

The Message of Philippians

by J.K. McKee posted 01 June, 2010 www.tnnonline.net

Paul's letter to the Philippians is **my favorite book of the Bible**. Within this short four chapter piece of writing, we really get to see the heart of the dedicated Apostle, and how Yeshua the Messiah was absolutely everything for him. People the world over have read Philippians in good times and bad times, desiring encouragement and seeking comfort and solace—and I am no exception. When I need to understand the calling that the Lord has placed upon my life as a Bible teacher, and the experiences that I have endured, I remember Paul's perspective in Philippians.

Unlike some of the other Pauline letters, Philippians does not have a huge tone of correction to it. The Apostle Paul visited Philippi in Acts 16:6-40, where he and Silas encountered and ministered to Lydia, exercised a demon from a slave girl, and were unjustly arrested and beaten by the Roman authorities. Several years have passed since his visit at the time of this writing, but the Philippians remained very close to Paul's heart, and they were consistent supporters of his ministry efforts. Now imprisoned in Rome, Paul takes the time to write his dear friends a special letter, expressing his gratitude to them as he reflects on his current circumstances.

Paul greets the Philippians, wishing them well (1:1-2), and is quite clear to let them know how much they mean to him. At the outset of his letter, Paul says, "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy" (1:3-4). Because of the Philippians' help of partnering with him in the work of the gospel, Paul expresses confidence that the good work which the Lord started in them will reach able completion (1:5-6). In all of Paul's ministry activities, as he testifies, "whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel" (1:7), he always remembers the Philippians "with the affection of Messiah Yeshua" (1:8). All Paul can issue to his dear friends are the greatest blessings of good will, as they grow in faith and effectiveness in the Lord's service:

"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 Messiah, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Yeshua the Messiah—to the glory and praise of God" (1:9-11).

Paul proceeds to let the Philippians know a little about his current circumstances while in confinement. While they might think that Paul's imprisonment is bad, *he actually thinks it is good*, describing how many Roman officials have had to hear about the gospel because of it (1:12-13). Paul's imprisonment has also encouraged many of the Believers "to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly" (1:14). While some of these Believers "preach Messiah out of envy and rivalry," this is not true of everyone (1:15), and many acknowledge the Divine hand behind Paul's confinement (1:16). In spite of some declaring "the gospel" with selfish intentions, trying to create some angst for Paul, (1:17), he sees the bigger picture in that "The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Messiah is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (1:18). Admittedly, many people in ministry, myself included, have a difficult time adopting such a view, especially when they may see some significant flaws in other teachers and spiritual leaders. Yet for Paul in Rome, Roman people hearing an incomplete message about Yeshua would have been preferable to them hearing *no message* about Him at all. **So, all Paul could do is praise the Lord about the Romans—be they ordinary people *or* even of Caesar's very company—having to hear about Israel's Messiah.**

Paul appreciates the Philippians' prayers for him, and has confidence that whatever happens it will be for his deliverance (1:19). Whether Paul lives or dies, regardless of what occurs it will be for a positive demonstration of the glory of Yeshua (1:20a). If Paul should die, such a death should be considered gain, as it will leave a testimony behind to others that being martyred for the gospel is a worthy and admirable cause (1:20b-21). Paul reflects the point of view that he gets to somehow choose between dying and living a little bit longer, a choice which puzzles him (1:22). Paul's personal preference is, "I desire to depart and be with Messiah, which is better by far" (1:23a), a recognition that death welcomes a Believer into the immediate presence of the Lord in Heaven. Even if such a prospect is inviting, quite comforting, and to very much be regarded

“gain”—Paul has more work to do for the Lord on Earth, and has confidence that for the meantime he will remain alive, certainly bringing more joy to the Philippians (1:23b-26).

No person knows exactly what the future will hold, and even if Paul is released from his confinement, there is no certainty that he will be able to see the Philippians in person again. So, Paul correctly instructs his friends, “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Messiah. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will 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” (1:27-28a). The good conduct of the Philippians will serve to communicate to their enemies that they will find themselves eternally judged, whereas they will be forever saved (1:28b). Even if it may manifest itself in different forms, both Paul and the Philippians are engaged in a struggle that will likely cause both of them to be physically harmed (1:29-30).

One of the major things that the Apostle Paul desires of his dear friends the Philippians, above all, is that they be “united with Messiah” (2:1), something which will bring him great joy (2:2). He instructs them, “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” (2:3-4). Believers are to serve each other, and be concerned with *others first*, making others’ needs a priority. If they are able to do this, then they will be emulating Yeshua the Messiah, who is the quintessential example of a servant (2:5). What Paul proceeds to employ in his letter (2:6-11) is widely agreed by interpreters to have been a liturgical hymn or creedal statement employed by the First Century Messianic community in its worship—and it informs us quite well on the balance between Yeshua’s Divinity and humanity.

What is commonly called the *Carmen Christi* begins by attesting to the Divinity of Yeshua: “Who, being in very nature God...” (2:6a). Even though Yeshua was existing as God from eternity past,¹ He “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” (2:6b, NRSV) or “something to be used to his own advantage” (TNIV),² as He chose not to claim this status in the work He was to accomplish. Yeshua possessed equality with the Father,³ yet in His service “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (2:7) via the Incarnation. Another way this is stated is that Yeshua “emptied Himself” (NASU),⁴ implying that He put aside His exalted status of glory in Heaven in order to enter into the world of mortals.

The reason for this is quite serious: “being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (2:8). Because of such utter abasement *yet* salvation activity, “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Yeshua every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Yeshua the Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (2:9-11). This exaltation as supreme ruler of the universe serves as a vindication of Yeshua’s sacrifice for human sins.

In His humanity, Yeshua the Messiah was sacrificed for our transgressions. In His Deity, Yeshua was exalted to the right hand of the Father in Heaven. The *Carmen Christi* hymn includes a direct quotation from Isaiah 45:23⁵—“every knee should bow”—which itself is delivered within a series of declarations about how the One God of Israel is to be regarded as the only Savior, to

¹ The present active participle *huparchōn* is used, sometimes skewed a bit by English translations that use the past tense “was” (2:6, NASU).

² While rendered elsewhere as “grasped” (2:6, NASU/NIV), the noun *harpagmos* best means “**some**th. to which one can claim or assert title by gripping or grasping, **some**th. claimed” (Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 133).

³ Notice how *isos* or “equal” is also employed in John 5:18, where Yeshua’s detractors want to kill Him, because “he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God [*ison heauton poiōn tō Theō*].”

⁴ Grk. *kenōō*.

⁵ Kurt Aland, et. al., *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1998), 675.

which all of Creation must issue worship. This is a status that Yeshua possesses as LORD, as a part of His integration into the Divine Identity:

“Declare what is to be, present it—let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? **And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.** By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: **Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear**” (Isaiah 45:21-23).

With this Tanach intertextuality sitting behind the *Carmen Christi* hymn, no one can claim that Yeshua’s exaltation as LORD is just Him being some kind of cosmic “Master.” Yeshua as Son is just as much Divine as the Eternal Father. All people must look to the Son as their Savior, worshipping Him as their Redeemer.

The point made by Paul in quoting this hymn to the Philippians is that if Yeshua the Messiah can empty Himself of His glory in Heaven, be incarnated as human, then be humiliated and crucified for the sins of mere mortals—and following be astoundingly exalted as the King to which all of Creation must acknowledge as Savior—*then surely in emulating the Lord the Philippians can try the attempt to look out for others’ needs.* If Yeshua did all of this for sinners, then what small effort can we each try to perform for Him as His followers? If Yeshua came down from Heaven and died for us, then His followers should surely be able to at least inconvenience themselves for the sake of their fellow brothers and sisters.

How might Paul’s words of making another’s needs more important than your own (2:3-4), change some of the unfortunate debates over inclusion and equality we currently find in the Messianic movement? **Have we really taken this admonition to serious heart**—especially in view of how we are all sinners in need of confessing Yeshua as Lord of All? I seriously doubt whether enough of today’s Messianics have really probed the implications of Philippians 2:3-4 in regard to how Jewish and non-Jewish Believers are to be working together as one in the Messiah. *In fact, I would dare say that too many are purposefully ignoring it.*

How serious is it to follow Yeshua and acknowledge Him as Savior? Paul informs the Philippians, “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” (2:12). One does not simply acknowledge the Messiah as Lord, and then go about business as usual. For the Philippians, at least, diligently emulating Yeshua was not a problem. Paul attests, “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (2:13). Paul directs the Philippians to not complain or argue, that they are to be blameless in a corrupt world, and to and shine brightly as stars (2:14-15; cf. Daniel 12:3). He also testifies to a degree of boasting on their behalf before the Messiah, because of the diligent service of their faith (2:16-18). Indeed, if there is anything to be truly proud about as a servant of the Lord—it is that your spiritual work has made a concentrated difference in the lives of others, who are likewise serving Him! Some of the examples of faithful servants who Paul is able to laud include Timothy (2:19-24), known to the Philippians, and Epaphroditus (2:25-29), a Philippian himself.

Within Paul’s message, he does warn against a group of people out there, who might stop or deter the Philippians from the positive spiritual course on which he has set them. Philippians 3 is one of those parts of the Bible, that while not too complicated to understand, often draws either a blank stare or a few question marks in the minds of some Messianic Believers. I actually think that when ch. 3 is read from the recognition that Philippi was an ancient Roman colony of many retired soldiers, it is not that difficult to comprehend. Also to keep in mind, is that even though Paul issues this word as “a safeguard to you” (3:1), there is no definitive evidence that the “dogs” he warns about ever made it to Philippi.

The Philippians are told, “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 Messiah Yeshua, and who put no confidence in the flesh” (3:2-3). In all likelihood, these “dogs” are a reference to a kind of Judaizers/Influencers previously warned about

in Paul's letter to the Galatians: those who would require non-Jewish Believers to undergo ritual, proselyte circumcision to be fully reckoned and accepted as God's people. Paul candidly states that the circumcision they offer is to be considered "mutilation" (NKJV).

The Apostle Paul does not want any of the Philippians to put their confidence in the achievements of the flesh, because he himself has ample reason to do so, but has refrained from it (3:4). Paul lists off his own circumcision on the eighth day, his tribal descent from Benjamin, his Hebrew language skills, and his Pharisaic training (3:5). While this is important autobiographical material for understanding Paul as a person, his zeal for his own human accomplishments led to his persecution of the Believers (3:6), and so he can rightfully say "whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Messiah" (3:7). While some have thought that Paul is completely speaking against his Jewish heritage, most of what he has listed in his background is **quite positive**. But take a good look as to what Paul's personal achievements are contrasted to:

"I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Messiah Yeshua my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Messiah and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is found through faith in Messiah [or, the faithfulness of Messiah]⁶—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Messiah and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (3:7-10).

The source of Paul's righteousness or identity is not to be found in the Torah, but rather in the Messiah and what He has accomplished by His death and resurrection. Certainly, obeying God's commandments should come as one emulates the Messiah, and Paul is not speaking against the Torah here. The issue is, rather, Paul's human pedigree compared against Yeshua's sacrifice for sinners. Paul is by no means a turncoat Jew in making these claims; he is telling the Philippians that if his Jewish achievements are affectively meaningless compared to the Lord Yeshua—then their own Greek and Roman "achievements" are to be found as being *lower than meaningless*. If Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews, and a committed Pharisee—and he recognized this as not being that much compared to the awesomeness and supremeness of the Lord Yeshua—then those who served in Caesar's legions and retired to Philippi had *even less* to say about themselves! They did not have to strive for the kind of so-called "spiritual" life that Paul had prior to his salvation,⁷ but rather follow after the Messiah and live in upstanding obedience to His example (cf. Romans 8:4).

Admittedly in a Messianic movement today which focuses so much on a "restoration of Torah," the centrality of Yeshua the Messiah in our lives is something that in some (significant) sectors is a side issue, or sadly a tolerated appendage. *Too frequently, the attention of Messianic Believers is given to the Law and not the Lawgiver. We would do well to reconsider the Apostle Paul's perspective, and strive to keep the Messiah and His accomplishments for us as the focus of all we do.* We must never forget what Yeshua HaMashiach endured to secure *our* redemption!

Paul recognizes that a life of faith is something that takes time, as the consummation of our salvation is at the resurrection (3:11). In saying "I press on to take hold of that for which Messiah Yeshua took hold of me..." (3:12a), Paul is almost telling the Philippians that he desires to emulate the Messiah's death and resurrection as much as he can, a probable reflection on his once being a persecutor of the *ekklēsia*, and his wanting to make complete amends. He does not know how close his own life will mirror that of his Lord, but what he does know is, "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 Messiah Yeshua" (3:13b-14). Every Believer should put his or her past, unredeemed life behind themselves, and strive to move forward in the life of faith that is guided by the Savior (3:15). As Paul instructs his friends, "Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you" (3:17a).

⁶ Grk. *dia pisteōs Christou*; "through the Messiah's faithfulness" (CJB).

For a further discussion, consult the editor's article "The Faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah."

⁷ Obviously, the First Century Believers held to a basic Pharisaical theology, concurrent with affirming the doctrine of resurrection.

While many of the Philippians no doubt took Paul's admonitions to serious heart, the good Apostle has to sadly observe, "I have often told you before and say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Messiah" (3:18). Rather than the "dogs" being in view here, Paul is instead speaking more generally as it relates to the many people he encountered who once had professed a sincere faith in Yeshua, but then for various reasons fell away. These people are most concerned with Earthly pleasures: "Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things" (3:19). Quite contrary to this, the life of Believers is one that is Heavenly—and this Heavenly life will one day come to Earth and radically change the order of things:

"[O]ur citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Yeshua the Messiah, 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" (3:20-21).

I should just say it now: **Philippians 3:20-21 is my favorite Bible passage.** While commonly recited at funerals, I cannot tell you how much comfort and peace I have received from these verses. I take special solace in these verses as I think of loved ones who have gone to be with the Lord in Heaven—but who affirmed a disembodied existence as *only temporary*—and will one day return to Earth at the Second Coming (cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:13) and be physically reconstituted with their bodies resurrected!

Even though Paul knows the Philippians will stand firm in their faith (4:1), he does have to mention the sad fact that two women in their assembly, Euodia and Syntyche, have not been getting along (4:2). *What is important about this, of course, is that two First Century women are acknowledged to have key roles in the leadership structure of the Philippian congregation.* He urges that whatever schism is present between these two ladies is to be healed, as all of their names are in the book of life (4:3). The Philippians are to be about eagerly rejoicing in the Lord, and demonstrating His goodness (4:4-5). Paul reminds them, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (4:6). If they do this, the peace of God will then prevail (4:7), and the attention of the Philippians will be on things that are noble, pure, and honorable (4:8-9).

The end section of Paul's letter includes some very deep, heartfelt gratitude that he has for his close friends. While he has learned to be content in a variety of circumstances, and while he looks to the Messiah for his strength, nonetheless the Philippians have given him specific reasons to be thankful (4:10-14). The Philippians have shown a consistent record of providing financial aid to Paul's ministry work, even when many others did not (4:15-16). Paul has not sought after their money, but he does know that the Lord will honor their giving to him (4:17). The Philippians' offerings to Paul are compared to being "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (4:18). And because of it Paul is sure "my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Messiah Yeshua" (4:19), who deserves all the glory forever (4:20).

The Apostle Paul closes his letter to the Philippians by extending greetings from all of those with him (4:21), but most "especially those who belong to Caesar's household" (4:22)—another reminder that the good news is making a noticeable impact in Rome. Paul blesses the Philippians with the simple salutation, "The grace of the Lord Yeshua the Messiah be with your spirit. Amen" (4:23).

I do not think that the four short chapters of Philippians are that difficult to understand. There are certainly aspects and terms used in Philippians that take on some more targeted significance, when set against a First Century Jewish and Greco-Roman background to be sure. Yet for the most part, Bible readers can sit comfortably with an English translation and reflect upon Paul's kindhearted reflections fairly easily. I do not know some of the specific reasons why today's Messianics often avoid reading through Philippians, other than how they might be challenged on how Paul views his Jewish pedigree (3:7-10) to not mean that much compared to what Yeshua the Messiah has done, and the fact that Paul lauds the fact that the message of Israel's Savior has made a difference among the lives of Romans (1:13; 4:22). Surely, any person who believes that he or she has achieved great human works—yet has experienced redemption in

the Lord—should recognize how what we have done of our own strength means nothing, *or* even less than nothing, compared to the supernatural power of the gospel in being saved from an eternity separated from God. We live our lives as Believers in response to what the Savior has done, which while including a proper obedience to His Torah, is still to be centered **around Him**. And, this is something to surely affect ***all people!***

While there are many aspects and themes from Philippians that I have to remember in difficult or complicated times I experience as a Bible teacher, there are no verses more impactful on me than Philippians 1:23 and 3:20-21. As many of you know, my father passed away from cancer in 1992 when I was 11. He was a sold out, evangelical Christian, very active in lay ministry, preparing to go into full time pastoral ministry, and he strongly believed in the significance of the Hebraic Roots of Christianity. In his final days his attention was not on things of this world—and so Paul’s words “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (1:23, RSV), were truly on his heart and in his prayers. My father had no inherent desire to die, and leave behind his beloved wife and three young children (including a five month old infant). But, finally meeting the Lord Jesus face-to-face, who he loved so much and served wholeheartedly and with great joy, **was truly what he indeed wanted**. *The same should be each of our desires as well.*

In 1994 my mother got remarried and I moved away from my home in Northern Kentucky. Through the course of sixteen or so years, I lived four more places, went to college, finished my master’s degree, and got almost seven years of full time ministry under my belt. I visited many places in the world that my father had never been to, but certainly had wanted to go—most especially the Land of Israel and the United Kingdom. But in just the past two months (April 2010), I was able to finally revisit the one place—*which for me personally*—is the most sacred site on Planet Earth. After almost sixteen years I went to Ft. Mitchell, Kentucky and visited our McKee family plot where my two grandparents and my father are buried. The first thing that I did was immediately take out one of my father’s Bibles, and speak out directly from both Philippians 1:23 *and* 3:20-21. I publicly confessed with my mouth that he is consciously in Yeshua’s presence right now, but also that his grave will one day be reopened at the resurrection—and that all of those who loved him will get to touch and embrace his body again⁸ (all said with one of the maintenance personnel standing nearby fixing a lawnmower).

Philippians 1:23 very much speaks to what my father wanted, and Philippians 3:20-21 reminds me of the future yet to come. **My friends, if I knew the day of the Second Coming, his gravesite is the one place on Earth where I would want to be!** As special as Jerusalem and the Temple Mount may be to some of you, I have a feeling that if you have lost a parent or spouse, you would probably prefer to be at their gravesite when the saints return with Yeshua.

Does Philippians have any special significance for you? Have you even taken the time to open your Bible, start reading, and pray to the Lord to open your heart to something that He can only communicate to you through this short letter? *I know that Philippians has a very special significance to me.* It is my sincere hope that you can learn to appreciate Paul’s letter of thankfulness as much as I have, and allow its inspired words to remember the past, present, and future work the gospel of Yeshua the Messiah in all that you do! **Let us all learn to highly value Philippians in our Bible studies and personal meditations**, as we strive to be a distinct Messianic people who are, in fact, *Messianic* because of what *the Messiah* has accomplished for us.

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version* (NIV), © 1984, published by International Bible Society.

⁸ Consult the transcribed sermon “The Meaning of the Resurrection” by K. Kimball McKee from 28 April, 1991, available on the TNN Online website.