

Philippians in One Lesson

(Overview of the Letter to the Philippians)

I. Background for This Lesson

- a. In our expository teaching we occasionally attempt to tackle a book or letter in a single lesson. That forces me to take more of a 'big picture' look at the letter (in the case of Philippians), reading it through a few times to try to discern what the main point is.
- b. This letter is worthy of much more detailed study than just one lesson, but I hope this will help you in your own study of the letter to take it further on your own. There are a lot of things touched on by Paul in this letter that are worth exploring further.
- c. Not too long ago (in 2022) we studied through the **Book of Acts**, which provides a good introduction to Paul's relationship with the church in Philippi, in Macedonia (roughly corresponding to northern Greece).
 - i. When Paul is in Asia Minor on his second missionary journey, in **Acts 16**, he has a vision at night of a Macedonian man asking him to "come over to Macedonia and help us". The Lord is calling Paul to preach the gospel there (**Acts 16:9**).
 - ii. After Paul sails across to Europe, he goes first to Philippi, "the foremost city of that part of Macedonia". There he reaches out to Lydia, the seller of purple cloth, at the place of prayer by the river. She and her household are baptized (**Acts 16:11-15**).
 - iii. Next we learn of Paul casting a demon out of a slave girl who was annoying him. He gets in trouble with her owners for that and ends up in prison. At midnight in the prison, he and Silas are praying and singing hymns, with the other prisoners listening, when the Lord brings an earthquake that opens the prison doors to release Paul and Silas (**Acts 16:16-30**).
 - iv. Paul then preaches the gospel to the Philippian jailer's household, who believe and are baptized. The next morning the officials of the city escort Paul out (**Acts 16:31-40**).
 - v. Paul passes through that region again on his third missionary journey (**Acts 20:1-6**).
 - vi. In **Acts 28**, Paul is being held prisoner in Rome, awaiting a trial before Caesar.

- d. Paul's letter to the Philippians is written while Paul is a prisoner in Rome.
 - i. "All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar's household." (**Philippians 4:22**, NKJV)
 - 1. Therefore, we know that Paul was in Rome, capital of the Roman Empire, when writing this letter.
 - ii. "But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ..." (**Philippians 1:12-13**, NKJV)
 - 1. From this we learn that Paul was imprisoned at the time he was writing this letter, which would correspond with the events described at the end of **Acts 28**.
 - iii. We know that Paul's trip to Greece on his second missionary journey was 50-51 AD, when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia. His visit to Macedonia on his third missionary journey would have been a few years after that. His imprisonment in Rome (end of **Acts 28**) would have been c. 61-63 AD, or about ten years after Paul first planted the church in Philippi.
 - iv. This letter is referred to as one of the 'prison epistles', because he was imprisoned while writing it.
- e. The general tone of the letter is rather positive and encouraging. Unlike in **1 Corinthians**, apparently there were no major heresies or sin problems that Paul needed to address with the Philippian church at the time that Paul was writing this letter.

II. Main Theme: Rejoicing in the Midst of Suffering

- a. In my opinion, the strongest point Paul makes in this letter has to do with a call for Christians to rejoice even in the face of suffering that they are going through.
- b. Why this is important for us.
 - i. Almost no one wants to suffer. We generally seek pleasure, or at least the absence of suffering.
 - ii. In an attempt to make the gospel more attractive to the world, various forms of a false 'prosperity gospel' are in wide circulation.
 - 1. Obvious example of purveyors of this approach, in the US, include 'prosperity gospel' preachers such as Joel Osteen.

2. Various forms of the 'prosperity gospel' are incredibly popular in many poorer countries, including in Africa.
 3. A 'soft prosperity gospel' variant of this approach can be found even within fairly conservative Christian groups. They tend to present a 'seeker friendly' message that includes points such as the following:
 - a. God loves us and wants us to be happy.
 - b. Sin leads to a miserable life (divorce, drugs, alcohol, strife, laziness, poverty, etc.).
 - i. (While it is true that sin does bring great destruction into our lives, the gospel is not presented this way in the New Testament.)
 - c. If we follow God we will have great marriages, wonderful families, happiness, success, good friends, supportive community, etc.
 4. Many Christians who have been taught this false version of the gospel end up struggle greatly when they face unexpected times of suffering. They wonder: "Where is God? What did I do wrong? Why am I being punished like this?"
- c. This idea of rejoicing in the midst of suffering (or at least accepting it, if we are suffering for righteousness' sake) is presented in an encouraging way in this letter. Furthermore, we see this theme throughout the New Testament, including in what Jesus taught, in many of Paul's other letters, in **1 Peter** and in **Hebrews**.
- d. How I see this theme highlighted in the letter:
- i. Paul starts by referring to his own suffering, saying that he is in chains.
 1. However, he does not want others to 'feel sorry for' him.
 2. He sees God using this to make other Christians bolder in spreading the gospel.
 - ii. Paul calls the Philippian Christians to suffer as well.
 1. "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also *to suffer for His sake....*" (**Philippians 1:29**, NKJV)

- iii. In **Philippians 2:1-12**, Paul points to the example of Jesus humbling Himself and being willing to suffer humiliation on the cross.
 - 1. He calls the Philippians to have the same attitude as Christ.
- iv. Paul reminds them that he is “being poured out as a drink offering” on their behalf.
- v. In **Philippians 3:7-10** Paul says he has “suffered the loss of all things”, and desires to know Christ and “the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if by any means, I may attain the resurrection of the dead.”
 - 1. This is a great prayer: “God, help me to *share in the sufferings of Jesus*”!
- vi. Paul then points to his own life as a pattern that the Philippians should imitate. (**Philippians 3:17**)
 - 1. This the type of leader I find it easiest to follow is the one who is calling me to *follow his own example* (rather than just telling me what to do, bossing me around or trying to micro-manage my life).
- vii. In **Philippians 4:4** he calls the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord always”.
 - 1. Paul points to his own life, in saying that he has learned how to be content in all circumstances; even when he is abased, hungry or suffering need. (**Philippians 4:10-13**)
- e. **Challenge:** As we read this, consider your own life, and the suffering that you have been struggling with.
 - i. Consider what Paul is saying here to the Christians, in encouraging them in the face of the suffering they will be facing.
 - ii. Consider the life of Paul, and his own circumstances. He was leading by example, and simply calling others to follow.
 - iii. Consider Jesus, the ultimate example of suffering for righteousness’ sake.
 - iv. Also, there are some outstanding phrases in this letter that are worthy of meditation and memorization, to call upon when we are struggling. Note the passages that inspire or challenge you, and memorize them!
- f. Suffering for the sake of Christ

i. Read **Philippians 1:12-26**.

1. Paul recognizes that some Christians preach Christ out of bad motives.
 - a. I have seen this in my own life, people with bad intentions and motives who taught the gospel.
 - b. God works through all types of people to spread the gospel message. He will deal with bad-hearted people in His timing.
2. Paul is in chains. However, he sees God using this for a greater good.
3. Some of the brothers, inspired by Paul being in chains, are becoming bolder in spreading the gospel.
 - a. The thing that is holding back the gospel from spreading: lack of boldness. The apostles did not pray for “open hearts” in **Acts 4**. They prayed for boldness.
 - i. Read **Acts 4:23-31**.
 - b. Seeing someone else suffering for the sake of the gospel inspires boldness.
 - c. Some fear coming persecution in the US. Paul saw persecution and suffering as an opportunity to inspire greater boldness, if we are willing to suffer for righteousness’ sake.
 - d. Don’t be fearful of persecution. Instead, let us pray for boldness and seek inspiring examples of boldness in the Scriptures that can call us higher.
4. Paul was looking forward to being with Christ after death (and after the resurrection, based on what he wrote elsewhere). However, he was willing to remain here and suffer for the sake of “fruitful labor”.
5. This is the context of his famous statement, “For to live is Christ, and to die is gain”. (**Philippians 1:21**)

ii. Read **Philippians 1:27-30**.

1. Many in Protestant circles today summarize ‘the gospel’ more or less as follows:

- a. "Christ suffered on our behalf, *so that we don't need to suffer*. All we need to do is believe in Him and what He did for us".
2. However, that is *not* how Paul saw it!
 - a. "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but *also to suffer for His sake....*" (**Philippians 1:29**, NKJV)
 - b. As Christ's followers, we will suffer as well.
3. Also consider:
 - a. "Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him *deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me*. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it." (**Luke 9:23-24**, NKJV)
 - b. "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps...." (**1 Peter 2:21**, NKJV)
 - c. "You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ... This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him. If we endure, We shall also reign with Him...." (**2 Timothy 2:3-12**, NKJV)
4. The more accurate gospel message is: "Christ suffered and died for us. If we want to be His disciples, we must follow His example. We must be willing to suffer and die for Him."
 - a. This is much more than the initial death to sin we experience in baptism. It is a way of life, being willing to pursue righteousness, die to ourselves and endure suffering of all types to the end.
5. Paul also admonishes them to not fear their adversaries, and to be unified with one another, "to stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together...."
 - a. This call to unity among themselves sets the stage for introducing what Paul discusses next, perhaps the second main theme of this letter: being unified with one another by having the humility of Jesus Christ.

III. A Second Theme: Unified Through the Humility of Christ

a. Read **Philippians 2:1-11**.

- i. Paul calls them to be “of one accord...of one mind”.
 1. Jesus prayed for unity of all believers in **John 17**. Paul hit that topic first in **1 Corinthians 1-3**, in his letter to the Corinthians, where they were plagued by division. In that case, it was the result of identifying with prominent apostles (Peter, Paul, Apollos) and breaking into factions.
 2. It is very difficult to be unified with others: in marriage, a family, a church, and among Christians outside our local fellowship.
 3. The goal of unity among all Christians is so challenging that most Christians *do not even try!*
- ii. Here, the source of division appears to be much more common: human pride.
- iii. Satan is always working to cause division in the body of Christ. I see it going on all the time. This is one of the most important battles to wage in the body of Christ, one that few take as seriously as we need to.
 1. Jesus hit this first of all the issues He tackled in the Sermon on the Mount, saying that disunity between brothers needs to be addressed urgently, before offering a gift at the altar.
- iv. Here Paul calls us to be willing to imitate the humility of Jesus, who was willing to lower Himself from being the Son of God, to become a man, and then lower himself further to accept a humiliating, cursed death on the cross.
 1. He calls us to have the same attitude of humility that Jesus demonstrated, specifically that we do not foster pride-based division in the church.
 2. Recall that the night before Jesus died, the one specific thing He prayed for regarding us (those who would believe in the future through the message of the apostles) was that we would be unified. (**John 17:20-23**)

b. Read **Philippians 2:12-16**.

- i. God’s desire is to be of one accord, in order that we would shine out like “lights in the world”.

1. “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”
(Matthew 5:14–16, NKJV)
 2. Perhaps one of the greatest ways that Jesus wants us to be lights in this dark world is through our unity with one another. He said this would be the sign to the world that we are from God. **(John 17:23)**
- ii. One of the hardest challenges in the face of suffering (including when in conflict with other Christians): controlling our tongues. We cannot complain, dispute, argue or engage in gossip.
1. From *Of the Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis, chapter 11*: “If every year we would root out vice, we should soon become perfect men.”
 - a. A good place for many of us to start: repent of the vice of complaining!
 - b. “Do everything without complaining or disputing....”
(Philippians 2:14)
 - c. If we have a problem/conflict with someone, take it directly to that brother, as Jesus commands us to in **Matthew 18**. Do not engage in gossip, complaining to others about that person!
 2. Jesus again is the example for us to follow.
 - a. “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: “Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth”; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously....” **(1 Peter 2:21–23, NKJV)**
 3. Consider related admonitions in Scripture.
 - a. “Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. For

'He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil.' (1 Peter 3:8-12, NKJV; where Peter is quoting from Psalm 34, which is designated Psalm 33 in the LXX)

- b. "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus, no spring yields both salt water and fresh." (James 3:5-12, NKJV)

iii. **Practical Challenges:**

1. Have the humility of Christ, striving to remain unified with other disciples.
2. Look to the good of others, not just ourselves. Humble ourselves.
3. Control our tongues.
4. Resolve things directly and quickly as we are commanded in **Matthew 18**.
5. Do not give into the temptation to complain or gossip in the face of suffering.

c. Read **Philippians 2:17-24**.

- i. Paul says he is being poured out "as a drink offering".

- ii. Paul has wonderful praise for Timothy, both inspiring and convicting to me. This is a statement I think about often.
 - 1. “For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For *all seek their own*, not the things which are of Christ Jesus.” (**Philippians 2:20–21**, NKJV)
 - 2. “For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For *they all seek their own interests*, not those of Jesus Christ.” (**Philippians 2:20–21**, ESV)
 - 3. **Challenge:** In every situation, any advice I give, am I seeking after my own interest? Interest of my particular group? Or the interests of Christ?
 - a. I find what Paul says regarding Timothy to be extremely convicting. This passage has ‘haunted’ me.
 - b. When I am giving advice to others, I need to be like Timothy: looking out for *the interests of Christ*, with no concern for my own personal interests.
- d. Summarize **Philippians 2:25-36**.
 - i. Epaphroditus was sick to the point of almost dying.
 - ii. Paul was spared the further sorrow of his loss.
 - iii. Epaphras was distressed that others were worrying about him!

IV. Philippians Chapter 3

- a. Read **Philippians 3:1-11**.
 - i. People (Judaizers) were adding requirements of the Law of Moses to the gospel presented to Christians. That was in direct violation of what the apostles laid down in **Acts 15**.
 - ii. Paul’s “no confidence in the flesh” statement is regarding circumcision.
 - iii. “...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may *share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death*, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (**Philippians 3:10–11**, ESV)
 - 1. Paul asked to share in the sufferings and death of Christ, that he could share in the resurrection as well!

2. This is a great example for us to imitate and a great thing to pray: let me share in Christ's suffering!

b. Read **Philippians 3:12-21**.

- i. "Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, *forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead*, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (**Philippians 3:13-14**, NKJV)
 1. This is sound advice for good spiritual/mental/emotional health.
 2. Many beat themselves up repeatedly over the past and worry about the future.
 3. Paul provides great advice regarding where to devote our focus and attention! Although he had done many terrible things before becoming a Christian, he grasped how to handle his past sins.
- ii. Paul leads by example, calling others to follow what he himself is doing.
 1. "Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern." (**Philippians 3:17**, NKJV)

V. **Philippians Chapter 4**

a. Read **Philippians 4:1-9**.

- i. Paul affectionately refers to the Christians in Philippi as his "joy and crown".
- ii. He appeals for two women in the church to be unified with each other.
- iii. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (**Philippians 4:4**, NKJV)
 1. The hardest part of this challenge: it is to apply *under all circumstances*!
 2. We are to rejoice not only when things appear to be going 'well', but also when we are facing trials and suffering.
- iv. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the

peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” (**Philippians 4:6-7**, NKJV)

1. This is wonderful, practical advice.
 2. Instead of worrying, make our requests known to God.
 3. This advice should become an important part of the prayer life of every disciple.
 4. Jesus taught the same thing! (**Matthew 6:25-34**)
- v. “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.” (**Philippians 4:8-9**, NKJV)
1. Focus your thoughts on the good and positive things.
 2. Meditate on those things.
 3. We do need to address problems that come up, in a righteous way. However, our overall focus should be on doing and meditating on *what is good*, including the good things that we see in each other’s lives.
- b. Summarize **Philippians 4:10-23**.
- i. Final greetings, and comments regarding financial assistance.

VI. Closing Thoughts

- a. The Christian life will have suffering in it.
- b. We are called to follow the example of Christ: suffering for righteousness, while looking for a greater glory to follow.
- c. In view of this, let us rejoice under all circumstances.
- d. Instead of being anxious in the face of trials, let us lay our concerns and requests before the Lord.
- e. Have the humility of Christ in our relations with others; look out for the interests of Christ (rather than our own personal interests) in every encounter.