

# Introduction to the Letter to the Philippians



## The Plan

The purpose of this Introduction is to help us all “get into” the letter as a whole. The items below are intended to help see the flow of the letter and to understand that the letter is first of all primarily ‘occasional’, i.e. written to a particular people at a particular time and place. This is crucial to best understand and appreciate it. Again, why not focus on the book in your own devotions. Start off by reading the book through in one sitting, and then work through it slower, bearing in mind the points made here and any other book that may help. Use different translations if you can. Read the relevant passages in the week before each Home Church gathering. We are looking not just to understand it better, but to be able to live it better.

## Introduction

In AD50 a man from Macedonia appeared to Paul in a dream requesting help. Paul took this dream seriously and made plans to visit. The first stop on the journey was Philippi, a small but important city – a Roman colony, enjoying all the benefits of Rome, populated largely by ex-soldiers, and proud of it! Acts 16:6-40 records the planting of the first church in that city in Lydia’s house (note: there was not even a synagogue there!). It was not without its troubles though, Paul and Silas were put in prison. Their singing resulted in an earthquake, however, and some new disciples. It is now around 10 years later and Paul is in prison again ...

Paul is most likely under house-arrest in Rome. Epaphroditus arrived from Philippi to help him, but he was not in good health by the time he got there. Paul relied in these kind of gifts because he was not provided food. The church had heard Epaphroditus was ill but not what had happened to him. Now he has recovered, Paul is sending him back with a letter thanking them and addressing a couple of issues. Philippians is a most affectionate letter. It very is clear the love Paul (cf 1:1; 1:4-5, 1:8, 4:1) has for the church and the love the church has for him (2 Cor 11:8-9, Phil 4:16-19). There are no appeals to authority or apostleship here, just the love a father to his children exhorting them to a Christ-like life.

## Things to look out for

- 1) Life in Christ** – Paul frequently refers uses the phrase “in Christ” and “through Christ”. He wants to focus all of life’s activities around the reality and meaning brought by Christ. He prays with Christ’s affection (1:8), that they will receive the fruit of righteousness through Christ (1:11), and he cites the example of Christ that they are to follow (2:6-11). He wants to fully identify with Christ in life, death and suffering, stretching forward to the new life in Christ that is to become a full reality “on the day of Christ” (2:16). Most climactically Paul expresses it in the well-known verse: “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21). Paul’s singular focus and purpose for living is Christ, all else is dung (3:7-10).
- 2) ... is a life of joy** – Considering that Paul is writing this from prison, that he is sending back someone who almost died, that a big theme is giving up your own interests for Christ and others, it is a huge challenge that Paul exhorts the Philippians to a life of joy over 16 times in the letter! He rejoices in his sufferings, in their Christ-like attitudes, when enemies take advantage of his situation and in the friendship that he has with them and his colleagues. He encourages them to rejoice in his and their sufferings, to be joyful in their obedience and to always rejoice (and again: rejoice!). This seems only possible because of the perspective of life in Christ and the trust that all aspects of life, - whether sufferings, plenty or need, obedience, love for others, service – work to bring glory to Christ. It seems there is never a reason to not find joy in Christ in every circumstance.
- 3) Servanthood** – Paul introduces the letter, unusually, by calling him and Timothy “slaves of Christ”. The rest of the letter outlines this reality. Most of all it is clear that they are primarily following the example of their master, Jesus, who became a slave (2:7). Paul has no need here to call himself “an apostle”, since he planted the church his credentials are clear, rather as a father to the church he wants to set himself up as a model to follow (3:17) even as he follows

Christ. He also mentions two other examples, that of Timothy, his “son in the Lord”, and Epaphroditus, who almost died “for Christ” as he delivered the Philippians ‘aid’ to Paul, giving great value to normal everyday Christian service. The nature of this servanthood is clear, it is primarily about “looking not to your own interest but to the interests of others” (2:4, 2:20-21, 2:30). It is also about giving up positions of privilege, honour and power and taking a lowly position, being willing to serve others, and thereby to “know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (3:10).

- 4) **Friendship/Fellowship** – The mutual affection between Paul and this church is clear. Hence Paul talks about working together, struggling together, sharing in each others sufferings, being formed together and yoked together. Fellowship is central to the letter and therefore the call to address infighting and bickering is strong. The fellowship is a gift of the Spirit and found in the Spirit. This is against a self-seeking attitude, and rather is putting aside individual desires for the sake of others. The nature of Christian friendship is a unity that comes from the Holy Spirit, being expressed through self-sacrifice and self-emptying love toward the other.
- 5) **Eschatology** – Although not central to the letter, it is clear within it what the nature of Paul’s future hope is, not surprising maybe when Paul is clearly being faced with a real possibility of his death. Paul has a definite future expectation (1:10, 2:16, 3:11, 3:20-21) and a sense of urgency with regards Christ’s return (4:5). Should he die he expects to be with Christ (1:21-23) prior to the day of the Lord (1:6). On that day, he expects Christ to return to earth, to bring everything under his control and to transform our bodies to be like his. In the meantime we are to live now on earth as citizens of heaven, even as they live in Philippi as citizen’s of Rome.

## Running Order

- 1) **Greeting (1:1-3)**
- 2) **Thanksgiving and prayer report (1:3-11)**
- 3) **How things are with Paul (1:12-26)**
  - a. Present situation (1:12-18)
    - i. Rejoice in imprisonment because it is furthering the gospel – his own witness and in spurring others on
    - ii. And even those who do it out of rivalry
  - b. Its expected outcome (1:19-26)
    - i. He expects release (v24-26)
    - ii. But either is gain (v20-23) - *everything is Christ*
- 4) **How things are with them - Exhortation to unity (1:27-2:18) - reason: 4:2-3**
  - a. Stand firm in unity in face of suffering (1:27-30)
  - b. “if our relationship means anything” – unity through selflessness and humility (2:1-4)
  - c. Example of Christ (2:5-18)
- 5) **What’s next? (2:19-30)**
  - a. Two example of selflessness - Epaphroditus and Timothy
- 6) **Against False teachers (3:1-4:1)**
  - a. Confidence beyond the flesh (3:1-6)
  - b. Reiterating his gospel (3:7-14)
  - c. And the final hope as a result of present journey (3:15-4:1)
- 7) **Exhortations (4:2-9)**
  - a. Stand firm together
- 8) **Thanks for the gift (4:10-19)**