

Philippians Overview and Summary

Why do you write letters? May I suggest that it is because there is an occasion to write? You know, someone just had a baby, or graduated from college, or you wanted to know how things were going. Of course, these days fewer and fewer people write letters and more and more send emails. But the reasons are just the same.

Now Paul had a reason to write the letter he wrote to the Philippians. But what was it? We only have his letter, we don't have a direct explanation for why he wrote it. So we have to become investigators. So let's begin the investigation, because it will reap rich rewards in helping us grab hold of the message God has for us.

Usually, the best way to find out the occasion for a letter is to read the very first part of the letter and the very last part. We're going to follow that strategy in Philippians.

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. 8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

One of the things that stands out here is Paul's repetition of the word "all." Its as if he wants the readers to feel an all inclusive regard on his part. The next thing that stands out is that Paul felt joy when he prayed for this church because they had been partners with him in the gospel ministry. They had helped him defend and confirm the gospel, and there had developed a deep affection between them. This gives him confidence that they will experience this work of God among them in a continued way until Jesus comes.

What Paul prays for them also gives us some hints as to the themes of this letter.

9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

There is something lacking in their love for him, and it is knowledge, so he prays that their knowledge may increase along with their love, again, until Jesus comes. The good things we see developing in ourselves and our church come from Jesus himself as he works in us to produce fruit.

We need to look at one more aspect of this introduction to the letter.

12 Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. 13 As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. 14 Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

15 It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. 16 The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. 18 But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Right after Paul prays for an increase in their knowledge, he begins to teach them knowledge. They, in their love, have misunderstood something. They believed that Paul's imprisonment, which we learn about in this part of the letter, had served to hurt the gospel, but Paul believed and knew it had advanced the gospel. The proof was in the conversions among Caesar's guard, the soldiers guarding Paul during his time awaiting trial.

But what Paul notes is that the one thing that might be endangering the gospel more than his imprisonment is the disunity among the believers in Rome, for that is where we are assuming Paul is writing this letter from. We tend to think it is the difficult persecutions, or the godless legislations, or the illness or death of our leaders, that endanger the gospel. But it is our own selfish agendas played out against other Christians that really endanger the gospel. Paul knew this so well.

Now why would Paul make it a point to talk about this situation right now? We know that much of this letter is devoted to an encouragement to unity at this church. What are they arguing about? Let's look at the end of the letter.

2 I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Here are the two women around whom the controversy is swirling. But what are they arguing about? Does it matter? Well I think we have a clue in the end of this letter.

10 I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. 11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

14 Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. 15 Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; 16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. 17 Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. 18 I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. 19 And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

This, I believe, is the key to understanding this letter. We were told by Paul that he considered this church a partner in the gospel. Here we learn that at least one way they did that was through their giving. But I want to take you briefly to 2 Corinthians 8.

I And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

Paul is using the Macedonians, which included the Philippians, as an example of the kind of giving he wants them to do. But he tells us that the Macedonians were experiencing a time of poverty. Now I want you to suppose that you are a Philippian and you have received the news that Paul has been put in prison in Rome and is awaiting trial before Caesar's tribunal. In the past you have contributed to Paul's ministry. Some are saying that is what needs to be done right now. Paul is having to rent his own house where he is being guarded. The gospel is at stake, they are arguing. But others are saying things have changed at home now. We're too impoverished to give money to Paul, they say. We have to take care of ourselves first.

Look at the end of the letter again. Is Paul thanking the Philippians for their gift? That is what many Bibles put as the heading for this section of the letter. Do you see a thank you? No, what you see is Paul saying he doesn't need the gift, but he's glad it was sent. How would you feel if you got something for someone and they said, "I don't need this but I'm glad you gave it to me"? But Paul has already told them they were wrong about the gospel being endangered by his situation and any supposed lack of money. The danger is disunity in the church. If the Philippians are in disagreement about sending Paul money, this section begins to make a great deal of sense.

Paul is saying to the one group that argued, "We need to send Paul money or the gospel will be in danger," I don't need it. I'm content as I am. I can do all things through Christ. I've already led several of Caesar's guard to Christ. To the group that is arguing, "We have to take care of ourselves," Paul is saying, It is good you sent this gift. My God will supply all your needs. Such gifts are a sweet-smelling offering to God.

So now that we understand the probable occasion for this letter, what is Paul's message?

He picks up the theme most strongly in 1:27-30.

27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel 28 without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. 29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, 30 since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Paul is calling these believers to warfare. Have any of you heard the story of the Spartan defense against the Persians? Two of the major tactics the Spartans used were the phalanx and the paian. The phalanx was a formation significantly wider than its depth. It was an organized in-step formation that easily defeated a simple mob approach to warfare. The paian was a marching and war song devised to keep the army marching in

step. Both of these tactics promoted unity within the fighting corps. Unity is crucial to victory.

The Philippians needed to stand firm and fight as one man for the faith of the gospel. What does that mean? How do we exhibit this kind of unity? Paul addresses this in chapter 2.

1 If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

There are two keys to being united as a church: one is recognizing our one purpose, the other is putting away our personal ambitions for the sake of this purpose and choosing instead to help others fulfill their needs.

What is the one purpose for which we are to be a phalanx and sing a psalm? What was it that brought Paul such great joy? What was it that kept him going despite being jailed, beaten, starved, or facing death? It was the ministry of the gospel. Nothing was more important to Paul than telling others about Christ. Nothing made life worth living more than being involved in that endeavor. And Paul was convinced that this was the one purpose for which Christ formed His church.

Is that what you're living for? I found myself challenged about this the other day when I was reading about Paul in the book of Acts. He was saying goodbye to the elders in Ephesus and recounting his ministry among them. He said, "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." I realized that I let a lot of other things about my life I consider worth something to me besides the task the Lord Jesus has given to me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Can you identify? We think more about getting a new tv, or that next vacation, or what we're going to eat for lunch. But, you say, these are the things that make for life, especially that eating part. And I don't think Paul was advocating a joyless life at all. But have you ever felt like you were playing a hand in someone gaining eternal life? Have you ever had a role in someone experiencing the forgiveness of Christ? Yes we need to eat, but can we not use even that as an opportunity to talk to the waitress about important matters or at least leave her a good tip and a tract? Do we forget about the gospel when we go on vacation?

Jesus did not save us to make us miserable. He knows that to live for him and the proclamation of his message is the most thrilling and fulfilling purpose we could ever live for. It makes all others pale in significance and meaning. But we need each other to accomplish it. It is not an individual endeavor. If I lead someone to Christ, I cannot help them become the disciple they need to become without you. I don't have all the gifts it takes to mature him. We need all our gifts working in concert to do that.

That's why Paul also said we have to be willing to put aside our personal agendas for the sake of the gospel and consider the needs of each other. What if you are going through a hard time and need me to be there for you but I want to go to the baseball game? I can think of my needs, Paul says in verse 4, but I am also to think about your needs. If I consider you more important than myself, as Paul instructs me, then I must believe that Jesus has a bigger and better blessing for me in ministering to you than in watching a ball game.

And if you and your group of buddies at church thinks we should send money to some missionary but I disagree, I should not pursue an argument to the point of hard feelings and disunity, but rather let the peace of Christ rule in my heart, because we were called to peace among ourselves. Our phalanx will break down under self-centered agendas and we need that unity to accomplish what Christ called us to.

The perfect example of this selflessness was Jesus Christ.

*5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
6 Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
7 but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Though he could rightly have held to his place of honor as God, he willingly gave it up because we needed him to. He considered us more important than himself, being willing to die for us. The implicit reward offered us by his example is that when we humble ourselves God will exalt us, as He did Christ.

But maybe you need more examples to follow. Sure Jesus would do this, but we're not Jesus. Then consider the example of Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus.

17 But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.

Paul had already shown himself willing to stay around, though heaven was preferable to him, for the sake of the Philippians (you can read about that in chapter 1). Here he simply repeats that he is willing to die for them if need be.

19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. 20 I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. 21 For everyone

looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.

Timothy was known to this congregation and his unselfish service to them and to Paul was beyond question.

25 But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. 26 For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. 27 Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. 28 Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. 29 Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, 30 because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.

Epaphroditus was their own leader, sent with the gift to Paul in Rome. Enough time had elapsed for them to get word back that he had fallen deathly ill and for Paul to hear that they were concerned. Can you imagine those who were against giving the gift and what they might be saying? “We told you so. See, God showed his displeasure by letting Epaphroditus get sick.” This is why Paul said to receive Epaphroditus back with honor and joy. His is an example to follow in every sense of the word.

But now Paul has a warning of another kind. If we are to be an army set on one goal, one purpose of proclaiming the gospel to the world with our personal agendas set aside, we must also be united against our common enemies and false gospels. It does no good to be united behind the wrong cause, the wrong gospel. So Paul must clarify what the true gospel is.

2 Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— 4 though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

There are those who will teach that human effort and accomplishment are essential to gaining the righteousness that God accepts. But if Jesus accepted that he would have left Paul alone, because Paul had achieved a form of perfection in righteousness. And this wasn't a righteousness that could be lived out in the lonely deserts. Paul persecuted the church. He lived it in the trenches. But Paul learned something when Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus.

7 But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul needed Christ's righteousness and that was only obtainable by faith in Christ. He would make knowing Christ and sharing in his sufferings the goal of his life. Pursuing his own righteousness was fruitless.

But Paul would pursue perfection, Christ's perfection, but with a humility that recognized that he could not attain it, not rest in his own ability to live the Christian life, and not boast of his achievements in that regard.

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Have you ever had the fortune to be running a race against several others and be in the lead? If you are smart you will not decide at that point that you can take it easy and trot to the finish or even walk. If you do you are bound to be surprised by the one who summons his or her last minute energy to blow past you. Like the proverbial hare, you must not rest or the turtle will pass you and win the race.

Paul had earlier challenged the Philippians to be warriors in unison with the phalanx, singing the paian of the gospel together. Now he urged them to be runners, not looking back on their "accomplishments," because that was a sure way to find out you were not running in the right race, not following the right gospel. The true gospel does not know of a place where you gain perfection that means you no longer need to grow. You may reach maturity, but you do not reach perfection. You still need Christ to produce the fruit of righteousness in you until he comes. He needs to be the one who brings the work he began in you to completion, and that won't be finished until the last day, the day of His return.

There are others who will consider this life as the end in itself. A loving marriage, or a fulfilling career, or happy children, will tempt us as well for first place in our affections and ambitions. Not so for the true follower of Christ.

20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

We live as citizens of heaven and foreigners to the world. We represent the risen Christ who will raise us. As such we form an army of followers who have a chance to transform the world with the message of hope and forgiveness Jesus has given us. We will have enemies who will seek to overpower us with their hatred and enemies who will seek to compromise us with false teaching. Our only hope is to fight together under the flag of the true gospel that rejects human accomplishment as a factor in salvation. Our message is for all, even and especially those who do not think they can obey God's laws and merit heaven. We are here to tell them they are correct and to model for them that we have abandoned ourselves on the cross of Christ and accepted in his death and resurrection the only answer for our lives.

It is so compelling a message and life that we are willing to put aside our own pettier agendas and humbly consider others better than ourselves. When the world sees us living this selfless, God-centered life, they will either reject us or be drawn to us to see what gives us such hope and joy.

That is the message of Philippians. That is the challenge to our faith. Are you a Euodia or a Syntyche, willing to argue your position no matter the impact on the solidarity of the body of Christ? Or will you submit to one another out of devotion to the Christ who submitted himself to death on a cross, and put aside lesser goals? If you are living for lesser goals than the progress of the gospel, you are likely contributing to the disunity of the church. Humble yourself, give yourself anew to the purpose of God. Rejoin the ranks of those whose God-given, expansive purpose, is to reach the world for Christ.