

Philippians: Outline and Thought Flow

Let us look a little more at this possible chiastic structure. Again, I want to emphasize I am not presenting that as the final word. It is something that you need to explore. You need to read Philippians with this and see if it is convincing, if it makes sense of what the text says. I have already mentioned to you that there is a certain question here in chapter 3: why does Paul bring in Timothy and Epaphroditus between the exhortation and the warnings, the encouragement toward growth and the warnings to watch out for the problems of legalism and antinomianism? The chiastic structure I am proposing does not cover the introduction and a preceding section until 1:26 or the conclusion, 4:2, and following. So I am not covering all of Philippians in this scheme here, but this structure does relate to the central sections of the book.

What I am suggesting is that there is a chiasm between the first section, 1:27-30, which speaks about steadfastness in suffering, and the last section of the main body of the letter, 3:17-4:1, the warning against man-centered antinomianism. We will call these A and A'. There is also a connection between the exhortation and the encouragement to grow in humility, 2:1-18, and the warning of man-centered legalism, 3:1-16. We will call these B and B'. You see that sections A and B are exhortation, encouragement, and admonition, while sections B' and A' are warnings. In between you have Timothy and Epaphroditus. The interesting thing is that, as Paul presents the encouragement to steadfastness in suffering, he also gives an example, the example of Epaphroditus in 2:25-30. So Epaphroditus is an example for the steadfastness in suffering. And the second exhortation, or the second encouragement, is that of humility, and Paul gives the example of Timothy in 2:19-24. So there is a connection between humility and the example of Timothy, and a connection between steadfastness and the example of Epaphroditus. Read that yourself; just go through it yourself at home and read the section on steadfastness and see whether that is echoed by the example of Epaphroditus and the humility reference and that to Timothy.

So you have a double chiasm here. You could see the chiasm as being just from the encouragement to steadfastness to the examples, so from 1:27 until 2:30. That would give you A, B, B1, A1. Or you could say that the chiasm is actually a double chiasm, from the encouragement to steadfastness to the section on man-centered antinomianism, from 1:27 until 4:1. That would give you the following sections:

- A: exhortation to steadfastness, 1:27-30
- B: exhortation to humility, 2:1-18
- B1: Timothy, an example of humility, 2:19-24
- A1: Epaphroditus, an example of steadfastness, 2:25-30
- B2: warning against man-centered legalism, 3:1-16
- A2: warning against man-centered antinomianism, 3:17-4:1

This is not too complicated of an inversion and pattern: the exhortation (A and B), the examples (B1 and A1), and the warnings (B2 and A2). I find this to be a helpful suggestion in understanding the relationship between the exhortations and the examples, for one, and the relationship between the exhortations and the warnings, for another. What are these connections? The connections are relatively simple. Read the Timothy section, 2:19-24, and ask whether that illustrates humility or steadfastness, or whether it applies at all. If it did not apply, you would have to start over again and ask, "Why does Paul employ the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus here?" I am quite convinced of this chiasm, this pattern between A, B, B1, and A1.

What is a little more challenging is the relationship between the steadfastness and man-centered antinomianism on the one hand and humility and man-centered legalism on the other. As Paul

encourages the Philippians to hold still as they experience suffering and difficulties, there is a positive outgrowth from that against a man-centered lawlessness. Let us just read briefly the reference in 1:27 to 30, which says,

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. [“Whatever happens” already signals the possibility of suffering.] 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 without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. [Here is a clear indication of suffering.] This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for Him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

This is an exhortation not to run away from the difficult situation that you may find yourself in. The main emphasis here is external opposition—criticism and oppression from the outside, but I do not think it is only limited to that. I think there is the question of what you do when things get hard. What do you do when things become difficult? How do you react when there is a sense of pressure in your life? Paul's exhortation and encouragement is, “Hold still”—not as a martyr, not as a stoic sufferer—but “Hold still in your trust in Christ.” This is an antidote to man-centered antinomianism. You are not going out to please yourself, to seek your own, and to pursue your own desires or your own feeling of “I deserve that, I need that,” or “I don't want that, so I am going to get out.” Immaturity—which we can see more easily in terms of children—is exactly that. “Too much homework, I will not do it. Too much stress, I will just blank out and not do anything.” That is what we feel like in our natural disposition.

In response to that, Paul gives the exhortation to have the eyes of God, to trust in His provision, and to be able to hold still when things get tough. Perhaps God has us in a tight spot and He is performing a delicate surgery on us and we need to hold still. It is painful, but He is doing His work. Paul is saying that this is the best thing against antinomianism, because, you see, God wants to draw you Philippians into a God-centered way of life, and He uses the tool of suffering to accomplish that. Do not resist suffering in your life. Of course, as Peter tells us, if you suffer for your own foolishness, do not think that this is any high spiritual attainment. If you run up debts with your credit card, and then you really think it is horrible suffering that you have to pay off those loans, that is suffering for your own foolishness. But when you feel that you should have more recognition and more ease in life and you find yourself in a tight place where there is not much room to please yourself, I think you need to wait to get the eyes of God to see that God has you in that place. There is growth out of that, growth away from a man-centered attitude of pleasing yourself toward a simple dedication and yieldedness to God.

Now I am aware that there are situations that are unbearable, and so I need to be careful in terms of pastoral care. You should not make a general rule that no one should ever seek to get out of a difficult situation. But if you feel that God has you in a place—and I think you can assess that yourself—and the question is between pleasing yourself and staying in the difficult place, my intuition tells me that you should stay in the difficult place. I need to be careful here, in terms of pastoral care, because there may be some situation where you really need to get out. I am thinking perhaps of a situation with an abusive spouse; we have had some of those situations in our church in Germany. So I have to be careful, but again, if you feel that the option is to please yourself, do what feels good to you—but it really does not honor the living God—or stay in that position in that place of difficulty, then stay there. Find the Lord to meet you there. It may be over months, perhaps over a long period of time, but there is good coming out of that. So I think this is very important: the exhortation to live a life worthy of the gospel and to seek

the purposes of God no matter what happens to you, and the contrast between that and a man-centered lawlessness, is very strong.

Think about the second point. The way to growth, the way to godliness, is a humility of service, and we are going to look at that in just a minute. Humility means beginning at the bottom, not being haughty, not assuming that you are doing great things, but trusting that God will do great things. You come with a sense of servitude, a sense of coming to a relationship, coming to the service of the church, with open hands, saying, “Lord, I need You to help me to relate to this situation properly, to lead properly, to teach properly, to preach properly, and to counsel properly. I need you.” There is a strong antithesis between that and “I have it all together. I know the rules. I am following them. I know exactly what I am doing. I do not know about everyone else; they do not seem to have their act together, but I do.” You see that a man-centered legalism could be so close to a well-meant desire to be godly. We are called to be godly. We are called to conform to the laws of God, but not in this way. Not in a man-centered way, and so Paul warns the Philippians, perhaps, not only against the background of Jewish legalism, Judaizers, but against the background of the Stoic, clean-cut guys from the Roman background who have it all together except that they are completely self-centered. Against this danger, Paul warns them to watch out and to grow in the attitude of Christ, to be strong in a godly way rather than in their own virtue or their own structure.

I see these contrasts, both with regard to steadfastness and suffering and with regard to humility. If you want to grow against antinomianism and pleasing yourself, hold still when God has you in a narrow path. When you want to grow against this man-centered Stoic sense of “I have it together and you really should have it together,” the antidote to that and the way forward through that is to have your confidence in God rather than in yourself. There is a natural mirroring here in this structure. And that is really all I want to say, and for a small addition, Paul gives examples that illustrate humility and steadfastness in suffering.

Let us look a little further here in terms of the flow of thought. Actually, we have already done a lot of work in understanding the flow of thought, but maybe we can draw it together now, taking the simple outline and this chiasmic structure together. Something is happening here in Philippians that I think goes beyond Paul's engagement with Philemon and with the Corinthians. You may remember that I mentioned that Paul is extraordinarily involved when he engages with Philemon to bridge the gap between Onesimus and Philemon for the sake of the Gospel. And in 2 Corinthians, in particular, Paul appeals to the Corinthians that they may have an open heart as he has already had an open heart. I think that Paul's involvement with the Philippians goes beyond even his extraordinary involvement with Philemon and with the Corinthians.

What I mean by that is that the word “partnership” is one step beyond. Paul is giving it all. We see that word used in chapter 1:4 where Paul says this to the Philippians: “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day [that was back when he traveled through Philippi.] until now, being confident of this: that He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

In speaking of partnership, let me go back to a discussion of relationships. It is bad to have a relationship where you say, “You come 50%; I come 50%. You move, I move.” Paul never does that. In Philemon and in 2 Corinthians, we see that Paul is willing to move 80%, 90%, 95%—whatever is needed to bridge the gap. As Jesus says, you take the first step. Do not wait. Do not point to other people's responsibility. Do not expect somebody else who may have wronged you to take the first step. You take the first step. You move. Paul does that.

This bridging of the gap is already a significant step forward in living out and preaching the Gospel of reconciliation. There is one more step forward, and that is partnership. This is a relationship in which you agree to team up together against the weaknesses that you identify in each other. You have a common enemy and common cause, where you say to your wife, “I know that is your weakness” and she says, “Yes, I know that is your weakness.” Together you say, “These are our main targets; we are going to work together against these two targets. We are not going to accuse each other or wait for the other person to take the first step. But rather, we will team up. We have a partnership in which we realize that we are up against a major enemy. We need to pray together. We need to associate together. We are focusing on these things that separate us, make us weak, tear us down, and tempt us to go either into this self-centered legalism or antinomianism, rather than holding still in suffering and keeping an open heart and a humble attitude of service.” Then you have a great opportunity for growth. I have just described some elements of my marriage to you, obviously, if you had not noticed that yet. The only thing is that our natural tendency is to move from partnership onto taking sides. That is the natural tendency. If you do not nourish partnership, you will fall back into this self-centered attitude of, “You move first and then I will move.” I think Paul is especially encouraging the Philippians to say, “We are together. We are facing the opposition together. You are behind me; I am behind you. We are associating together.” Paul is not just saying, “I praise God for the work that He has done in your midst,” which we find in other letters. He is not just saying, “It is wonderful to see you testify to God and to have growth,” but more than that, “We have moved together and we have made the Gospel our common cause.” That is the greatest, most beautiful way to approach the struggles that are still there. The dangers and the temptations are still there for the Philippians, but they can also really grow in steadfastness and in humility if they approach things in this way.

I think that the encouragement and the exhortation of Paul, through Philippians to us—in families, in relationships, in friendships, and in the Church—is to nourish the culture of partnership rather than power struggles. I do not know if you have been in a church where there are power struggles. People are opposed to each other. They have not yet realized that they cannot waste their energies in that opposition, and that they cannot win because the enemy, the power of the flesh, is so strong. Only as we move from that opposition to partnership, and as we realize that it is actually only by God’s power that we can overcome our own sin, and that of another person in the church or in a friendship, then can we come to a place of overcoming. I find it very sad that in relationships we so often underestimate the enemy that we are fighting against, and we fall into the trap of opposition, defensiveness, and looking to the other person. Instead, we must come to the high ground of partnership and say, “You know what? We are in this boat together. If we fight on this boat, we are going to capsize.” So many churches and so many relationships are in that boat, or have already capsized.

This is the appeal of Paul. We are certainly going to go a little deeper here, but on this level in putting the flow of thought together, this is the appeal of Paul: “We have found partnership. I am an imprisoned man for the Gospel, and you are people who are being opposed. You experience some strange preachers who take the Gospel in their mouth, but they have false motives. You suffer under that, you question that, and they oppose you. Some of you are tempted by a Stoic pride and a sense of having it all together. Let us be partners. Let us join together and see that we have a common enemy.” Paul sees the pattern of sin in his life—Romans 7. Paul sees it in the Philippians. Paul sees the great work that God has begun. He calls them into the nourished culture of partnership to fight together. If we could just develop that—if I could develop that culture in my marriage, my family relationships (especially with teenagers), and if you can win a battle of partnership so that there is no fighting against each other, but rather a recognition of partnership, where would we be? How wonderfully the Gospel would be able to take hold of our lives and manifest itself! We would not be perfect. Partnership does not mean final

victory. Partnership means acknowledgment of the struggle and the privilege of being able to associate and to fight together in intercessory prayer and in seeking the good of the other person.

I do not know why we have that principle in our lives, except that I know that we are fallen creatures and that somehow we fall back into a self-defensiveness. We fall back into a pattern of fighting our own fight, rather than being vulnerable to the work of God and turning around and seeking partnership. I find that the entire purpose of Philippians is partnership in the Gospel—expressed in this way, exemplified by Timothy and Epaphroditus, outlined in the exhortations, and concluded by the warnings—but the focus is really on that togetherness. And I would like to illustrate that a little by looking in some detail at Philippians 1:3-26. Let us look at this passage to see a further illustration of this partnership in the Gospel, the partnership that God has given Paul and the Philippians.

Philippians 1:1-26 has a very interesting, braided structure. Looking at the form and how the various verses are addressed, you see that there is an interconnection between the Philippians and Paul. We can see by the way he speaks about them and himself that they are in this together. Partnership is not only verbalized, but it is demonstrated and illustrated by the literary format that you find here.

Look at verses 3-6. Paul gives thanks for the partnership in the Gospel, as I have already mentioned—a partnership that began a growth that God will bring to completion. This partnership is illustrated in the next section. Paul, in verses 7 and 8, expresses his joy because what he endures for the sake of the Gospel is also the lot of the Philippians. So we have a partnership in the Gospel, and then in 7 and 8, we have a partnership in that which we suffer. They all share in God's grace together. So there is this sense of commonality, the sense of bonding together. In verses 9-11, Paul prays for the fruit of righteousness, which will come from Him who began a good work. Here Paul prays for the Philippians, and in verses 19 to 26, the Philippians are encouraged to pray for Paul's deliverance.

Verse 19 says this: “For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed but will have sufficient courage so that now, as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.”

You see here that Paul prays for them. He encourages them to pray for him (and they certainly do already) and, wedged in between verses 9-11 and 19-26, is the reference to the fact that the Gospel advances despite adversity. So I would submit to you that already in the first initial introduction to Philippians and then further expanded here, there is this intimate togetherness between Paul and the Philippians, which simply illustrates the partnership in the Gospel that is mentioned and announced in chapter 1:4. So, take that with you: the partnership in the Gospel is a calling that Paul reminds the Philippians about, and it is a calling in our lives to take with us from Philippians. As we indulge in man-centered legalism, as we indulge in our own desires, we thwart, obstruct, and hinder that growth that Paul is encouraging the Philippians to—growing in and joining in the partnership of the Gospel with him in that common bond, and thus fighting the battle together. I certainly think that this merits a lot of reflection. Perhaps you should think about yourself, why you approach things in an oppositional way rather than in a way of partnership. We do not have to agree on everything. I think we need to have the courage to say, “We do not see eye-to-eye on this point, but we will not divide the partnership over that thing that we cannot agree on.” I remember co-laboring with an elder in Germany and we did not see eye-to-eye on many points, but we were committed to the partnership of the Gospel, and we kept going, sometimes throughout many hours of conversations and debate. I think that is a wonderful indication and a wonderful challenge that lies before us. If we can set an example of living out the partnership of the Gospel—not just talking about it, but living out that partnership in the Gospel—I think there is a

wonderful fruit that will grow from that. It does not have to be all honey pie and sweetness, but it needs to be a sober assessment of what the battle is. If we underestimate the battle, we will say, “Well, let us fight it in opposition to each other.” If we see the battle, if we see the challenge and the promise of true growth, we will say, “Let us not begin this way; let us team up and identify what our common enemy is.” You see the pattern in human nature. If there is a common enemy, there is unity. If the common enemy is God, you have disunity. I notice that in my two boys. They could fight it out quite well with one another, but if I got in the way, they became connected and unified against the common enemy of their father. So let me leave you with a call to partnership in the Gospel. In the next lecture, then, we will go into the heart of Paul’s encouragement concerning humility.