

STUDIES IN PHILIPPIANS

Ron Thomas

Chapter 1

Paul begins his letter in his customary way, with the use of his name as the writer (sender). In each one of his letters he starts with “Paul.” Noticeably absent is his name in the Hebrews epistle (which some people think Paul wrote). He addresses his letter to the church at Philippi, especially addressing the *bishops and deacons* (NKJV). The word *bishops* is also rendered *overseers* (NIV). A noted biblical scholar had this to say about the word *bishop* (*overseer*), “In the second century *episcopos* [a Greek transliteration that gives us our English words *bishop, overseer—RT*] (Ignatius) came to mean one superior to elders, but not so in the NT. The two New Testament church officers are here mentioned (bishops or elders and deacons). The plural is here employed because there was usually one church in a city with several pastors (bishops, elders)” (RWP, E-Sword).

Paul is very grateful for the saints at Philippi, and it is (was) his prayer regularly to remember them before the Father’s throne. Note his prayer for them: that they would continue in their fellowship (partakers, ESV) with the gospel. As God worked in them Paul was confident that God’s work would be completed (**1:3-5**). What was this fellowship (or partnership) that Paul speaks of? Was it a “quiet enjoyment of it” as one sits in a building or “goes to church” each Sunday. No; it was an active participation in the promotion of it! One man said it this way: “...it refers to their sympathetic attitude and practical action in the interest of the gospel” (Muller, p. 41).

Paul was in prison but that occasion did not bring his spirit to the point of despair. David Roper said Paul was in prison for four years (p. 407). Think about that for a moment: four years of incarceration for preaching the gospel of Christ! What wrong did Paul do that warranted such a treatment? He did nothing wrong, of course, but preach Jesus and Him crucified. Those who did not want this thought he did much wrong (cf. **John 11:45-48**). The seriousness of the “wrong” he did brought him to be a prisoner of import. “The fact that Paul was turned over to this regiment and was guarded by them may indicate the importance given to his case by Roman officials” (Roper, p. 402).

Paul was in prison for doing nothing wrong; in fact, what he did do was show God’s love to man in the message he preached. While there he had come to understand that some had false motivations for their preaching; they wanted to make it harder on him—for what reason we are not told (**1:15-17**). In such circumstances it is easy to see how one might have been discouraged: first, there was the incarceration (prison) even when innocent of any wrong-doing and, second, that some “preachers” would see to make his stay in prison all the more unpleasant. A good many of the brethren were actually emboldened in a positive way by Paul’s circumstance to preach Jesus out of a holy motivation; for others, not so much. Paul, however, did not allow himself to be discouraged. His ultimate mission was to preach and promote the name of Jesus, and though he was incarcerated, he was doing exactly that. In fact, he was very much encouraged (**1:17-18**). Since the Lord actually appointed Paul for his task he undertook (**Acts 9:15-**

16), he was fully prepared to suffer for the Lord. In the end, what he did and what he suffered would bring glory to God and benefit him.

Though Paul was prepared to suffer, he exhorted the Christians in Philippi to have love unbounded (1:9). In other words, don't restrict their devotion, interests, knowledge, and application of that knowledge in their walk with God. With such an unbounded approach to the Lord they will approve those things that are excellent, filled with righteousness that comes from God (cf. **Galatians 5:22**) and, consequently, be pure and blameless when the Lord calls each home (1:10). The importance of this is not to be minimized. Godly living is crucial to righteousness. Godly living, however, is not to be done on one's own terms. It was not done on Paul's terms and it is not to be done on their own individual terms. Their godliness may result in much displeasure (cf. 1:12-14), but the end result will be worth it all. This is why Paul spoke as he did (1:19-23).

Paul understood the difficulty that had been laid at the feet of each person, but it was a decision that had to be made if one wanted to be pleasing to the Lord (cf. **Joshua 24:15**). While Paul was in this life he could say that for him to live is to live the life of Christ (cf. **Galatians 2:20**). On the other hand, if he were to lose his life for the cause of Christ, what would he have lost? What would he have gained? Thus, Paul was prepared for whatever may have been forthcoming. He was confident, however, that the Lord would keep him around on this earth a while longer the benefit of His cause—which was to help the brethren in their walk in Christ (1:24-26).

Even though Paul was not in their presence, having direct contact in order to help them, still he could help them as he exhorted them in this letter to be sure that their walk in Christ is worthy of Him who called (1:27). The force of what Paul said is this: *the one essential thing you must do is be sure your life is a worthy reflection of the life of Christ* (cf. **Titus 2:9-10**). In the affliction they were experiencing, Paul encourages them to not be terrified by such experience. How can one not be terrified by such? Yes, of course, it is much easier to say something like this to another than to actually implement it. Nonetheless, Paul helps them to understand that the life they live on this earth for the Lord is a life that many others won't value. In order to help one through the persecution experience (or, to be experienced) one must change the "location" of his (or her) thinking. Rather than thinking about things on this earth, seek and set your mind on the things of Christ (cf. **Colossians 3:1-4**; **Hebrews 13:6**). In fact, Paul helps them to understand what the persecutors don't (and can't) understand, and that is what terrible affliction is being faced (and suffered) by the Christian is nothing in comparison to that which the persecutors will experience (1:28). So, in suffering, Paul encourages them to let it be known that as a Christian one is willing to suffer for a higher cause. Note how Paul closes (this chapter). He says that it has been *granted* to them to suffer on behalf of Christ. A pretty remarkable word if you think about it (1:29-30).

NOTE: Paul was in prison for the defense and confirmation of the gospel (1:7, 17). Peter said that each Christian is to be ready always to give a reason for the hope that lies within them (1 Peter 3:15). Jude wrote that what he was about to write he decided to change in order to encourage the Christian to contend earnestly for the faith (**Jude 3**). These sentiments of the Holy Spirit are not designed for us to become partisan as many have in sports or politics. These words are for us to promote the Lord Jesus

and faithfulness to His word as He revealed it. So, each of us have an obligation to defend the cause of Christ, to give a reason to others for the hope that is within us, and even contend for the faith. This applies to all Christian, especially elders and preachers.

Chapter 2

In the previous chapter we made mention of the importance of godliness (**1:27**); those sentiments at the beginning of this chapter are taken and developed further. The word *if* (**2:1**, NKJV) gives us the idea of *since*; there is nothing associated with doubt in Paul's use of this word (except in application by the Christians).

Paul encourages the Christians in Philippi to adopt an attitude of mind that looks upon self in humility. There is *nothing* to be done entirely through self-interest. This is much harder than is realized; we all have self-interests, and to apply what the Holy Spirit is saying takes much effort—but the end result of that is far reaching, even to eternity! Rather than to look at our own self-interests, Paul said we are also to consider the interests of others (**2:3-4**). This is another way of articulating the golden rule (**Matthew 7:12**).

The reason we are to think this way is because this is exactly the way our Lord Jesus thought (**2:5-8**). When you consider what it was our Lord gave up (the glories of heaven) we are all the more encouraged to make the application (of the previous paragraph). Before His incarnation (“the act of clothing with flesh;” cf. **John 1:1-3, 14**) Jesus was in the very nature (form of existence) God. His interest in man (His own creation) was so great that His status (equality) as God was not something to be grasped (or held on to) because He feared losing His equality if/when he became a man. He gave up His royal status for the good of another (be sure to read **John 17**). Christ so humbled Himself that He not only became a man (**2:7**), He also suffered a cruel death that was considered the most humiliating form of death. “This death was particularly revolting to Romans. Cicero said (*Rab. Perd. 5:16; 4:13*), ‘The very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and ears’ and that to crucify someone was to ‘hang him to the tree of shame’” (EBC-R, P. 221). Think about what our Lord gave up for each of us (cf. **Hebrews 4:15-16**).

Our Lord's humiliation resulted in three things (**2:9-11**). First, it resulted in His exaltation. His was highly exalted (NKJV), exalted to the highest possible degree (EBC-R). This means that when Jesus ascended to the glories of heaven He was seated at the right hand of the throne of God the Father (**Mark 16:19; Matthew 28:18**). Second, it resulted in man's salvation. Every knee (person) should bow before the Lord, and those that do will be saved. Peter declared on Pentecost the words of Joel (**Acts 2:21**) that whosoever calls on the Lord's name will be saved. Those who responded to that call from the Lord obeyed the Lord's invitation (cf. **Matthew 11:258-30; Acts 2:38**). Third, it resulted in man's ultimate destruction. Every knee will bow either willingly (salvation) or unwillingly (damnation). The latter group is exceedingly large. Those who refuse to confess Jesus Christ as Lord have, in effect, called God a liar (**1 John 5:10**)!

Knowing all this what should be our response (**2:12-18**)? Paul wrote to the Philippians about the importance of obedience to God's will (**2:12-13**), both in his presence and when he is gone. Knowing

they will be obedient with him not present he encourages them to “work out your own salvation.” The word “your” is plural; of course, Paul is addressing the church as a whole. Though the “your” is plural, it is the individual that make particular application to the words. The idea is to carry’s one salvation to its completed end. We do not want to misunderstand: salvation is by grace through faith, but a faith that is not obedient is an empty (dead) faith. Thus, Paul encourages the Christians to continue in their obedience to the Lord’s will—thereby working out (bringing to completion) their salvation (cf. **1:6**). “This exhortation assumes human free agency in the carrying on the work of one’s salvation” (RWP, E-Sword). To be sure we have not missed the significance of what Paul said, note the next verse (**2:13**). How does God work in a Christian? “The will may be stimulated through the reading of the Scriptures, a timely sermon, or the encouragement of a Christian friend” (Roper, p. 457). What ever way our souls (spirits) may be stimulated, the fact that our mind has been instructed in godly things lends itself much closer to the heavenly realm than not; in our obedience we are created (molded) unto good works (cf. **Eph. 2:10**).

Paul reflects on his work to and amongst the Philippians and encourages them to adopt the attitude no complaints, but as God’s children they are to shine as godly lamps in a dark, crusted world (**2:14-16**). This is done best when they hold fast to the word of life (cf. **John 14:6**) because when you think about the world in which we live—a perverse generation—why would we not seek to protect ourselves from all the corruption Satan is surely wanting us to ingest? When we follow the Lord’s exhortation the light we carry is a light that will shine the path for another (cf. **1 Peter 3:15**). Thus, as Paul reflect on his work, he does not want his work to be in vain. In other words, as the Philippians work out their salvation properly their work will be carried along by God to its completion. On the other hand, if they don’t then they will be lost eternally, and Paul’s work will have been vain. Thus, he is willing to say, while in prison, that if he must suffer (even lose his life), and it results in their salvation, he is all the more pleased to be a sacrifice for them (**2:17-18**).

Paul is very much interested in the Philippians’ well-being; consequently, he hopes to send Timothy to them in a short time. Timothy was a special person to Paul (cf. **1 Corinthians 4:17**); he was a young man (**1 Timothy 4:12**; cf. **2 Timothy 2:22**), but one who received much encouragement from Paul (**2 Timothy 1**). He knew that if/when he sent Timothy that Timothy’s motive and interests would be exactly like that of Paul’s (**2:19-24**). In the meantime, however, he did send Epaphroditus. He is said to *minister* (Greek: *leitourgos*) to Paul’s needs; this particular word is used 5 times in the GNT (**Romans 13:6; 15:16, Hebrews 1:7; 8:2**). Paul calls him a brother, fellow worker, soldier, their messenger (Greek: *apostolos*). Evidently, it was the Philippians who took a collection, gave it to Epaphroditus, who in turn gave it to Paul, and this gift from them to Paul was a sacrifice from them to the Lord God (**4:16-18**). The Philippians’ servant was with Paul a period of time, but due to one reason or another he took ill; this illness was serious, so serious that he nearly died. It is noteworthy that Paul did not heal him miraculously; however, the purpose of the miraculous in the New Testament was on validating (confirming) the message of the Holy Spirit. With Epaphroditus there was no confirmation needed (**Hebrews 2:1-4**). As he got better Paul sent him back to encourage the Philippians and for them to encourage him in the important work he was previously engaged in; in fact, Paul said that Christians are to do this for all such men (**2:28-30**).

SUMMARY. Paul was in prison for the cause of Christ, and those who serve the Lord may have to experience the same. But, whether they do or not, there is way of looking at life that each servant of the Lord must adopt; they are to have the mind of Christ. Adopting that approach has each taking responsibility to carry his own load, but never losing sight of the fact of **2:3-4**. Moreover, those who serve in the Lord's kingdom are to be esteemed for their work's sake.

Chapter 3

As Paul continues his encouragement to the Philippians, he makes it a point to encourage them to rejoice in the Lord (**3:1**). It may be that we rejoice when our paycheck comes to us at the end of the pay period, but it does not last and it is something that is material in nature. It may be that our joy with regard to our children being present may be a good thing, but it too will not last. With the Lord, on the other hand, it is always good because he "pays" us abundantly and He will never leave, it is a quality of eternity. He will call us to His home, and for that can't we rejoice? Along with this rejoicing there is a note of warning. Some want to take away what the Lord gave; Paul calls them mutilators of the flesh (**3:2**). Exactly who these people are is unknown, though it is thought to have been an element of Judaizing teachers (cf. **Acts 15:1-21**), and this seems to be illustrated with the following words (**3:3-6**).

God is Spirit and those who worship God do so in spirit and truth (**John 4:24**), the Lord said. Here Paul says the same with the phrase "in the Spirit" (**3:3**, NKJV) or by the Spirit of God (ESV). Is there a significant difference between the translations? With the translation variance on this matter perhaps knowing exactly the proper rendering is difficult. Nevertheless, we can be sure of the following: those who are truly circumcised in heart (**Romans 2:28-29**) are those who are of the true Israel of God (**Romans 9:6**), which is the Lord's church. These are the ones the Lord has saved (**Ephesians 5:25-27**), and these are the one who worship in (or by) the Spirit. "We Christians, St. Paul means, have not only the true circumcision, but the only true worship" (Pulpit, E-Sword). In this we are to rejoice, Paul said.

Did Paul have confidence in the flesh (**3:4-11**)? In today's religious environment there is much dispute about the role of the "flesh" in salvation. Many religious people throw around the idea that man is not justified by works—and it's true he is not. Unfortunately, what is in view even includes God's commands (cf. **1 John 5:3**)! What did Paul mean when he spoke this way? With regard to fleshly characteristics in religion—and you'll note that at least one thing pertained to God's command—but with regard to these he was willing to give it all up (**3:7-8**). To really see the value of what he mentioned compare the fleshly characteristics in **3:4-6** to the remark in **3:3**. It's not that fleshly activities have no value (that is not his point), but they have no value in relation to salvation separate and apart from obeying, serving, and worshiping God in the spirit (cf. **Romans 2:28-29**). Thus, to have no confidence in the flesh (**3:3**), is to put one's confidence elsewhere. In the context Paul makes it clear where his confidence is placed (**3:7-8**). Note in **3:6** that Paul said with regard to the law (Law of Moses) he was blameless. Since no one could be justified by the law (**Acts 13:39**), it must be that Paul meant that no one could level a charge or accusation against him and have it stick. Thus, in relation to the flesh, he was confident that he was in good standing; however, since he had come to know that its value was nothing, he put his trust in the Lord, and not in any fleshly characteristics (**3:4, 8**).

Whatever he may have gained in the eyes of man (with regard to the flesh), all those things he willingly gave up in order that the “eyes of the Lord” would receive what he offered. To Paul, pleasure was seen and experienced as he gained knowledge of Christ. This knowledge had tremendous value to Paul because with it he gained an understanding that he did not previously have (3:8). With this understanding he learned that what he previously valued was of no real value at all. No longer did he seek to attain to his own righteousness; rather, he sought the righteousness that only comes from the Lord (3:9-10). As you reflect on Paul’s word to the Corinthians (chapters 1 and 2), we can appreciate all the more what value Paul had come to realize was in the gospel, though others had (and do) not (note especially **1 Corinthians 2:6-9**).

Adopting the same attitude (3:12-16). At one time he sought righteousness in accordance with the flesh (3:6, 9), now he seeks the Lord’s righteousness (3:10-11). Paul understood, though (his readers are as well), that he had not attained (or reached) that which he desired, which is *perfection* in Christ (3:11-12; 1:23; some think that Paul has in view the *resurrection* (3:11), and this is certainly reasonable, but I think the context lends itself better to Paul having a full understanding which leads to behavioral changes in this life). In fact, he made it clear than in his efforts he had not attained perfection, but he was not going to allow that to dissuade, discourage, or defeat him. In fact, he was going to “press toward the goal of the prize of the upward call” of God (3:14). This “unrelenting determination” allowed Paul to do the following: (1) have a proper understanding of his failings (2) move forward, and (3) leave the past behind (3:12-14). Paul encourages the brethren to adopt the same disposition (3:15-16). “Just as a little child is a perfect human being, but still far from perfect in his development as a man, so the true child of God is also perfect in all his parts, although not yet perfect in all his stages of development in faith” (Muller, p. 126).

One’s citizenship (3:17-21). Paul now encourages the brethren in following the proper pattern; that pattern, in this case, is Paul. Paul puts himself forward because his motivation is in stark contrast (cf. verses 17 and 19) to the motivation of those whom he warns about. With regard to his motivation Paul said his citizenship is *in heaven*. With that motivation he has no interest in allowing the things of this world to be an ultimate motivation for him. In other words, he is not going to think like the world thinks. On the other hand, however, there are those who have patterned themselves after this world (3:18-19). As enemies of the “cross of Christ” there are characteristics to be seen: first, the way they walk; that is, the way they live their lives. Second, the way they live their lives is the result of the god they serve, the god of this world (cf. **2 Corinthians 4:4**). Third, “they live in Christian circles” (Muller). As you take note of 3:1-2, you can see that Paul warns of some who have improper motivations and teachings. Paul is not attempting to be exhaustive in his description, but he is sufficient in his wording to make these things clear. Whereas Paul is saddened and giving his warning, he is also encouraging (3:20-21). The Lord’s servant has a citizenship not of this world, but in the heavenly realm. The word “citizenship” (NKJV), Roper tells us, has been translated by James Moffatt as “colony.” Philippi as a Roman colony, was a significant thing. Just as there were privileges to this status, there was also responsibilities—like they were expected to colonize (which meant they were spread Roman thought and culture, p. 521). As Christians, we can see the value of being in the Lord’s “colony”. Not only is the Christian a citizen of heaven, he is anticipating with much eagerness the Lord’s return. On that glorious day our frail, wrecked

material body will be transformed into a glorious body that is indescribable (cf. **1 John 3:2**). Thus, we patiently wait for that great day (cf. **1 Corinthians 16:22**). All this the Lord is pleased to do because of that which works in us (**1:6; 2:13**); the Lord will bring us to completion because *He* is able to subdue all things to Himself (cf. **Matthew 28:18**). We serve a mighty God!

Chapter 4

Paul's word of exhortation (**4:1-9**). As the chapter begins, the first verse is really a conclusion to the previous thought in C-3. The previous thought (**3:17-21**) is an exhortation to follow after the pattern as seen in Paul; he lives his life for God because he is a citizen of heaven (as all saints are). Therefore, the brethren are encouraged to stand fast in the Lord and His way (**4:1**).

While Paul encouraged the church to stand fast, evidently two sisters struggled in their relationship one with another (**4:2-3**). The nature of this disagreement they had is unknown, and, I suppose, it's not necessary to know what it was. Paul's direct exhortation (admonition) to them was their need to straighten out the problem that separated them, get themselves back in line behind the Lord Jesus. We all will struggle with one another every now and again, but when we refuse to "get things lined out" properly with our brother, then at least one is stepping out of line with Christ (perhaps both). Who is the *true companion* Paul mentions? Is he referring to an individual or the congregation in the singular? Some think that Paul had in mind Timothy (cf. **2:19-20**), and there is even the suggestion that Paul had a wife at this time who was currently in Philippi (cf. Hansen, pp. 284-285). It's not important as to who it might have been, but whoever it was, Paul was appealing to some brethren to assist in resolving this matter between the sisters.

The Book of Life (**4:3**). This "scroll" has the names of all those who are saved (**Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15**). It is mentioned a number of times in the New Testament. It is also identified as "names written in heaven" (**Luke 10:20; Hebrews 12:23**). Is your name there?

Is the Lord at hand? That is what Paul said (**4:5**). Since the Lord had not come yet, was Paul mistaken? With an emphatic no, it must be answered. Way too many people have looked at Paul's words and have concluded that an apostle of the Lord was surely mistaken with such an anticipation. However, Paul never once said he knew when the Lord would return; in fact, not a single one of us knows when the Lord will return (cf. **Matthew 24:36**). Since we do not, let us understand a phrase that was "in common use among the early Christians, and as being designed to keep before their minds a lively impression of an event which ought, by its anticipation, to produce an important effect" (Albert Barnes, E-Sword). Thus, we ought to rejoice in our anticipation for the Lord's return, but let us be anxious in nothing; rather, let us devote ourselves to prayer because it is the Lord who is in control, and it is Him who knows all (**4:4, 6**). This approach to the travails of life will allow us (help us) to have an understanding that is peaceful beyond all human experience, because we sure don't need to accumulate wisdom that this world offers (**4:7**)! In fact, rather than think as this world would have us to think, let us think on things that are godly and positive (**4:8**), looking to the apostle Paul as an example for one to pattern one's life after (**4:9**).

Paul's encouragement of the Philippians (**4:10-20**). The church at Philippi had a genuine interest in Paul and his missionary efforts. Evidently, however, they were unable to express their genuine support in the way they would have liked (**4:10**). In **2:25**, Paul mentioned his love and concern for Epaphroditus; now he mentions him again relation to the gift carried by him to Paul from the church in Philippi (**4:18**). Paul was very much encouraged by them, not so much because of what he received, but because of the fruit that abounds to their account (**4:17**). Those who produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit will most definitely be benevolent and liberal to those in need—whether that need is in the proclamation of the gospel or with regard to one's need to survive physically (cf. **Acts 11:27-30**).

Though Paul was very encouraged by the effort of the Christians in Philippi, he conditioned himself to accept whatever circumstances with which he was presented with an attitude that was positive. While in prison he and Silas were beaten for no wrong having been done, but what did they do with such unfair and ungodly treatment rendered to them—they sang praises to the Lord (**Acts 16:23-25**)! There was nothing in Paul that was merely a matter of appearances; this was a reflection of his heart. In fact, he made clear that he was able to do this because the Lord was his strength (**4:13**), he changed his own way of thinking (**4:8**), and he learned by experience (**2 Corinthians 1:3-9**).

Paul's experience is something to reflect on for a moment. In our material wealthy society, the idea of doing without is not at all acceptable. To a degree, I think most of us understand that sentiment. However, with Paul, what did he have? He earlier mentioned that he was willing (and did) give up all for the cause of Jesus (**3:7-8**). Because he had very little he learned to be content (**4:11**). What is contentment? One man said it this way: "The secret of contentment is knowing how to enjoy what you have, and to be able to lose all desire for things beyond your reach" (Lin Yutang). Vine's Dictionary defines it this way: "sufficient in oneself, needing no assistance" (p. 236). Needing no assistance? Without pressing the language too much, I assume the idea is that Paul made it a point to trust in the Lord (**4:13**) regardless of his circumstances. This allowed him to remove any and all focus on the body's need. This is not suggest that Paul did not have concern for the body's need, but it is to say that he learned not to reach for that which he could not attain. When the brethren were able to send relief, Paul was grateful. He was grateful to the degree that language could express itself adequately to those who helped (**4:14-16**). How could Paul adopt such an attitude in a distressful situation? A couple of things to consider: 1) he had the Lord Jesus to rely on; 2) what good would it have done him to have a state of mind that was not going to be able to bear up under the burden he had been placed? Thus, when Paul did receive, it was plenty sufficient (**4:18**).

Paul's final words (**4:21-23**). Encouraged as he was by the brethren in Philippi he closes his letter sharing well-wishes from the brethren where he was to those in Philippi.