

## **An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Philippians**

Paul's epistle to the church at Philippi is a marvelous little letter. It is rich in theological substance, yet highly practical. It is clear in its message, yet warm and personal. And it is wide in its appeal, yet pointed in its aim. It is the home of so many classic Christian banner verses and is very familiar to many Christians.

**1:6** he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ

**1:21** For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain

**2:5** Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus

**2:11** and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father

**2:13** it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure

**3:7** But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ

**3:10** that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death

**3:14** I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus

**3:20** our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ

**4:4** Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice

**4:8** Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things

**4:13** I can do all things through him who strengthens me

**4:19** And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus

Unfortunately, many are familiar with parts of the letter, but when it comes to viewing it as a whole unit they cannot put it all together. Therefore, the aim of this morning's study is to bring cohesion to Philippians, and help us to understand it as a whole.

### **I. Survey of Philippians**

It is my contention that "Joy from the Jailhouse" is not the theme of Philippians, but rather "Conducting Ourselves Worthy of the Gospel" is the theme. Although it is true that "joy" and "rejoice" are used with more frequency than any other major word (14 times), this does not necessitate that this is the theme. If overall word frequency dictated themes, then we could suppose that "Addition" is the theme because of the frequency of the words "and". However, this is not the case. The key to unlocking Philippians, as with any document, is found primarily in tracing the flow of thought from section to section within the letter.

Like most ancient letters, Philippians has a basic structure with an opening (1:1-11), a body (1:12-4:9), and a conclusion (4:10-23). The opening includes a greeting, thanksgiving, and a prayer. In like manner, the conclusion includes a thanksgiving, final greetings, and a benediction. All of these sections have been outlined in the copy of your translation.

Now, the meat of this letter is contained in the body (1:12-4:9). In 1:12, Paul opens his body with “I want you to know”. This phrase being used at the beginning of a letter should send warning flags to any reader that the following information is crucial to the rest of letter. He wanted them to know that what happened to him resulted “in the furtherance of the gospel”. He talks about this for the next five verses noting the division in attitudes:

**12 But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have resulted in the furthering of the gospel 13 so that my imprisonment for Christ has become evident in the whole palace guard and to all the rest, 14 and many brethren have been persuaded in the Lord all the more by my chains to be bold and speak the word without fear. 15 Some on the one hand because of envy and strife, some on the other hand because of good intention preach Christ. 16 Some out of love, knowing that I stand in the defense of the gospel. 17 Others out of selfish ambition preach Christ, note with a pure motive, supposing to add affliction to my chains.**

Then he presents his attitude (1:18-26) that he rejoices in the fact that Christ is preached regardless of the attitude. Then he points his concern directly at the Philippians in verse 27:

**27 Only conduct yourselves worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether coming and seeing you or whether being absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel, 28 not being frightened in anything by those who oppose, which is proof of their destruction, but your salvation, and this from God. 29 For it has been given to you for Christ, not only to believe but also to suffer for his name’s sake, 30 having the same struggle which you saw in me and now hear in me.**

The results that he says he is looking for in the Philippians no matter what happens to him is that they are “conducting themselves worthy of the Gospel of Christ”. Now, he defines this for them precisely with 2 ways. One is positive and the other is negative:

**Positive:** striving together for the faith of the gospel (1:27)

**Negative:** not being frightened in anything by those who oppose (1:28)

I believe the rest of the body is an exposition of this command underneath simply developing these 2 specific instructions. Chapter 2 is an exhortation to unity in the Gospel and Chapter 3 is an exhortation concerning their opponents, not to be alarmed by them. Therefore, I think 1:27-30 is the thesis statement of the letter and helps us divide the body:

- A. Introduction: Paul’s Affairs and the Progress of the Gospel (1:12-26)
- B. Paul’s Thesis: Conduct Yourself Worthy of the Gospel (1:27-30)
- C. Exhortation to Unity in the Gospel (2:1-30)
- D. Exhortation Concerning Opponents (3:1-21)
- E. Application and Summary (4:1-9)

This theme is supported by the frequency of such words as “fellowship” (6 times), “think” (10 times), “consider” (6 times) and “gospel” (9 times).

Paul turns the corner into his exhortation in 2:1 (“Therefore”). He then takes the next thirty verses to unpack what it means to strive together in the faith of the gospel (1:27). This chapter is divided into four sections that have a parallel structure:

- A Regard Others as Better (2:1-4)
- B Example of Christ in the Gospel (2:5-11)
- A<sup>1</sup> Work Out Your Salvation (2:12-16)
- B<sup>1</sup> Examples of Service in the Gospel (2:17-30)

First, he lays forth the right heart that should be behind service (humility), and then he appeals to the mind of Christ and His example. Second, he shows what service should look like before the world and then how he, Timothy, and Epaphroditus have displayed that.

The next major portion of the body is found in chapter three. It is distinguished from chapter two by the use of “Furthermore” in 3:1, which, in the context as he is introducing new material, would indicate he is transitioning. The new content in this chapter falls under the phrase in 1:28, “not being frightened by those who oppose”. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is encourage the Philippians in the hope that they have in Christ so that they can endure suffering at the hands of their opponents. This is another popular chapter in the Bible that is not well understood by most people in its context. The chapter can breakdown in the form:

- A Warning Against Enemies (3:1-3)
- B Paul’s Past Confidence in the Flesh (3:4-6)
- C Paul’s Present Confidence in Christ (3:7-11)
- B<sup>1</sup> Paul’s Future Confidence in Christ (3:12-14)
- A<sup>1</sup> Exposé of Their Enemies (3:15-21)

In the light of this structure, “Paul’s Present Confidence in Christ” would seem to be the main focus of the discourse, as the best defense (against their opponents) is a good offense (loving Christ more than anything).

In this last section of the body, Paul pulls everything together to give closure to his thesis in 1:27-30. He draws from the emphatic themes of the body in order to sharpen the reality of his message, causing it to bear upon specific people. He also synthesizes what he has been taking many words to unpack. One could say that 4:1-3 is a look at “harmony in relationships” and 4:4-9 is a look at “harmony in mind”.

Although “Conducting Ourselves Worthy of the Gospel” is the main theme of the book, there are also powerful sub-themes. The sovereignty of God (1:6; 2:12-13,27) permeates the apostle's understanding, especially as it is applied to suffering (1:29). Joy in God obviously permeates the apostle's heart (1:4,18,25; 2:2,17,18,28,29; 3:1; 4:1,4,10) and is

best understood as the goal or pursuit of unity. This is seen in his obsession with the glorious Christ. He viewed his relationship in terms of accounting where he “counted” or “considered” Christ as gain in view of everything because He is the only one who can satisfy (1:20-21; 2:21; 3:7-11; 4:4,12). It is this radical “Christian hedonism” that is the only thing that can sustain the soul amidst suffering and produce an obedient faith (1:18-19; 2:26-30; 3:3,7-11; 4:4-7). Also, the glory of God appears as the chief end of everything (4:20), including the desire for Christ (1:20-21), obedience (1:11), the accomplishment of redemption (2:9-11), and the resurrection (3:18-21). Therefore, all of these things relate directly to the intent of the letter: driving the Philippians to such a satisfaction in God, so that their minds and hearts overflow in love and intent for one another, thus sustaining them in suffering, and ultimately glorifying their sovereign, glorious Savior.

## II. What Can Haverhill Community Church Learn from this Letter

1. If you mine into the heart of this letter, you will find the Gospel (and the Philippians had already been Christians for long time)

**2:5 Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be used selfishly, 7 but emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant, coming in the image of men. And being found in the outward form as a man, 8 He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death of a cross. 9 Therefore, God exalted Him and gave Him a name above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow of those in heaven and in the earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.**

**3:7 But whatever was gain to me, these things I have considered loss for the sake of Christ. 8 But even more, I consider all things to be loss because of that which is of great value – the knowledge of Jesus Christ my Lord, because of whom I have suffered the loss of all things and consider it dung so that I might gain Christ and be found in Him, 9 not having a righteousness of my own which is from the law but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God on the basis of faith, 10 in order to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, sharing the likeness of His death, 11 if by any means I might come to the resurrection of the dead.**

Never mind that the word gospel is used 9 times in the letter.

2. We need to strive together for unity in the Gospel