

# Overview of the Book of Philippians

As we approach the Book of Philippians, we immediately recognize that the commission of this book is a charter for Christian unity. It is in this same fashion that the Book of Galatians is known as the charter for Christian Liberty. In the writing of this Epistle to the Philippians, Paul did not cite any Scripture from the Old Testament, which is rare. **One quickly observes that this Letter is a missionary letter** of thanks for the financial support from the Christians in Philippi (Philippians 4:10-20) and a report of the advancement of the Gospel (1:12-14). In spite of the persecution that the Philippians were having to endure, nevertheless, he encouraged them to rejoice (3:1). In this short Epistle, we observe the prominence of the role of women (Euodia and Syntyche) in Paul's ministry (4:2-3). Even though Lydia's name is not mentioned in this Epistle, nevertheless, she played a significant role in the beginning of this local fellowship of believers (Acts 16:14-15).

Just a casual reading of this book reveals that there is conflict between Paul and the Jews who sought to undermine the heart of God's Gospel (Philippians 3:1-3). There are several ways in which the Book of Philippians may be divided. The following scenario presents a brief overview to assist the reader in grasping the whole of this short Epistle:

## DIVISIONS IN THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS:

1. **1:1-30:** Encouragement to remain faithful in spite of persecution.
2. **2:1-30:** Examples of how to live the Christian Life.
3. **3:1-24** Exhortations to be faithful in one's walk with Jesus.
4. **4:1-23** Enablement toward faithfulness in Christian living

## THOUGHTS FROM THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

### Encouragement in Face of Disappointments

The Book of Philippians consists of one hundred and four verses. If we ever feel discouragement in our walk with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, we should read the entire Book. **In reading this book, we should slow down in our reading so that we might see the concerns of Paul.** This is a book in which Paul reminds the Philippians to rejoice even in the face of

adversity. If we read or study the Book of Philippians, it will point us toward Christ and His sufferings. **We should listen to Paul as he admonishes the believers:** “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). The author of the Book of Hebrews, possibly Paul, also sets forth this same scenario about focusing our attention on Christ in face of harsh conditions:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. <sup>2</sup> **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus**, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> **Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.** <sup>4</sup> In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Hebrews 12:1-4)

### God Works in You to Act

How do we view our activities in advancing God’s kingdom? Do we, at times, want to give up? When difficulties come, how do we respond? It was in this area that Paul had to remind the Corinthians that they were fellow workers in God’s New Community. He issues this admonition: “As God’s fellow workers we urge you **not** to receive God’s grace in vain” (1 Corinthians 6:1). Apparently, some of the Christians in Philippi were discouraged about Paul’s incarceration as well as the intense persecution that they themselves were enduring. Perhaps, for this reason Paul reminded them of their position in God’s kingdom:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—**continue to work out your salvation** with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. <sup>14</sup> Do everything without complaining or arguing, <sup>15</sup> so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in **which you shine like stars in the universe** <sup>16</sup> **as you hold out the word of life**—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. (Philippians 2:12-16)

When Paul states that the Philippians were to “work out your [their] salvation,” **he did not mean that they should attempt to earn salvation by works.** In other words, he used this phrase as an expression of one’s spiritual growth and development. **He is reminding them that biblical faith expresses itself in an ongoing process of progression.** Are we advancing in wisdom and in knowledge of God’s written Revelation? Paul began this Epistle by praying for their spiritual growth:

And this is my prayer: that **your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,** <sup>10</sup> so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. (1:9-11)

How can we “abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight”? We need to devote ourselves to the study of and reflection upon God’s written Revelation. The words of David should touch our souls: “But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates **day and night** (Psalm 1:2). Again, David writes about the preciousness of God’s Word: “They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb” (19:10). We need to reflect upon the psalmist words in Psalm 119: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (119:105). Are we praying that our hearts may be enlightened in order that we may work out our salvation with “fear and trembling”? It is in this same vein that Paul wrote to the believers in Ephesus:

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, <sup>16</sup>I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup>**I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.** <sup>18</sup> I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, <sup>19</sup>and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength. (Ephesians 1:15-19)

### **Timothy and His Devotion**

How do we measure up to our calling? Are we really and truly workers in God’s kingdom? Do we remember the words of Paul to the Ephesians about their “calling”? Paul penned the following admonition: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to **live a life worthy of the calling** you have received” (Ephesians 4:1). Where do we stand in our devotion or commitment to the advancement of God’s Gospel? We should tune in our ears as we listen to Paul as he describes his fellow worker:

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. <sup>20</sup>**I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare.** <sup>21</sup> For **everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.** <sup>22</sup> 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.** (Philippians 2:19-22)

Where do we stand in our view of our work in Christ? Do we have a sincere and heartfelt interest in spreading the Gospel of Jesus? Are we like the Christians in Ephesus that Jesus had John to write to concerning their reaction to being on fire for the Lord? Jesus said, “I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love” (Revelation 1:4). As Christians, we should also turn our attention to another one of the seven churches in Asia who also received a letter from the Lord about their lack of enthusiasm and passion for spiritual things. We would do well to read this letter over and over again. Once more, we need to pay attention to the words of Jesus: “I know your deeds, that **you are neither cold nor hot.** I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup> So, **because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold**—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16).

## Paul Appeals for Unity within the Body of Christ

Paul addresses the subject of unity within this local fellowship of believers. Even two of Paul's co-workers were experiencing conflict among themselves. He pens the following words about Euodia and Syntyche to settle their differences. In order to eliminate this fracture, he encourages others to join in to suppress this broken unity. Paul endeavors to stop this bickering between these two fellow workers with him in the Gospel: "I plead with **Euodia** and I plead with **Syntyche** to agree with each other in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> 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" (Philippians 4:2-3). Prior to this admonition about unity, Paul pointed to Jesus as an example of unity:

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, <sup>2</sup> then **make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.** <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> **Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.** <sup>5</sup> **Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:** <sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! <sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup>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. (2:1-11)

## Union with the Living Christ

To be "**in Christ**" is to live in His presence. If we read the Book of Philippians, it will point us to Christ. This book is an open door to the mind of Christ. Do we really and truly want to know Christ? Paul did! In fact, he told the Philippians: "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" (3:10). Do we feel this way? The Gospel story is about Jesus. **Jesus came not only preaching the Gospel, but He Himself is God's Gospel.** The word *Gospel* occurs nine times in Philippians (1:5, 9, 12, 16, 27 [2times]; 2:22; 4:3, 15). The Book of Philippians is about Christ. The combination of our Lord's name (Jesus) and His title (Christ) occurs seventeen times in the first chapter. Paul is fond of using "in Christ Jesus" (48 times), "in Christ" (34 times), "in the Lord" (50 times) in all his writings. To illustrate from another Epistle of Paul (Ephesians), Paul uses "in Christ" thirteen times; "in Him" occurs nine times; the word "mystery" occurs seven times, and the word "Gospel" occurs five times.

Just a casual reading of Paul's epistles reveals that Christianity is absolutely unique among the religions of the world. **Christianity had a history before its actual history commenced.** In other words, Christianity had a birth before it was born. The Christ of history is the fruit of the tree of prophecy. **God brought into being a community that will bear witness on earth to His reconciling work** (Ephesians 3:10; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Philippians 2:12-13). Paul advanced the

Gospel; he refused to hold it back in spite of numerous obstacles. Are we endeavoring to make the Gospel stand out? This book to the Philippians told the believers about his circumstances in prison and its effect on his ministry. Surely, his attitude must have astounded the Philippians. This confinement served to advance the Gospel.

### **Well-Known Sayings in Philippians**

- “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21)
- “I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.” (1:23)
- 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. (1:27)
- Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (2:3-4)
- 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 <sup>9</sup> 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. (3:8-9)
- Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (4:8)
- 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. <sup>11</sup> I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (4:10-13)