



## Paul's Letter to the Philippians

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### Chapters 1-4

#### Partnership in the Gospel

The letter to the Philippians would be called in our day a “missionary support letter”. Paul is prayerful in his gratitude for the Philippians steadfast “partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now” (1:3). His letter develops this theme of partnership in the Gospel.

#### ***Standing Tall Together in a Twisted and Crooked World***

The general tone of Paul's letter to the Philippians is *encouragement*. When a person encourages they literally breathe courage into a *discouraged* person or party. The church was facing difficulties as a congregation due to external persecution, internal conflict, false teachers, and fallen members. They also shared deep concerns about Paul because of his imprisonment and impending death penalty. In this letter, Paul seeks to give the Philippians a heavenly perspective on earthly trials.

*But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. –Phil. 3:20, 21*

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Using himself as an example in vulnerability, Paul allows them some insight into his own theological thought processes as he faces his own imprisonment and death sentence with courage in the Lord. He then provides some very practical encouragement to the members of the church that they too may stand up straight and tall for the Gospel of Jesus in the midst a “crooked and twisted generation” (2:15).

#### ***The Church in Philippi***

While Paul was trying to minister in Asia, God had a different mission plan for Paul. In a vision, the Lord called him to cross over the Aegean Sea into Europe (the region of Macedonia).

*And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”<sup>10</sup> And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. –Acts 16:9-10*

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The very first city in Macedonia (Europe) which Paul enters he finds a convert. The city of Philippi is described as a “leading city in the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony” (Acts 16:12). It was a city



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that prided itself in Roman culture and heritage as the site of a Roman military victory. The first converts to the church included Lydia, a merchant who sold purple dye, a demon possessed, “fortune-telling” slave girl, and the jail keeper of the city Philippi. (Acts 16:11-40)

Paul’s initial activity and the nature of the converts in Philippi, he caused quite the scene and a political scandal ensued with the officials of the city (see Acts 16:11-40). They simply did not have a category for Christians or for Paul, who was both a Roman citizen *and* a loyal citizen of the Kingdom of God. The disruption and confusion caused by Paul certainly was not welcome in the city and they asked him to leave:

*But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.” <sup>38</sup> The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. <sup>39</sup> So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.*

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What began in conflict likely would have continued to be plagued with official trouble. The Christians who lived in Philippi would likely have been lumped in the same category. From the letter, we can see that they continued to have “opponents” which may have “frightened” them from “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (1:27-28).

Those opponents, may have been both unbelievers who lived as members of the “crooked and twisted generation” but they also could have been false teachers who were promoting a form of the heresy which Paul so firmly refuted in his letter to the Galatians. Here he warns them: “Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh” (3:2).

The Philippian Christians were financial supporters of Paul’s mission. His letter of encouragement to them was written in with thanksgiving for their latest gift and provides an update on the fruit of the ministry they are partnering to support.

Paul is writing to them from prison. He is writing from a prison in Rome. He mentions the Roman “imperial guard” (1:17) and he sends greetings from the Christians in “Caesar’s household” (4:22). Paul was imprisoned in Rome starting around 62 AD ending with his martyrdom sometime between 64-67 AD. So the letter to the Philippians was likely written around 62 AD during his first imprisonment and period of house arrest in Rome therefore it is often called one of his “Prison Epistles” along with the letters to Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon.



## Literary Structure<sup>3</sup>

### Philippians 1-4

**A. (1.1-11) Prologue: 'Partnership in the Gospel' Theme Introduced with Prayerful Gratitude.**

**B. (1.12-26) Comfort/Example: Paul's Safety and Right Thinking in the Midst of a Difficult 'Guarded' Situation.**

**C. (1.27-2.4) Challenge: Stand Fast and Be United, Fulfilling Paul's Joy!**

**D. (2.5-16) Example / Action: Christ's Example of Humility and Suffering before Glory, then Related Behavioral Instructions.**

**E. (2.17-3.1a) Midpoint: Caring Models of Gospel Partnership, Two of Which Are Sent to Help Immediately.**

**D'. (3.1b-21) Example / Action: Paul's Example of Humbling and Suffering before 'Upward Call'/Transformation, then Instructions.**

**C'. (4.1-5) Challenge: Stand Fast and Accentuate Existing Joy by the Reconciliation of Two Past Gospel Partners!**

**B'. (4.6-9) Comfort/Example: The Philippians' 'Guarded' Peace of Mind and Right Thinking in the Midst of an Anxious Situation.**

**A'. (4.10-23) Epilogue: Partnership from the Past Renewed, with Expressed Gratitude.**

The letter to the Philippians follows a thematic structure known as Chiasm. The theme of the letter, partnership in the Gospel, develops toward a central point (E. 2:17-3:1a) and then back out to the theme of partnership. Paul is using the occasion of financial partnership in the Gospel to encourage a deeper partnership in unity of thought and life application.

### **A E & A' Partnership in the Gospel: Gratitude and Renewal (1:1-11, 4:10-23)**

The key theme is first introduced in chapter 1 and then renewed in chapter 4, partnership in the Gospel. Paul is filled with gratitude for the Philippians, his prayer is that they would be fully united in this gospel both in the grace shown to them, and in their mutual struggles and suffering for the Gospel and in the unified defense and proclamation of the Gospel to a lost world.

In the midpoint of the letter (2:17-3:1a) Paul highlights two tangible examples of this partnership in action through the sending of help in the humble servants of the Gospel: Timothy and Epaphroditus.

<sup>3</sup> Luter, A. Boyd and Lee, Michelle V., "Philippians as Chiasmus: Key to the Unity, Structure and Theme Questions" (1995). Faculty Publications and Presentations. Paper 252. [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/its\\_fac\\_pubs/252](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/its_fac_pubs/252)



## **B & B' Comfort/Example: Under the Guard of Rome and God (1:12-26; 4:6-9)**

Both Paul and the Philippians were experiencing difficult situations of persecution in their lives due to their commitment to the Gospel. Paul was imprisoned for the Gospel by the imperial guard in Rome. From an earthly perspective this could become the occasion of tremendous worry and despair. Paul uses the example of his own sufferings to help the Philippians see a different way of looking at the persecution.

First, Paul sees the incredible fruit that is being brought forth by his imprisonment. (1:12-18) The entire guard is hearing Christ proclaimed; the faithful are being encouraged to boldness because of Paul's witness; and Paul's rivals are seeing an opportunity to gain a place in the pulpit for their own selfish gain. Yet, in all of these things Paul rejoices because "Christ is proclaimed!" (1:18).

Secondly, Paul has a different way of looking at this life because of the resurrection life to come. (1:19-26) In a "to be or not to be" reflection, Paul reveals that whether he lives or dies he is blessed in Jesus Christ. He knows that if he dies, it will result in being with Christ. His continued life means more fruitful labor with them. So either way Paul with joy. Live or die, he simply can't lose!

In chapter 4:6-9, Paul will encourage the Philippians to lay aside anxiety in their own struggles by turning their worries over to God in prayer with thanksgiving and by setting their mind on that which is glorious and good. While he is under guard of Rome, their hearts and minds are guarded by the peace of God.

*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Phil. 4:7*

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As citizens of Rome, they are guarded in persecution because of the Gospel. As citizens of heaven, they are guarded for eternal life.

## **C & C' Challenge: Stand Fast and Be United, Fulfilling Paul's Joy (1:27-2:4; 4:1-5)**

So Paul challenges them to stand fast in unity and joy. The oppositions and struggles they face could become an occasion for dissension and division. Indeed there were two of the female leaders in conflict with one another (Euodia and Syntyche, 4:2). Paul challenges them to eschew conflict with one another and unite and strive "side by side" against the common enemy which is seeking to tear them apart.

*<sup>27</sup> Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,<sup>28</sup> and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. Phil. 1:27-28*

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The unity in their relationships should be reflected in a remarkable character of joy! Paul encourages them to "complete his joy" by being united in mind and the character of humility exemplified in Christ (2:1-2).



## D & D' Example / Action: Humility and Suffering before Glory-The Example of Christ and Paul (2:5-16; 3:1b-21)

To underscore his challenge to humility and unity of mind and joy, Paul first points to the example of Jesus in 2:5-16 and then his own desire to share in Christ's example in his own life in 3:1b-21. Jesus is the Supreme example of the type of humility that will lead to ultimate glory. Though he had every right to assert his own leadership and status in his divine nature, he humbled himself and took on the frail flesh of humanity even to the point of dying an ignoble death on a cross. The humility of Jesus led to his exaltation to the highest place in heaven and on earth.

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Phil. 2:5-9*

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Paul uses the example of Christ's humility to call the Philippians to stand tall and bright as "lights in the world" (2:15) in the midst of a sinful and fallen world. The reason they can do this is because of the partnership with Christ and Paul, who has himself emptied himself for the sake of the Gospel.

Paul returns to the subject of humility leading to exaltation when he shares his own purpose to follow on the heels of Christ Jesus in suffering so to somehow obtain the glory of the resurrection. (3:1b-21) To Paul nothing else in this life really matters. (3:8) He will pursue the end of partnering with Christ at all personal cost and by any means possible. (3:10)

*Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— <sup>10</sup> that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 3:8-11*

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Paul has made this the pursuit of this call in Christ the singular focus of his life. His challenge to the Philippians is to join him in this singular focus in partnership for the Gospel.