal and intimate in many ways. The relationship between Paul and this church is evident. So, we must remember, we have a letter here and not a theological treatise. Certainly, Paul was not aware that his words would eventually be canonized as Holy Scripture!

As a letter, we must understand, we have only one half of a conversation. Paul is communicating for a reason, but we do not necessarily know what that reason is. We only have his portion of the conversation. But, as we read, we can see really and truly the heart of Paul. He is a friend writing to friends, so naturally we get a glimpse of that friendship.

The last thing to remember here is that this is a letter to a church **[SLIDE 4]**. Yes, it is a church full of friends, but Paul is aware that he is addressing the church, the body of Christ. That’s how we get to benefit from this writing because we are also the church. Most likely this meant a home church, and it also means that Paul wrote to be heard. He would have expected his letter to be read aloud in the assembly and communicated to a group. And so that is what we are doing today.

We are beginning a new series on Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi. **[SLIDE 5]** And whenever you go to preach on something, especially on an entire letter, you have to go into it looking for themes. When we take this letter as a whole, what is overarching? What is the main point the writer is trying to convey here? In Philippians, Paul talks about many things, but there is one thing that seems to permeate this letter from front to back and that is an ever-running stream of joy. Paul expresses joy often, but not only is he showing his joy, he also provides reasons why he is so joyful. Those reasons are really our reasons as well. So I am referring to Philippians as a letter that gives us a context for joy. So with that, let’s start at the beginning.

(READ verses 1-2)

So, we see Paul is not working alone. Timothy is somehow involved with his work and is willing to sign off on what Paul is saying. I don’t know if I’d go so far as to say that Timothy is a co-author but it’s clear that Timothy was willing to attach his name. I also don’t want to lose the sharpness of the term “slave” **[SLIDE 6]**. Paul could have just as easily said that he was a servant of Christ, but he uses the word *doulos* and it means slave. It gives the indication that Paul and Timothy are not free men, that they are owned by a master. That master being Jesus Christ. And this arrangement, this state of slavery is for Paul, I believe, a context for joy. It’s a joyful thing to live under the authority of Jesus. In Romans 6 Paul expresses the same idea. He says in verse 18 that through Christ we have been set free from slavery to sin and have now become slaves of righteousness. In I Corinthains 6:20 also makes the point that we are not our own…God himself has bought us for a price. We belong to him. For Paul this is a good deal, an occasion for joy.

**[SLIDE 7]** Back to Philippians verse 3-5 (READ) Paul is thankful for the people in this Philippian church. His relationship with them provides a context for joy! Paul is especially close to these people. He founded the church there by means of a special calling. We read about it in Acts 16. In verse 9 Paul and his crew are in Troas and is says, **[SLIDE 8]** “During the night, Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.” The only reason Paul was ever in Philippi in the first place was because God had especially called him there. He went immediately, because after all, Paul is a slave to Christ. He will go where he is sent! You can read about Paul’s adventures in Philippi throughout the rest of Acts 16, but suffice it to say, it was a memorable trip! Paul casts a demon out of a little girl; he and Silas are wrongly accused and imprisoned **[SLIDE 9]** ; while in prison there was an earthquake and somehow in the midst of the shaking the prison doors opened and the prisoner’s shackles were unfastened. The jailer on duty sees it all as such a disaster that he moves to kill himself over the debacle and yet Paul stops him. And not only does the jailer not end his life, but he and his whole family get baptized! They come to faith in Christ! What a miraculous story! What a bizarre way to start a church, right there in a demolished prison. Paul mentions here as well that this church supported him financially and relationally; he calls them “partners in the ministry” and it’s something to be joyful about.

**[SLIDE 10]** READ 6-8

Paul mentions the **[SLIDE 11]** Day of Jesus Christ. This is reference to when Jesus will return…Paul keeps this coming of Jesus front and center in his mind. He dwells upon it, he expects it, he allows it to dictate and motivate his actions. We will talk more about it throughout this series but, I want to note it here, as Paul will continue to bring it up. In verse 7, we get our first indication that Paul is in jail again! **[SLIDE 12]** As he currently writes, he sits in jail – most likely in Rome. The Philippians know this as they have continued to support Paul which is one of the reasons why Paul has such affection for this church. The CEB says that Paul feels affection for these people with the compassion of Christ Jesus. Other translations say Paul yearns for them with the affection of Jesus. The Greek term here means “bowels”. Paul’s affection here is compared to the bowels of Jesus. What Paul means here is that he has a visceral, gut-level, intense love for these people. He loves them the way Jesus does; with the very core of who he is.

In this deep and abiding love, Paul goes on in verses 9-11 **[SLIDE 13]** (READ) Paul’s love expresses itself in prayer **[SLIDE 14]**. I think it’s true to say: If you really love someone, you will pray for them. He prays for this church in Philippi. And they need what we need. Does anyone remember the name **[SLIDE 15]** Jackie DeShannon? In 1965 she came out with a hit song called *What the World Needs Now is Love.* “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of.” Well, Jackie was half right. We do need love, but Paul’s prayer is that **[SLIDE 16]** love becomes rich with knowledge. We need love and knowledge to go hand in hand because we need to be able to decide what really matters. Love all on it’s own becomes directionless. And love without direction quickly becomes idolatry. We need knowledge to guide our love so that we don’t pursue the wrong things. According to Paul, we need to love what really matters.

If I have the occasion to take my kids into **[SLIDE 17]** Kwik Trip, which is my favorite gas station and you should all try to get there even though it is barely possible with this construction, but if I go there and say to my kids, “You can get one thing,” I’ll bet that you can guess what I will end up buying. It’s going to be some mix of candy, chocolate, donuts, or ice cream. Junk right? If the kids get the freedom to pick, they are bound to pick junk. Now Kwik Trip does have some fruits and vegetables available. They have milk and eggs. They have some actually fairly tasty soups to choose from. Even a hamburger or some chicken tenders might not be a bad choice. But none of those options will appear on the radar when dad says “You can get one thing.” My kids love the junk. They have a great affection, but they lack knowledge to go with it. So, once they are in the aisle of the store, their love goes quickly off the rails. They don’t know how to decide what really matters.

Are we much different? **[SLIDE 18]** Are we much different from little kids in the candy aisle? How much junk do we adore? How misguided is our love? Paul highlights the importance of this knowledge because, as he has stated before, the day of Christ is coming. Do we want to be the ones living our lives knee deep in the junk of this world when Jesus arrives? But Lord, can’t you see all the love, sweet love? We loved sweetly! And in that love, we missed out on what really matters and we failed to give glory and praise to God.

Love always has an object. It always exists for a purpose. We can love our spouse, our family, our job, our home, our car, our status, our money, our hobbies, and we can love Jesus too. How does he fit into all of this? Does Jesus get to be on our list somewhere? Lucky for him! Let’s go back to how Paul perceives himself. How does he introduce himself? Paul, **[SLIDE 19]** a slave of Christ. For Paul, to love Christ means not so much that Jesus is on our list of priorities, but rather that Jesus is our list of priorities. We can give glory and praise to God in our lives because we have coupled our love with knowledge and insight and we have determined what really matters: **[SLIDE 20]** Jesus himself; Jesus, name above all names. It reminds me of another song; a hymn by Helen Hemmel from the 1920’s. **[SLIDE 21]** “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face. And the things on earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.” This gets to the heart of what Paul is talking about.

This is our context for joy **[SLIDE 22]**. We get to be slaves with Jesus as our master, we get to share in affection for one another, we get to live fully expecting Jesus to return and we get to have knowledge added to our love so that we are not misguided, so that we don’t idolize the junk, so that we can determine what really matters; who really matters. If we are living with our eyes focused on the face of Jesus, what other source of joy could we possibly need?

I wonder if there might be someone in your life that would benefit from receiving a hand-written snail mail letter from you. You could express to them your affection for them. You could let them know that you are praying for them and tell them what you are praying for. You could share with them why and how you experience joy by pointing them to Jesus. You could let them know that they are part of your context for joy. Write it down, seal it up and mail it out. You never know how a letter might affect those who receive it. The apostle Paul certainly didn’t know the affect his words would have when he wrote a letter to the Philippian church.

I close with Paul’s prayer in verse 11: **[SLIDE 23]** “I pray that you will then be filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God.” Amen.