**In the Lord**

The phrase “in the Lord” is a common expression used by Paul to communicate one’s status as a Christian. For instance, if Paul refers to someone as “in the Lord,” he is using the phrase to communicate that the individual is a fellow Christian and a member of the one true body of Christ.

Although the phrase “in the Lord” can be used to refer to the “Lord” as the object of an action, such as, “Believe in the Lord Jesus,” (Acts 16:31) or, “rejoice in the Lord” (Phil. 3:1), the focus of this word study is not on these more familiar and understandable uses of the phrase, but rather the uses described initially, primarily in Pauline literature.

There are 40 uses of the phrase “in the Lord” in the Pauline literature.

The first set of examples carry the meaning, “as a believer” or “as believers”:

* Rom. 14:14 – “(I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but to the one who considers something to be unclean, to that person it is unclean.)” This could be more idiomatically translated, “I know and am persuaded *as a believer* that nothing….”
* Rom. 16:12 – “Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who have worked very hard in the Lord.” (i.e., “Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who have worked very hard *as believers*.)
* 1 Cor. 9:1 – “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?” (i.e., “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work *as a believer*?”)
* 1 Thess. 4:1 – “Furthermore then, brothers and sisters, we ask and encourage you in the Lord Jesus, that just as you learned from us how you must walk and please God...that you would do so even more.” (i.e., “Furthermore then, brothers and sisters, we ask and encourage you *as believers*, that just as you learned from us how you must walk and please God...that you would do so even more.”)

Other verses that fall into this category are: 1 Cor. 11:11; 15:58; 16:19; Gal. 5:10; Eph. 4:17; 6:21; Phil. 1:14; 2:19, 29; 4:1; Col. 4:17; 1 Thess. 3:8; 5:12; Phlm. 1:16, 20; Rev. 14:13.

The second set of examples carry the meaning, “who is a believer” and typically are used in relation to others:

* Rom. 16:8 – “Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.” This could be more idiomatically translated, “Greet Ampliatus, my beloved *who is a believer*.”
* 1 Cor. 4:17 – “For this reason I sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord.” (i.e., “For this reason I sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful child, *and a believer*.”)
* 1 Cor. 7:39 – “she is free to be married to whom she wants, *but* only *if he is* in the Lord.” (i.e., “she is free to be married to whom she wants, but only if he is *a believer*.”)

Other verses that fall into this category are: Col. 4:7; 2 Thess. 3:4.

Now, there are some other uses of the phrase “in the Lord” that do not fall into either of these categories. These will be addressed individually.

The first difficult occurrence is in 2 Corinthians 2:12-13 which reads, “Now when I came to Troas for the good news of Christ, even though a door had been opened to me in the Lord, I had no relief for my spirit because I did not find Titus my brother.” The Greek is *en kuriō* (ἐν κυρίῳ) just like in all of the uses above, and since Paul is not using the phrase to communicate something akin to “as a believer,” other possibilities for the intended meaning of this phrase need to be explored. Typically in the Greek, the preposition “*en”* can either be “*in* the Lord” or “*by* the Lord.” The versions and the commentators are divided as to how Paul is using it here. Yet, the essence is pretty much the same. If the door was opened “by the Lord,” then the Lord gave Paul an opportunity to spread the Good News. If the door was opened “in *connection with*” the Lord, there was an opportunity to spread the Good News. The reading “by the Lord” is much easier to understand from the point of view of the English reader, and if the door was originally opened “in *connection with*” the Lord, no doubt the Lord was working to make that happen, so “by the Lord” would not be far off the mark. So, here, there are two solid options, and either could be what Paul intended.

The second strange use of “in the Lord” occurs in Ephesians 2:21, which reads, “In *union with* him the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy sanctuary in the Lord.” Although, the ending phrase “in the Lord” is even said to possibly be “superfluous,” or unnecessary, and could be, “another example of Ephesians’ redundancy of style,”[[1]](#footnote-30603) because Paul just started the sentence with “in him,” Paul likely has an intention behind using the phrase “in the Lord.” Perhaps the best options are that the metaphorical church building, being talked about in Ephesians 2:19-22, grows “in *connection with* the Lord,” or that the building is holy “in *connection with* the Lord.” The Greek syntax could go either way. If Paul intends the first meaning, then the idea would be that this growth of the church only happens in connection with Christ, with Christ as the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20), the foundation upon which the Church is built, and with trust in Christ as the means by which metaphorical stones are added onto the building (i.e., believers are saved). Thus, the growth of the Church only happens in connection with the head, Christ. The second option, that the metaphorical building is holy “in *connection with* the Lord,” could be playing off of the Old Testament typology in which the Temple was made holy by God’s presence and the items in the Temple were made holy, or cleansed, when sprinkled with blood (Heb. 9:22), so too, the New Testament temple where God dwells— Christians (Eph. 2:22; 1 Cor. 6:19)—are made holy by Jesus’ blood (Heb. 10:10). Therefore, Christians are made holy because of their connection with Christ,[[2]](#footnote-29957) or, “in *connection with* the Lord.” As with 2 Corinthians 2:12-13, both of these interpretive options are possible, and one cannot be clearly adopted against the other.

The last strange usage that will be addressed is in Philippians 2:24 which reads, “although I have confidence in the Lord that I myself will also come soon.” Paul is simply saying that he has confidence that he will get to come to Philippi soon, the oddity arises because Paul adds the phrase “in the Lord.” What does Jesus (“the Lord” cf. Phil. 2:11, 29) have to do with Paul having confidence that he is going to see the Philippians? We must remember that Paul is in prison as he is writing the book of Philippians. He has also “become convinced” that he knows the right thing to do is to stay “in the flesh” (alive), so that he can help progress the faith of the churches he has planted (Phil. 1:24-25). So, Paul has become convinced that his ministry as an apostle is not over, but that Jesus and God still intend to use him to further the good news and encourage churches, even though there is a possibility this does not happen (Phil. 2:17). Therefore, here in Philippians 2:24, Paul can say that he has confidence “in the Lord,” namely, that the Lord Jesus will help him get out of prison so that he can continue to fulfill his role as an apostle. Paul believes that Jesus wants to still use him, and he knows that whether or not he remains in prison is out of his control, he must rely on Jesus. Paul “could rest easy without worry (cf. 4:6). The problem of his future was not his to solve, but his Lord’s.”[[3]](#footnote-12117)

In summary, the phrase “in the Lord” has quite a few possible meanings, and each occurrence should be understood in context, however, the most common meaning Paul intends for the phrase is to identify those who are Christians or believers. If someone is “in the Lord” they are of the household of faith and if they are to do something “in the Lord,” then they are to do it “as believers should.”

1. Andrew T. Lincoln, Ephesians, vol. 42, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1990), 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-30603)
2. Ernest Best, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1998), 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-29957)
3. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Philippians, vol. 43, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2004), 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-12117)