

Philippians: Context and Outline

We are going to look at Philippians in three different lectures. Obviously, a lead question we will ask is, “Why does Paul like the Philippians so much? What is going on there?” We will look again at the contact between Paul and the Philippians, how this church came to be, and what caused Paul to write to the Philippians. We will particularly try to get at the message of the letter. Toward the end, we will focus on one aspect of that message: namely, Philippians 2:5-11, one of the most wonderful descriptions of the great deeds of Christ and the work between the Lord Jesus Christ and the Father on our behalf. So let us begin with prayer together and then delve into this wonderful topic.

*Our Heavenly Father, we thank You again that You give us—in the midst of busyness, in the midst of challenges and difficulties and opportunities—the time to become quiet before You. You give us the opportunity to listen to Your Word, to understand how You have made Yourself known throughout the ages, and in the particular time of the first century. Lord, we praise You for giving us Your eternal and lasting Word. We praise You that there is a historical setting for it, and yet we know from Your Word that it is enduring truth concerning You and Your work. Lord, we thank You that our lives are dependent upon and encapsulated by You. We thank You that Your faithful hand in our lives is noticeable and is true even now. We thank You, Lord, that while we are yet weak, while we stumble and fall in many different ways, You are faithful to us. You hold us and You seek to produce in our lives that godliness, which we cannot produce ourselves, that life in accord with Your Word, Your will, and Your law—that was the life of Jesus on this earth, and is becoming our life through Your work. Lord, we pray that our speaking, our acting, and our desires in our hearts would be conformed to Your purposes, to Your glory, so that You would be magnified and not hindered by our lives. Lord, we praise You; we ask for Your blessing in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

You are already fairly acquainted with the sequence of events for these lessons. Where do we look before we get into Philippians? We look into the chronological outline of the life of Paul to orient ourselves concerning the relationship between Philippians and the book of Acts. We must go back a little bit. We cannot simply begin with a question of Paul writing to the Philippians, which we will focus on in this lesson, but we really need to go back briefly to the book of Acts and reflect on the occasion of Paul’s founding of that church. What missionary journey do we find ourselves in when we first come to Philippi in the book of Acts? It is the second missionary journey, so we need to look in the vicinity of Acts 16, and that is indeed where we find the beginning of the Philippian church: Acts 16. I want to draw your attention to the unusual circumstances in which a church is being planted in Philippi. After the vision that Paul has to go to Macedonia, Europe, he comes to the city of Philippi.

Acts 16:12 tells us,

From there we traveled to Philippi [and this is where this town arises for the first time], a Roman colony and the leading city in that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. On the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river where we expected to find a place of prayer. [I will explain that in just a minute.] We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. [The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.] When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home, saying, “If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

Then there is a further description here of a girl who followed Paul shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved.” That sounds really flattering. Verse 18 tells us, “She kept this up for many days, and finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit,”—notice that—“‘In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her.’ At that moment, the spirit left her.”

So there has been an incident of evangelism in presenting the Gospel, the expulsion of an evil spirit, and then the third event in Philippi is an account of a prison guard toward the end of this chapter. There is a lengthy, miraculous account of what happened to Paul and how the prison guard and his family came to the Lord in Acts 16:22-40. This is the beginning of the life of the Messianic church in Philippi.

We do not know exactly how long Paul stayed in Philippi—a few days or maybe several weeks. We do have at least two references to the time. It says, “a few days,” in the beginning and then a little later on it says, “she kept that up for many days,” so we have some time frame here, but all in all, this is a hopelessly short time to plant a church. If you are planning to plant a church today, you may have an initial phase of exploring the city and finding out about the demographics, and maybe two years of just settling in, and then you slowly begin to have public worship services, etc. Paul came in and a church was started. Well, that was a different time. Roughly what date would this be—when Paul was in Philippi? Probably around 50-51 A.D.

Following that, Paul journeys further. We have various references in the letter to the Philippians to the fact that when Paul writes to the Philippians, he finds himself in chains. Perhaps the most conspicuous place is Philippians 1:13, where he says, “As a result [as they find out what has happened to Paul], it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.” So if we ask about Paul’s location as he writes this letter to this young church in Philippi, we have basically two options as far as I can see: Caesarea Philippi, between 57 and 59 A.D., or the period when Paul is in Rome under house arrest in 60-62 A.D. Either of these are possible locations from which Paul may have written Philippians, although the reference to the palace guard is somewhat suggestive. As far as I can see, while it may be possible for that to refer to a place in Caesarea Philippi, it more likely alludes to the palace guard in Rome. Therefore, I would tend to favor the later date. This would give us a time frame of at least 10 years after the birth of that young church in Philippi that Paul writes to the Philippians.

Let us explore the city of Philippi a little. It is interesting to take a few of the references we find in Acts and get a sense of that city as compared with other places Paul visited and ministered to. We read that this was a Roman colony, and we need to stop for a little and think about what that really means. The contrast here is between colony and province. What is the difference between a Roman colony and a Roman province? It is important for us to understand the make-up of the church, the mentality of the church, and what may perhaps challenge them in the future as Paul writes Philippians to them. Do you know the difference in the way the Roman Empire was administered in a Roman colony and a Roman province?

The connection between a colony and the Roman government was much more direct. In fact, you could say a citizen in the city of Philippi was like a citizen of Rome; it was an extended part of Italy of where Rome had begun to express and have its power. A province was a nation that had been taken over through war—through capture. An example of a province would be the area of Judea or the area of Palestine. Within Palestine, there was, for instance, a puppet king in Galilee or there might be a king for Judea and Galilee, or there would be a governor for Judea, such as Pilate. We are basically distinguishing between two forms of governments of provinces. There were procurators and pro-senators. Pilate, for example, was a procurator. Pilate was, obviously, a governor of Judea. He was to

administer that part on behalf of the Roman government, but he was a procurator and not a pro-senator. You can also use the word proconsul; these are basically synonymous, although there are some distinctions. The fact that Pilate was a procurator in the province of Judea and not a pro-senator tells us something about the assessment, from Rome's perspective, of that area. The procurator is directly answerable to Caesar, to the empire, whereas a pro-senator or a proconsul was answerable to the senate. So a pro-senator was answerable to the Roman senate, while a procurator was answerable to Caesar.

If you look at the map of the Roman Empire and look at the provinces that were run by procurators and the provinces that were run by pro-senators, you find out that the problem areas were run by procurators, and the relatively manageable areas, those areas without a great deal of internal conflict, were run by pro-senators. Why? Well, obviously, because Caesar wanted to have his hand on the problem areas, he delegated authority to the senate over provinces that were relatively easy to handle. There was at least some semblance of a “division of power,” but the emperor kept his finger on those areas that were problematic. So the fact that Pilate was a procurator tells you that, from Rome’s perspective, Judea was a problem area. And that also tells you a little bit about the difficult position that Pilate was in, because he knew that he had to answer directly to Caesar, not just a senate where there were all kinds of people and less direct accountability. As you probably know, committees do not get a lot of things done, but to be answerable to Caesar was a big pressure, so that explains something about Pilate.

So that was the government of a province, but here we learn that Philippi is part of a colony, which is much more Roman, much more connected to Rome. There is no intermediary, no puppet king or governor; it is an extension of Rome. Today, after the Second World War and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is Kaliningrad, a part of Russia completely unconnected to mainland Russia. It is a leftover part of what was formerly East Prussia. This is how you need to think about the colony in Philippi. It is a little bit of Rome, although it is not located on the Italian peninsula. In spite of its distant location, it is virtually Rome. The citizens there are Roman citizens. It is very prosperous. There would be a sense of pride there to belong to the “in” group: “We are not just some adapted and amalgamated area; we belong to the inside group of Roman citizens.” Roman dress would have been important, along with other markers of the pride of being Roman citizens. Perhaps, therefore, Paul's reference in Philippians 3:20-21 that “our citizenship is in heaven” is intended to make a point, obviously, that while we benefit from and enjoy the protection of godly governments, we do not place our trust in them. Our citizenship, our sense of identity, our place of belonging, is not this place, but rather the citizenship in heaven and in the heavenly Jerusalem, as it is spoken of in Hebrews. Philippi would have had a strong military presence, a strong sense of fortification, and certainly too many Romans for comfort.

In Philippi, in terms of the Jewish presence, there is no synagogue there. That is a telling thing—perhaps just by omission—but it is a Roman colony, and there is no synagogue. Perhaps it was a small place, but we read in Acts that Philippi had a significant place in Macedonia. There is at least a little hint—although it is somewhat speculative to go beyond that—that the Jewish presence there was not welcome as it was in other cities where the synagogues were established as safe havens of listening to the Word of God, of praying to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of educating the children according to the ways of God. That is not present in Philippi.

There is another important point here. Paul continues in his basic pattern of to the Jews first. He looks for a synagogue. He does not find a synagogue, so he then looks for a place of prayer. This was the only mode of expression for Jews and God-fearing people, outside of the synagogue congregation, to continue to practice their faith. “Outside of the gates,” may be another indication that they could not find an accepted place of worship in the city. Certainly, those who belong to the Jewish people and are of Jewish conviction are being marginalized in Philippi. Another wonderful thing to read here, as we just

looked at the passage in Acts, is that Paul does not move on simply because he finds no synagogue. He does not move on simply because he finds only a group of women praying. You see, he does not discriminate in that sense of who should and should not hear the Gospel. He goes and looks for a Jewish place of prayer, and because there are not at least 10 men to, according to Jewish law, make a congregation of worship official, here are women congregated to pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Lydia, the most conspicuous one of that group, is the one who, as we have read, God prepares her heart, God regenerates her heart, and she is receptive to the Gospel message. Lydia is a wonderful person, an interesting study in the first century. She is dealing with cloth from the city of Thyatira in Asia Minor, about 150 kilometers north of Ephesus. Perhaps it is a good guess that she would have dealt with the purple cloth produced in Colosse, and we will come to Colossians a little later. Perhaps she was engaged in this kind of a cross-cultural trade from Asia Minor to Macedonia and back, with the base of her business in Philippi but her home in Thyatira. She would be crossing two worlds: the highly Romanized, legalized, militarized city in Philippi, and the more pagan religious culture of Asia Minor. Do you remember Ephesus and the Artemis temple? There are all kinds of religious movements and developments in Asia Minor from which Lydia may have come.

The incident with the slave girl gives you an understanding of the demonic powers, the evil powers that are also present in Philippi. And the jailer perhaps represents the establishment of law and order, authority, and power. The Gospel affects all three: a woman who is willing to receive and who is opened by God to receive the Gospel, a woman who is depressed and suppressed by evil spirits, and a man who is certainly exercising authority and then coming under the authority of Christ.

This is the situation and the setting that Paul comes into as he evangelizes in a Roman colony. As I have said, I would tend to set the date of the writing of Philippians at around 61 A.D., so Paul is already in the center of the Roman Empire as he sends this letter to the Philippians. This is perhaps sufficient to give you a setting and a feel for the situation. The name “Philippi” is derived from King Phillip II of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. Paul ministered for a relatively short time there, but it became one of his most beloved churches that he has been involved with and that he continues to have contact with through various exchanges of information and now through the sending of this letter.

The challenge in interpretation of Philippians—and that is what we will devote ourselves to, to explore that a little—is, what is the purpose of the Philippian letter? What is Paul conveying to the Philippians as they are encouraged to grow in Christ? Some have said that we should just count words. Look, for instance, how often the word “joy” is used in Philippians—sixteen times, I believe. There must be something about joy in Philippians. Others believe that there may have been some disunity there. There are some references in the beginning and the end of Philippians to the issue of unity. You will find many other interpretations and approaches to Philippians. Perhaps you yourself remember the conclusion of Philippians and simply associate with it this wonderful concluding statement, which is so encouraging to so many Christians: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Perhaps you think that is the climax and the center of what Philippians conveys. Well, I want to take you on a little excursion—an excursion into the question of how we find the purpose of a book. I think that can be illustrated particularly well with Philippians, and so I am going to pursue a little bit of a methodological approach. What do we look for in order to understand the message of Philippians? How

do we find the message of the Word of God in Philippians rather than our own particular theological agenda to the text? I am sure that you have favorite passages in Philippians and you enjoy certain aspects of them. Perhaps you are impressed, as I am, with the reference to the humiliation and humility of Christ and His exaltation. We will certainly come to that in this lesson, Lord willing. But first the question is how we find out the purpose of Philippians, so I want to move in that direction a little.

Let me begin by giving you a very simple outline of Philippians, and then we will try to work on the question of how we find the purpose of Philippians. The outline is not very complicated. There are the common points of greetings and thanksgiving and prayer in Philippians 1:1-11. So there is an introduction of greetings, thanksgiving, and prayer, and then comes the first major section, which I will reflect on a little more later, and that is Paul's circumstance. There is a very deep purpose here in the description of the circumstance of Paul, and I will get to that in a little while.

The second major section is exhortation. Exhortation a major section from Philippians 1:27 until 2:18. There are two subsections for these exhortations, and those are the two main concerns that Paul has for the Philippians. One is to live worthy of the Gospel in suffering, and the second exhortation is to serve in the attitude of Christ. These are the two admonitions, the two concerns that Paul brings to the Philippian church. I will try to give that a little more substance later on. So that is "living worthy of the Gospel" in Philippians 1:27-30, and then "serving in the attitude of Christ" in 2:1-18.

Then there is something surprising that ought to make us alert and awake for our question of what the purpose of Philippians is: namely, that Paul seems to break out of that kind of an outline of concerns that he brings to the Philippian church by speaking about his fellow workers, Timothy and Epaphroditus. That is in Philippians 2:19-30, and that should make us stop and think about why Paul speaks after the exhortation about Timothy and Epaphroditus only to go on with a fourth major section: namely, warnings—references to dangers to growth. True to Paul's form, there are two areas of warnings that we can discern in Philippians 3:1 to 4:1. The first warning pertains to legalism. The second pertains to antinomianism, or lawlessness. Paul basically tells them that there are two dangers out there and he encourages and exhorts them to live worthy of the Gospel and to serve in the attitude of Christ and watch out for these two dangers. One is that they would seek to live a godly life by their own strength, on the basis of their own energies and standards. The other danger is that they would please themselves and follow their evil and wicked desires.

We will work our way toward that. I have mentioned the introduction, and there is also a conclusion. The conclusion to Philippians contains exhortations to a Christ-centered life, testimony and thanks, and greetings and benediction. From Philippians 4:2-23 there is a relatively lengthy conclusion with exhortation, thanksgiving, and benediction.

This a very simple outline of the main concerns that we find in Philippians, but now I need to take you a little further into the question of the purpose. We have scratched the surface; we have identified a few points, but what is the purpose? And better yet, how do these various elements relate to one another? Are there just a few separate things that Paul wants to bring to the Philippian church or is there a particular connection? The question of purpose will lead us in this direction. One thing I have not emphasized a great deal—and that is why I want to take time for this now—is that it is very good to observe the literary form and structure. God has seen fit to make Himself known through the written word, and that has a particular form. We even find different literary genres in the Old and New Testaments, such as narrative and discourse, but within those literary genres, there are also more particular forms in which the Word is presented to us. I am convinced that Paul and the other writers of the New Testament had a sense for literary form, and that God in His wisdom utilized these literary

forms for us to be able to listen to, observe, and understand the main aim of what God wishes to communicate to us. We did that a little bit with Acts when we looked at the summary statements and asked the question of purpose there with narrative. I did that to illustrate an analysis of narrative. Now, we are looking at one letter, one discourse, and we are asking the same questions: what can we observe in the outside form, the shape in which the Word is presented here? How does that help us to actually interpret, to understand the message and the purpose, and to follow the emphasis that Paul emphasizes? Finally, how does that help us to follow the emphasis of God to the Philippians and to us with that part of God's Word? I am assuming one basic tenet—I may be wrong—that this basic principle applied in the ancient world, form, is the servant of content. Therefore, if we find literary form and structure in Philippians, we can infer that this literary level is there to support the message. Perhaps in modern art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century you will find an intentional dissidence between form and content for the purpose of making a statement: “This world does not hang together. There are too many problems, there are too many contradictions. I cannot hold this world together.” According to Francis Schaeffer, 20<sup>th</sup>-century art often intentionally mirrors the mentality of the time by creating a clear dissidence between form and content. That is certainly possible, and I have seen some of these forms of expression in literary works of the modern day. However, I do not see such a phenomenon in the ancient world. When there are indicators on the literary level, they are there to help our understanding of the content. That is my basic assumption.

What do we find in Philippians, in terms of form, that would guide our thoughts along the lines of what God is intending to say? I am urging you to study the form rather than come to Philippians and say, “It says ‘joy’ 16 times, so it must be a book about joy,” or, “Disunity in the beginning, disunity at the end, so it must be something about disunity.” Those things are not wrong, but you see, they are merely a first impression. It is just like a relationship, when we look at somebody and we get a good or a bad impression and we act on that rather than being careful and saying, “Let me get to know this person.” It is happening more and more to me, actually, in recent months and years, that I evaluate a person in a wrong way. Later, I am deeply ashamed or surprised to find out what wonderful things are wrapped up in a person who does not seem very special at first. You have your little idea, but you miss the jewel that is hidden deeper inside that person. The same applies to Bible interpretation: we must step back, as we did with Acts, and say, “What do we find? What do we find in Philippians that would help us get at what is being emphasized here?” I believe there is a wonderful, relatively simple structure in Philippians that makes sense of these separate pieces. They are good in themselves; they are helpful, and the structure brings them together into a very powerful message and encouraging exhortation to the Philippians. I believe the Philippian church may be compared with a nicely-humming car engine that is functioning very well, but it just needs a little oil, a little more air here, tightening of that screw. I think there is a certain peace in Paul's encouragement and exhortation of the Philippians, and also of the Ephesians, more so than in the parallel letter sent to the Colossians. You pick up from the letter that there is more trouble in Colosse, but in Ephesians and Philippians there is a certain peace.

How can we get to the understanding of the purpose? That is what we are going to do a little in the next few minutes. With regards to the structure of Philippians, various interpreters have observed different things. Some interpreters have looked at Philippians along the lines of rhetorical structures, and I will not bore you with a lengthy explanation of that. “Rhetorical structures” are these elements in Philippians that correspond to documented rules of verbal elements of the ancient world. The German interpreter, Schenk, has done a lot of work, particularly with regards to Philippians 3 and 4, to try and present the rhetorical structures. I am not so impressed with that approach, but it is worthy of exploration just to see what forms may we find here. Are there patterns of form that would give us an indication as to how Paul is presenting the content? This approach basically looks at other presentations in the ancient world that

have certain rules, a structured sequence of argumentation, and sees how what Paul has written compares with that.

Another approach that has been taken is the epistolary approach, and certainly much has been written in recent years on these written forms, which investigates whether Philippians is particularly following some further detailed rules, besides what I have told you about, of a basic epistolary structure that has an introduction, some main parts, and a conclusion. In the introduction, there is normally some kind of salutation, some thanksgiving and prayer. Certainly that would apply here in Philippians, but the epistolary approach looks at more details to understand what form the letter takes. I am going to move quickly and come to an area that is a little older, but it holds great promise as far as I can see. I believe that the chiasmic approach can help us understand both the structure and the content of Philippians.

The word “chiasmic” is drawn from the Greek letter *chi*. The basic structure of a chiasm is that something is stated in “A,” something else is stated in “B,” the statement of “B” is mirrored in “B-prime,” and A is again echoed in “A-prime.” The relationships of these four statements can be drawn as a cross. It can also be written in a line as A, B, B', A'. The first element and the last element form what is called an *inclusio*, and the central elements are connected as well. Sometimes interpreters conclude that the central element is particularly emphasized and the outside elements, so to speak, are more to keep things together. There is a difference of opinion among interpreters of literary forms as to how we should interpret a discovery of chiasm.

Most of the time, chiasm is found on a smaller scale of literary forms. For instance, in Colossians 1:15-20, I think I have counted four or five small chiasmic structures. “In heaven and on earth, visible and invisible,” is a chiasm. Heaven, earth, visible and invisible.” You see “heaven” and “invisible” are A and A', and “earth” and “visible” are the B and B'. That is a simple chiasm that is quite conspicuous.

Some interpreters, however, have also said there may be chiasmic structures on the “macro-text,” as they call it—on the larger scale of an entire letter. That is really the possibility I would like to propose to you with Philippians. I am not going to present it here *ex cathedra*, or shout and pound on the podium to see that you definitely believe this. It is a suggestion that makes a lot of sense. In the next lecture I will present to you the case for thinking that perhaps the entire letter of Philippians is a simple tri-partite or three-part chiasm. The chiasm I have presented to you is a bi-partite chiasm, one with two sections. There is one more section in Philippians. This explanation makes a lot of sense. It brings the various thematic aspects together. The people of the ancient world had a certain level of literary and aesthetic feeling. I think that we are very unliturgical in our current time. Because of that, the idea of literary structure and form is very strange to us. We think, “Who would have ever thought of such forms?” However, there is a song by The Beatles—“All you need is love, love is all you need.” That is the simplest chiasm imaginable, and they use it for the purpose of pounding something into your head: “All you need is love, love is all you need.” The central part, “love,” is certainly emphasized. There is something to that, and I feel that we have an extreme lack of literary sensitivity when compared with the people of the ancient world. I am not suggesting that, in the ancient world, the listeners of the Philippian letters were searching for a chiasm in every little phrase. That is exaggerated as well. I am suggesting that these hearers had a simple level of literary awareness that helped them to “read” the underlining that you cannot see, but can hear. If you read the entire Philippian letter, and you see that one section and another complement each other, and that they kind of hang together and emphasize each other, you can actually get that. Some people seem to see chiasms everywhere and they find very complex chiasms that are enormously difficult to keep track of. When someone proposes a complex chiasm of 20 parts somewhere, and you cannot remember which members were mentioned before they are all unraveled again to get to the end, I think that is exaggerated. I have seen some studies on Acts chapters 1 to 7 that

create a mega-chiasm in those seven chapters. I think that is exaggerated, but we need to remember that Philippians was read aloud. The letter arrived, it was received as the Word of God, and the people listened. If they were somewhat trained with their ears rhetorically, they would have caught a simple chiasm. We will deal with this in more detail in the next lecture.