

Paul's Prison Epistles

Lesson 5

Paul and the Philippians

Manuscript



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INTRODUCTION

When soldiers face the uncertainties of war, their minds often turn toward thoughts of death. And they look for ways to comfort themselves and to comfort loved ones back home. Often, they write letters of thanks and final words of advice, encouraging their loved ones to carry on. Well, in many ways, Paul's epistle to the Philippians is like a letter from a soldier facing the possibility of imminent death. Paul wrote Philippians at a time when he was suffering in prison, when he was weary and wondered if he might soon lose his life for Christ. And he wrote to people he loved. So his words to the Christians in Philippi were heavy but caring; sad but consoling; appreciative but bittersweet. As we study this epistle, we must always keep in view that, from Paul's perspective, these could well be his final words to his faithful Christian friends.

This is the fifth lesson in our series *Paul's Prison Epistles*, and we've entitled it "Paul and the Philippians." In this letter, Paul wrote to encourage the Philippian Christians who were worried about the sufferings he was enduring in prison. As he realized the possibility that he might die soon, Paul wrote to give the church in Philippi hope and assurance.

We'll divide our study of Paul and the Philippians into three main parts. First, we'll introduce the background of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Second, we'll look closely at the structure and content of the epistle. And third, we'll explore the modern application of this letter. Let's begin by looking at the background of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

BACKGROUND

As we've said throughout this series, Paul wrote all of his epistles to address the particular needs of different churches. So, it's always important to know something about Paul's circumstances and the circumstances of the people to whom he wrote. Knowing these details helps us orient ourselves properly to Paul's message, and to receive his letters as he intended. As we approach the letter to the Philippians, we need to ask questions like, "Who were the Philippians?" and, "What was happening in their lives and in Paul's life?" and, "Why did Paul write to them?" The answers to questions like these will help us to understand Paul's authoritative teaching in this letter, and to apply it more fully to our own lives.

As we investigate the background to Paul's epistle to the Philippians, we'll focus on three matters. First, we'll consider Paul's relationship with the Philippians. Second, we'll look into Paul's experience of suffering in prison. And third, we'll explore the conditions that the Christians living in Philippi faced at the time Paul wrote this epistle. Let's begin by looking at the relationship between Paul and the church in Philippi.

RELATIONSHIP

Philippi was an important city in the Roman province of Macedonia, an area that now lies in modern Greece. It lay along the *Via Egnatia*, the main road connecting the city of Rome to the eastern provinces, and it possessed a special status within the Roman Empire. The city of Philippi was afforded the same rights as Roman colonies within Italy, and its citizens had full Roman citizenship.

It's important to remember that Paul had significant interactions with the church in Philippi before he wrote his letter. He planted the church in Philippi during his second missionary journey, probably around the year A.D. 49 or 50. Before he reached Philippi, he had been ministering in Asia and had planned to move eastward. But Paul received a vision of a man begging him to bring the gospel to Macedonia. In response to this vision, Paul sailed for Macedonia. He landed in Neapolis, but moved quickly inland to the city of Philippi, about ten miles northwest of Neapolis.

A number of Paul's activities in Philippi are recorded in Acts 16:12-40. For example, it was in Philippi that Paul gained his first convert to the Christian faith in Europe, a merchant woman named Lydia. And it was in Philippi that Paul was jailed for an exorcism he performed on a slave girl. This was also where the well-known Philippian jailor professed faith in Christ, because he was so moved by Paul's compassion for him. Paul's ministry in Philippi was so successful that even when he left the city, the Philippian Christians supported him. At various times, they sent him monetary gifts when he was in financial need. Listen to Philippians 4:15-16 where Paul wrote about their generosity:

When I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again (Philippians 4:15-16).

The church in Philippi loved Paul so much that they regularly helped him financially. In fact, in Philippians 4:10, 18, Paul acknowledged that the Philippians had sent a gift close to the time that he wrote his letter to them:

Now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity... I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent (Philippians 4:10, 18).

Although there were some Philippian believers who appear to have been financially secure, it's likely that the church as a whole was exceptionally poor. So, they were not always able to help Paul financially. But they loved Paul so much that, when they were able, they gave generously to him. And just as the Philippians loved Paul, he felt strong affection for them as well. He loved them for their commitment to the Lord and for the way they had been his partners in gospel ministry. They were his close friends, people whose fellowship he cherished, and whose presence he missed. Listen to

the way he spoke to them in Philippians 1:4-8:

Always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now ... I hold you in my heart ... I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:4-8).

In fact, in Philippians 2:12 and 4:1, Paul referred to the Philippians as his “beloved” using the Greek word *agapētos* (ἀγαπητός). *Agapētos* is the term that Paul commonly used to describe his closest coworkers and dear friends, such as Tychicus, Epaphras, Philemon, Onesimus and Luke. Paul's love for the Philippian church appears to have been stronger than his love for many other churches. And it was manifested not only in his feelings of belonging and familiarity, but also in a continuing vibrant friendship. It isn't hard to imagine that there would be a close bond between Paul and Lydia, his hostess; or between Paul and the jailor whose life he saved; and perhaps even between Paul and the slave girl whom he rescued from demon possession. Through these and other relationships, Paul had grown to love the believers in Philippi, and they had the same feelings toward him.

Paul had a rough start when he first arrived in Philippi... We learn a little bit more about his relationship with the church from his letter, though. Paul calls them fellow partakers of grace in Philippians 1:7... When he calls them fellow partakers in that grace, Paul is identifying himself, as he does throughout the letter, as a prisoner for Christ who suffers in joy and asks the Philippians to suffer with him well in joy and to support him even in that suffering... His relationship seems to be very positive, very encouraging. He loves the Philippian church and they love him and support him both in his imprisonment and when he's free preaching the gospel.

— Dr. Jonathan Harris

Now that we've seen the loving, supportive relationship between Paul and the Philippians, we should take a few moments to look at another crucial facet of the background of the book of Philippians: the apostle's suffering in prison.

SUFFERING IN PRISON

Throughout his long ministry, Paul suffered greatly on many occasions. He was repeatedly whipped, beaten with rods, and hunted by assassins. He was imprisoned many times. Once he was even stoned and left for dead. And he did not always bear up well under these hardships. At times, he was depressed, even despairing. During his third missionary journey, Paul wrote these words in 2 Corinthians 1:8 about his sufferings:

We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we

experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself (2 Corinthians 1:8).

Notice here how Paul described himself as being under such a heavy burden that he had no strength to endure it, and even despaired of life itself.

Of course, like every faithful, mature Christian, Paul knew that life is never utterly hopeless. God is always in control of our circumstances, and all true believers are guaranteed eternal life with Christ. But Paul was just a human being who had weaknesses, just like we do. And the truth is that sometimes knowing and trusting in God's sovereignty doesn't keep us from struggling with how hard our situations may be. Paul struggled, and even wanted to give up at times. Realizing this about the apostle is important because, as we'll see, Paul was struggling with similar feelings at the very time he wrote to the Philippians. His faith anchored him in the truth and encouraged him that God was working all things for good. But Paul's heart was still heavy, and his sorrow was profound.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul didn't disclose all of the troubles that weighed so heavily on him. But he did speak of some of them, and he revealed the collective impact that his troubles were having on his state of mind. For instance, he spoke frequently of death as a welcome relief from his suffering. In Philippians 3:10, he wrote these words:

That I may know [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (Philippians 3:10).

In this verse, Paul revealed that his present suffering was so great that he fully embraced the thought of sharing in Christ's sufferings and death. And in Philippians 1:20, Paul explained his perspective in this way:

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death (Philippians 1:20).

Here, Paul expressed his hope that he would gain courage as he suffered. His concern was to honor Christ, without shame, whether he lived or died. And immediately after this, in verses 21-23, Paul expressed the possibility of imminent death with these words:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me... I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better (Philippians 1:21-23).

As we can see in this passage, Paul was torn between two longings. He wanted to continue to live in this world to serve Christ and his kingdom. But he also desired to die to experience the glory of life with Christ in heaven after death.

When Paul writes to the Philippians, he is very much living under the possibility that his life is going to end soon, that he is going to be executed for his faith. And his response to them is one that is, I think, one of the most inspiring parts that we find in Scripture. He says to them that he really is kind of torn between the two. He doesn't know if it would be better to actually die and go be with Jesus or to continue to live and serve the Philippians. I get the sense that Paul is actually yearning a bit for death to be that outcome and to go be with Christ, because how glorious would that be? But yet, if he is to continue to live and serve others with the message of the gospel, then he is perfectly willing to do so. So, Paul's attitude really is either way, whether he lives or dies, it's a win for him. But it's also a win for the Philippians if he just continues in this life.

— Dr. Dan Laich

Now, we should all realize that under normal circumstances, Christians should not be preoccupied with a desire to die. Yes, we should look forward to what is beyond the grave for us. It will be glorious. Yet, the Scriptures teach that long life is God's blessing. We were created to do our part in bringing the kingdom of God to earth as it is in heaven. And in this sense, throughout the Bible, death is a curse. Paul himself called death an enemy in 1 Corinthians 15:26. But there are times when we wonder, as Paul did at this point in his life, if our time for serving God in this world is near its end. And when these times come, our hearts should be filled with a longing to experience the wondrous blessings of being with Christ in heaven. Of course, Paul didn't reveal how troubled he was at this time just by speaking of death as a welcome relief. We can see Paul's troubled state of mind in several different places in his letter to the Philippians. For example, in Philippians 2:27-28, he spoke of his friend Epaphroditus' recovery from illness in these terms:

[Epaphroditus] was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious (Philippians 2:27-28).

Epaphroditus' death would have added more sorrow to the sorrow Paul already felt. Paul was grateful for the mercy God showed to Epaphroditus, but Paul's trials were so great that even this blessing would only lessen his pain. It would not eliminate it.

Paul's commitment to living for Christ in this life, and his joy in what was ahead after death, grew out of the fact that his life was in serious jeopardy. As we saw in a prior lesson, he may have written this letter from prison in Rome or from Caesarea Maritima. If he wrote from Rome, it may be that he expected Caesar to condemn him. And if he wrote from Caesarea Maritima, he may have been troubled by the Jewish plan to

assassinate him. But whatever the impending threat, Paul seems to have wrestled with the real possibility that, although he wanted to live for Christ, he might soon die for him. For instance, in Philippians 1:20, he wrote hopefully, "Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death." And in 1:22, he indicated that he might have a choice of dying, writing, "If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell." In 2:17, he spoke of the possibility that he was "to be poured out as a drink offering." And in 3:10, he suggested that his current sharing in the sufferings of Christ might well lead to his "becoming like Christ in his death." But Paul wasn't absolutely convinced that he would die. Elsewhere in this letter, he expressed the hope that he would continue to live. For example, in Philippians 1:25, he wrote, "I know that I will remain," indicating his hope that he would live to continue ministering to the Philippians.

Paul was not absolutely sure what would happen to him. On the one hand, he knew that his imminent death was a real possibility. So he tried to prepare his friends in Philippi for the worst. On the other hand, he had some level of hopefulness that he would live on for a while. So he also encouraged the Philippians to hope for the best. But whatever the future held for him, at the time he wrote this letter, he was fully resolved either to live for Christ in this world or to die for him and receive the glory of entering into his presence in heaven.

Having looked at Paul's relationship with the Philippians and his suffering in prison, we should now explore the conditions that existed in Philippi at the time of Paul's letter to them. What circumstances did the Philippian Christians face that required Paul's attention?

CONDITIONS IN PHILIPPI

Paul addressed many conditions in the church at Philippi, but we'll focus on just two matters: the Philippian church's concern for Paul, and the internal and external problems that existed for the church in Philippi. Let's begin by mentioning the Philippians' concern for Paul.

Concern for Paul

As a whole, the church in Philippi had a strong, loving relationship with the apostle Paul. And as they reflected on his sufferings in prison, they were dismayed and troubled. So, as soon as they were able, they demonstrated their concern by sending a gift to meet Paul's earthly needs. They also dispatched Epaphroditus to deliver the gift to Paul and to minister to him in prison. Paul mentioned this gift in Philippians 4:18, writing this note of thanks:

I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a

sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God (Philippians 4:18).

As we've mentioned, the Philippians were not wealthy, so this gift constituted a significant sacrifice on their part. But they sent it eagerly because they were so concerned about Paul's well-being. And as we read in Philippians 2:25, the Philippian church also sent Epaphroditus to minister to Paul in prison. Listen to Paul's words there:

I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus ... your messenger and minister to my need (Philippians 2:25).

Apparently, Epaphroditus also delivered a report to Paul from the Philippians. They expressed concern that Paul was being persecuted, even by some who claimed to follow Christ, and that a threat of death hung over his head. And in his letter back to them, Paul confirmed that the Philippians' had properly understood his circumstances, and expressed appreciation for their concern. For example, in Philippians 1:15-17, he admitted that certain preachers of the gospel were troubling him. He described his situation with these words:

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry ... out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment (Philippians 1:15-17).

In fact, one of the reasons Paul felt so sorrowful was that so few of the believers around him, including Christian leaders, truly dedicated their hearts to gospel ministry. Listen to his words to this effect in Philippians 2:21:

For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:21).

In short, the Philippians were justified in their concern for Paul at this time. Paul's troubles were great, and his support was thin. But the Philippians weren't simply concerned about the fact that Paul was suffering. They were also troubled by the thought that he might die, whether through assassination or public execution. And these fears were justified. As we've seen in prior lessons, the Jews had attempted to assassinate Paul more than once, and the crime of which he was accused was punishable by death. So, out of deep concern for the apostle, the Philippians devoted themselves to prayer on Paul's behalf. Paul thanked them for their prayers in Philippians 1:19-20, with these words of encouragement:

I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that ... Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death (Philippians 1:19-20).

Paul was grateful for the Philippians' prayers and assured them above all that Christ would be exalted whether he lived or died.

Having considered the Philippians' concern for Paul, we should now look at some of the problems that existed for the church in Philippi, stemming from a variety of sources.

Problems for the Church

From Paul's letter to the Philippians, we learn that the church in Philippi faced at least three types of problems. First, they faced persecution from those outside the church. Second, they were threatened by false teaching, similar to that which had infiltrated other churches. And third, they struggled with conflicts between believers within the church. Let's look at the persecution they were undergoing first.

Persecution. Paul mentioned the Philippians' persecution in 1:27-30, writing these words:

[Stand] firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents... For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have (Philippians 1:27-30).

Paul says there in chapter 1 of Philippians that "it has been granted to us" not just to believe but also "to suffer with Christ." Okay? "Do not be surprised; do not be afraid." The apostle Paul goes one step further in Romans 5, we are to rejoice, we are to glory in our suffering. Okay, why? Because suffering is God's design for Christians to shape us into Christ-like character... Scripture says that we are to be assured by the gospel — Romans 8, let the gospel assure us of God's unfailing love, and "Who shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution?" So, ultimately, when we undergo persecution or suffering, we are to hang on to the gospel and find our assurance of God's love for us there.

— Rev. C.S. Tang

Some years earlier, just after he had planted the church in Philippi, Paul had encountered great resistance from Jews in the neighboring Macedonian city of Thessalonica. And as we read in Acts 17:5-13, these angry Jews accused Paul and the other believers of violating Roman law. As a result, Paul was forced to flee the city by night to avoid further persecution by Jews, as well as arrest by the civil government.

These Thessalonian Jews were so zealous that they pursued Paul even to the city of Berea. So, it's likely that these same Jews, or others like them, also troubled the church in Philippi and roused the local government against the church there as well. But whatever the specific nature of the persecution in Philippi, it's clear that the church was suffering at the hands of unbelievers.

In addition to persecution from outside the church, a second problem the Philippian believers faced was the threat of false teaching.

False Teaching. Now, from Paul's epistle to the Philippians, it appears that false teaching had not yet deeply impacted the church in Philippi, since Paul did not confront it directly. But he did warn the Philippians to reject any false teaching that might reach their city. Consider Paul's words about circumcision in Philippians 3:1-3:

To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision (Philippians 3:1-3).

Paul was concerned that false teachers who advocated for circumcision — “those who mutilate the flesh,” as he called them here — might trouble the Philippian church. He also condemned other kinds of false teaching in Philippians 3:18-19:

Many ... walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

Paul's language here probably described any number of false teachings, including such things as dietary asceticism and improper use of Old Testament dietary laws. These types of false teachings might have come from at least two sources. On the one hand, Paul had in mind the kinds of false teachings that had threatened the churches in Colossae and the other cities of the Lycus Valley. As we mentioned in a prior lesson, these false teachings in the Lycus Valley mixed Christian teachings with various elements of Greek philosophy, asceticism and corruptions of Jewish law. For example, Paul specifically associated this false teaching with an abusive use of circumcision in Colossians 2:11, 12. And he connected it with dietary asceticism in Colossians 2:20-23.

On the other hand, Paul also was concerned about what we often call “Christian Judaizers” from Jerusalem. He had written about these false teachers years before in Galatians 2:11-21, and later in Romans 4:9-17. It's possible that his current imprisonment resulted from earlier conflicts with these false teachers during his trip to Jerusalem. Like the false teachers in the Lycus Valley, the Judaizers tried to force Gentile believers to adhere to certain Jewish traditions that were contrary to the Christian faith.

Lastly, besides troubles with persecution and false teaching, the Philippians struggled with conflicts among themselves within the church.

Conflicts. Paul addressed these conflicts in general terms in Philippians 2:1-3 with this exhortation:

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy ... [be] of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves (Philippians 2:1-3).

And in Philippians 4:2, he specifically exhorted two women who seem to have been unable to resolve their differences, writing these words:

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord (Philippians 4:2).

Now, the internal conflicts in the Philippian church did not warrant harsh condemnation or discipline from Paul. Yet, they were disruptive, unproductive and sinful. Self-centered, unloving conflict is never acceptable in the church. So, Paul spent a substantial amount of space emphasizing the importance of unity and love in the church, as he did in many of his epistles, to further the cause of Christ.

It's helpful to try to understand the context of the book of Philippians. And I think we get a great clue to it in chapter 4 verse 2 as we deal with these ladies, Euodia and Syntyche. Now, what's interesting here is we get a clue as to why he would even write this letter. He says, "I plead with Euodia and I plead" — notice the emphasis there — "I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." It seems like these ladies aren't of the same mind in the Lord, and we get the idea, likely, that they're arguing significantly. Now, this gives us another clue as we go back and read this letter with this little bit of information about what's going on in the life of this church, that maybe there's some of this information as to why Paul would say, "Let this same mind be in you that was in me ... [who] ... Jesus ... who ... didn't consider equality with God something to be grasped ... took upon himself the form of a servant" — back to chapter 2, right? So, when Paul says, "Let this same mind be in you," he might be speaking to these ladies who are struggling, and likely not just these two ladies. But that the opportunity comes where we can truly lay down our grievances so that we can have the mind of Christ in us as we give up of ourselves. And this is exactly what Jesus did, who did not consider his position something to be grasped. Instead he took upon himself the form of a servant, took upon himself the form of a slave.

— Dr. Andy Miller III

Now that we've looked at the background to the book of Philippians, we are ready to move to our second main topic in this lesson: the structure and content of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi.

STRUCTURE & CONTENT

As we consider the structure and content of Paul's letter to the Philippians, we'll divide the letter into five main sections:

- the salutation in 1:1, 2;
- a section of thanksgiving in 1:3-8;
- Paul's prayer for the Philippians in 1:9-11;
- the main body of the letter in 1:12-4:20;
- and Paul's final greetings in 4:21-23.

SALUTATION (1:1, 2)

The salutation in 1:1, 2 identifies Paul as the primary author of the letter and states that the letter also came from Timothy. Yet, in line with Paul's personal affection for the Philippians, he consistently referred to himself directly and personally in the singular using the words "I" and "me," rather than "we" and "us," as he did in some other epistles. And in Philippians 2:19, 22 he referred to Timothy in the third person.

The salutation of Philippians is somewhat different from those in most of Paul's other letters because it does not mention Paul's apostleship. Only 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Philemon share this distinction — although, all three of these other letters do mention Paul's apostolic authority *outside* of their salutations. Only in Philippians do we find an entire letter in which Paul never explicitly calls attention to his apostolic authority. Now, this does not imply that Paul's letter to the Philippians lacks apostolic authority. Rather, it's a testimony to his personal relationship with the Philippians, to their high regard for Paul, and to their eagerness to please the Lord. Not once did Paul feel the need to appeal to his office and authority.

THANKSGIVING (1:3-8)

Following the salutation, Paul moved to a section of thanksgiving in 1:3-8. This move from salutation to thanksgiving is consistent with the form Paul followed in most of his other canonical letters, except for Galatians and Titus. The first part of Paul's thanksgiving, found in verses 3-6, presents a fairly standard statement of thanks. Paul spoke of the joy the Philippians had brought him and of his expectations for their ultimate

salvation. But verses 7, 8 stand out from Paul's standard thanksgiving, because they emphasize the depth of his love for the Philippians. Listen to his words there:

It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart ... God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:7-8).

These verses are yet another indication that Paul's relationship with the Philippians was deeply personal and heartfelt.

PRAYER (1:9-11)

Following his salutation and thanksgiving, Paul offered a prayer for the Philippians in 1:9-11. This prayer is fairly brief, but it is full of the emphases that appear throughout the letter. On the whole, Paul prayed that the Philippians would express their Christian love by living in ways that honored God. First, he prayed that they would have the discernment necessary to make proper judgments. Second, he prayed that this discernment would lead them to perform good works, and to persevere in faith and practice until Christ's return in judgment. Finally, he prayed that the Philippians would bring glory and praise to God through their good works and perseverance.

BODY (1:12-4:20)

After his prayer, Paul turned to the main body of his epistle to the Philippians, in 1:12-4:20. This section has been outlined in various ways by different interpreters. But in this lesson, we'll focus on the logical flow of Paul's encouragements and instructions to the Philippian church.

As we've already mentioned, when Paul wrote to the Philippians, he was suffering greatly in prison, and his life was in jeopardy. It was from this mindset that he wrote to the believers in Philippi. Paul knew these might be his last words to them. So, he expressed his deepest feelings, letting them know how much he loved them, and how thankful he was for their friendship and ministry. He also offered final words of wisdom, teaching them how to deal with adversities in ways that would honor God.

Keeping in mind this overarching perspective on Philippians, we can discern three primary sections within the main body of this letter: first, a description of Paul's perseverance in prison in 1:12-26; second, his exhortations to the Philippians to persevere in 1:27-4:9; and third, Paul's affirmation of the Philippians' perseverance in 4:10-20. Let's take a closer look at each of these sections, beginning with Paul's perseverance in prison.

Paul's Perseverance (1:12-26)

Paul persevered in prison not by denying his suffering, but by finding reasons to be joyful as he suffered. And he took the time to explain his joy to encourage the Philippians to stop worrying about him. He appreciated their concern for him, but he didn't want them to be overly distressed about his circumstances.

In this section on Paul's perseverance, he focused on three sources of joy that he found in the midst of his troubles: the success of his present ministry in 1:12 through the first part of verse 18; his hope for future deliverance in the second part of verse 18 through verse 21; and his anticipation of future ministry in verses 22-26. Paul explained that by focusing on these good things, he was better able to endure his hardships.

Present Ministry (1:12-18a). First, he told the Philippian Christians that even though he was suffering in prison, he was happy that his present ministry continued to thrive. Listen to Paul's account in Philippians 1:17-18:

[Some] proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice (Philippians 1:17-18).

In part, Paul suffered because selfish, ambitious evangelists caused trouble for him. But even though he suffered in this way, Paul rejoiced in the fact that they preached the true gospel.

Paul's take and attitude towards people that speak with false motives is centered around one basic idea: Are they preaching Christ? If they preach Christ with clarity, let God handle the motives. And with that the church can continue to move as one, and the God that searches all hearts will search their hearts and address those concerns. For eventually, even the person with a wrong motive might even change and become more committed.

— Pastor Johnson Oni

Future Deliverance (1:18b-21). Paul not only found joy in the fact that his present ministry continued to thrive, but, in the second part of verse 18 through verse 21, he also found joy in his hope for future deliverance. Paul hoped that he might eventually be released from prison. But, as we said earlier, during this time, Paul's suffering was so severe that he knew his immanent death was a real possibility. Still, he was encouraged by the fact that, in God's providence, his suffering would be relieved, whether by his acquittal or by his death. He expressed this perspective in Philippians 1:18-21:

I will rejoice, for I know that ... this will turn out for my deliverance ...

whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Philippians 1:18-21).

In one sense, the threat of death troubled Paul greatly because it would mean the end of his service to Christ and his kingdom on earth. But in another sense, he was able to see past his death to the joy that would be his in the presence of Christ in heaven. And by resting in the fact that both life and death would bring God's blessings, Paul was able to experience joy in the midst of his troubles.

Future Ministry (1:22-26). Paul's joy was fueled by the success of his present ministry and his hope of future deliverance. And in much the same way, in 1:22-26, he found joy in the possibility of a future ministry to the Philippians. Listen to his encouragements in Philippians 1:25-26:

I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again (Philippians 1:25-26).

The Philippians loved Paul, so they would have been relieved to hear that he still hoped to live. And he loved them too, and took comfort and satisfaction from the thought that God may very well allow him to see them again.

After encouraging the Philippians by assuring them of his perseverance in prison, Paul wrote a long section of exhortations directing the Philippians also to persevere, in Philippians 1:27-4:9.

Exhortations to Persevere (1:27-4:9)

Here, Paul instructed them to remain faithful to Christ and to live exemplary lives even in the midst of distressing circumstances. Paul's exhortations touch on four main topics: the importance of perseverance in 1:27-2:18; the help for perseverance that ministers provide in 2:19-30; Paul's own example of perseverance in 3:1-16; and finally, his instructions regarding challenges to perseverance in 3:17-4:9.

Importance of Perseverance (1:27-2:18). First, let's look at what Paul said about the importance of perseverance in Christian faith and practice. In Philippians 1:27-29, Paul acknowledged the Philippians' struggles and encouraged them with these words:

[Stand] firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents... For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should ... suffer for his sake (Philippians 1:27-29).

The Philippians' faced opposition that was distressing and painful. But none of

this was beyond God's control. On the contrary, God himself had ordained their suffering on Christ's behalf as means of blessing them. And for this reason, it was vital that they persevere in unity and courage through these difficulties.

Paul writes to the Philippians and says that it's not only been given to you to believe in Christ Jesus, but to suffer for his sake. So suffering is part of what it means to take up our cross and to follow Christ daily. And so the New Testament writers give us a lot of practical advice about how to deal with trial and suffering in our lives. We see this, of course ... in the encouragement to overcome, to be faithful in the midst of great pressure to disavow your relationship with Christ, or just to compromise.

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

As we've seen in other lessons, Paul taught that, even though Christ's death on the cross was utterly sufficient to deliver us from the wrath of God, Christ's suffering will not be finished until he returns. In the meantime, he completes his appointed suffering through Christ's body, the church. Because believers are in union with Christ, when we suffer, Jesus suffers. And from Paul's perspective completing Christ's appointed sufferings is a badge of honor for every Christian. As we just read in Philippians 1:27-29, God had not just permitted the Philippians to suffer — he had "granted" them the honor of suffering for Christ. Paul unpacked this idea in Philippians 2:5-9, where he wrote these words:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who ... humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name (Philippians 2:5-9).

Jesus willingly endured suffering and mistreatment for the sake of God's kingdom, and his reward for this sacrifice is immeasurably great. In the same way, believers should humbly endure suffering and mistreatment in order to spread the gospel of the Kingdom throughout the world. And when we do, our reward will also be great. This was why Paul could write these words in Philippians 2:17-18:

Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me (Philippians 2:17-18).

Paul did not just want the Philippians to endure their appointed suffering, but to rejoice in it because of the blessings it produces in this life and the next. He wanted them to rejoice in the blessings that would result from his own sufferings, just as he rejoiced in the blessings that flowed from their sufferings.

Suffering a lot of times is viewed as being negative. However, from a Christian viewpoint, suffering is seen as a discipline, and is a discipline that the Lord uses to mold and shape believers more and more into the character of God... Paul spoke well of this in Philippians 3 when he was explaining that he wanted to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, but he doesn't stop there. He talks about the fellowship of sharing in his suffering. And so believers can fellowship with Christ in his sufferings, and also we can fellowship with one another as we encounter sufferings in life as well, knowing that what Paul said in Romans 8:28, "God is able to cause all of this to work together for good," and so, therefore, we can have a different perspective perhaps than the world as it relates to suffering and its impact in the life of a Christian.

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

Paul encouraged the Philippian believers, as they suffered in this life, to focus on God's rewards for their suffering. In this way, they would have the strength and courage to persevere in faith and holy living, even under great duress.

Help for Perseverance (2:19-30). Paul stressed the importance of perseverance by reminding the Philippians of the blessings they would receive. Then, in Philippians 2:19-30, he offered practical help for perseverance by sending ministers to care for them.

Keeping our eyes on the rewards that will be ours as we persevere through suffering is crucial. But Paul also understood that it is much easier to endure suffering when we have other people helping us. We all need others to strengthen and encourage us. So, Paul assured the Philippians that he was sending his friends to minister to them in their time of need. And he announced his hope that he would be able to see them soon as well.

First, Paul was sending Epaphroditus, the Philippians' own messenger whom *they* had sent to minister to Paul. It's likely that he was the one who actually delivered Paul's letter to the Philippians. As we learn in Philippians 2:25-30, the church in Philippi was worried about Epaphroditus because he had fallen ill. And Epaphroditus was concerned for them because they were so worried. So, Paul sent him back to them in order to ease their minds as well as to minister to them. Next, Paul planned to send Timothy to Philippi. For the time being, Timothy would remain with Paul in prison, ministering to the apostle during his distress. But as we read in Philippians 2:19, Paul expected to be able to send him to help the Philippians in the near future. And finally, Paul hoped that eventually he himself would be released from prison, and that he would then come to minister to the Philippians. He expressed this hope in Philippians 2:24, where he wrote these words:

I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also (Philippians 2:24).

The Greek word *pepoitha* (πέποιθα), here translated “I trust,” can also be rendered “I am persuaded.” Paul was hopeful about his release, but as other portions of Philippians indicate, he was not absolutely certain of it. In all events, Paul knew that the ministering of faithful believers would be extremely valuable to the church in Philippi as it struggled under the weight of hardships. So, he assured them of his plans to provide them with skilled and loving ministers.

Example of Perseverance (3:1-16). In the next section of exhortations, found in Philippians 3:1-16, Paul offered himself as a positive example of perseverance through suffering, both with regard to his mindset and behavior. Paul explained that, when he had come to faith in Christ, he had ceased to rely on earthly standards to gain God's favor, and instead had begun to rely solely on Christ. But this was not because he didn't measure up to the earthly standards of the Jewish community. On the contrary, by their earthly standards Paul was among God's most highly favored people. Listen to Paul's description of his credentials in Philippians 3:4-6:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Philippians 3:4-6).

If any mere human being could have merited God's blessings by keeping the law, it was Paul. But the truth of the matter is that no fallen human being can be good enough to merit God's blessings of salvation and eternal life. And so, Paul refused to rely on his earthly merits, and depended only on Christ's merit, which God credited to him by means of faith. At the same time, he also made it clear that merely professing faith is not sufficient to guarantee our salvation. On the contrary, all who claim to have faith in Christ must also persevere in the faith to obtain eternal life. We must maintain our faith, and we must live holy lives, or else we prove our faith to be false. This is why, in Philippians 3:12-16, he placed so much emphasis on perseverance, writing about salvation in Christ in these terms:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own... I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus... Only let us hold true to what we have attained (Philippians 3:12-16).

As we can see here, professing faith in Christ at some point in life is not enough. We must prove our faith by remaining faithful. And if we do not persevere to the end, maintaining our faith in Christ for our salvation, and remaining faithful to him in godly living, we prove that our faith was false.

Philippians 3:12 is a verse that many people memorize. And a lot of times it's pulled out to show that we're not perfect. Right? It says, for instance, "Not that I've already obtained all this" — or I've already arrived at my goal. And then it says, "I press on," and there's all that sort of image that comes in there and this metaphor of pushing on. But unfortunately, when we memorize that verse or use that verse, we miss its meaning most of the time. I'll tell you, I've missed its meaning most of the time. Because it says, "Not that I have already obtained all this." Well, what is "this" referring to? What is this this? Which this is this? So, if you go backwards just one verse, you get the idea what the "this" is: "I want to know Christ — yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participate in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining the resurrection from the dead"... Why should Christians persevere? Why should they move forward? Because no matter what's happening in your life, no matter what's going on, the resurrection is coming, and that's when God will put all things right that are wrong.

— Dr. Andy Miller III

Challenges to Perseverance (3:17–4:9). Paul's final exhortations pertain to the challenges to perseverance, which he addressed in Philippians 3:17–4:9. These exhortations are primarily applications of his example of perseverance. Paul encouraged the Philippians not to allow false teachers, or conflict within the church, or personal hardship to cause them to falter in their faithfulness to God. And he began by focusing on the ways that false teaching might invade the church in Philippi. Listen to Philippians 3:18-19, where Paul wrote this harsh condemnation:

Many ... walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things (Philippians 3:18-19).

Clearly, these "enemies of the cross of Christ" were not true believers. Nevertheless, they were in a position to harm the church. Perhaps they spoke persuasively against the need to persevere. Or maybe they were influential in some other way. In any case, Paul insisted that true believers must reject the false teachings of Christ's enemies, and persevere in pure Christian faith and practice. The desire to avoid trouble and suffering should never lead to turning from the gospel. But Paul also warned that even true believers within the church could present challenges to the perseverance of their fellow believers. As one example, he mentioned the problem between Euodia and Syntyche. In Philippians 4:1-3, Paul wrote these words:

Stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. I entreat Euodia and I entreat

Syntyche to agree in the Lord... [H]elp these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel (Philippians 4:1-3).

By engaging in conflict with each other, Euodia and Syntyche were failing to stand firm in holy living. And, because these women had worked closely with Paul, their conflict also threatened the perseverance of other believers in Philippi. In addition, Paul exhorted the Philippians not to allow the hardships they faced as individuals to hinder their perseverance. He encouraged them to adopt a joyful perspective, and not to allow anxiety to discourage them. His thoughts are represented well in Philippians 4:4-7:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice... [D]o not be anxious about anything, but ... let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God ... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:4-7).

Rather than sinking into worry and anxiety, Paul encouraged the Philippians to ask God to meet their needs. Paul knew that, in some cases, God might respond by eliminating the troubling circumstances. But even when God chose not to do this, Paul knew that God's peace would "guard [their] hearts and ... minds in Christ Jesus." By changing their attitudes and outlooks, they could persevere in their faithfulness to God.

In the body of Paul's letter to Philippi, he described his own perseverance, and he exhorted the Philippians to persevere as well. Then, he closed the body of his letter, in 4:10-20, with an affirmation of the Philippians' perseverance in faithful Christian living, especially through their continued ministry to him.

Affirmation of Perseverance (4:10-20)

In this section, Paul thanked the Philippians for the money they had sent to relieve his suffering in prison. His thank-you note assured them that he had received the money, and that it had helped to improve his conditions. But the greatest value the money had for Paul seems to have been emotional. Listen to his words in Philippians 4:12-14:

In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need... Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble (Philippians 4:12-14).

The greatest value of these funds was how they touched Paul's heart. Through their sacrifice on his behalf, the impoverished Christians in Philippi had shown Paul how much they truly loved him.

The Philippians could not have demonstrated their love for Paul at a better time. Paul's imprisonment was weighing heavily on him. He was suffering severely and near despair. Imagine how comforting it must have been for him to be reminded that so many people loved him and wanted to share in his sufferings! We may even wonder if it was

the Philippians' concern that restored his hope. Was it their love that inspired his decision to rejoice in the midst of his terrible circumstances? Was it their friendship that reminded Paul he was neither forgotten nor alone? One thing is sure: Paul loved the Philippians with all his heart. So their gift could not have done anything but deeply encourage him.

FINAL GREETINGS (4:21-23)

Lastly, the letter closes with Paul's final greetings in Philippians 4:21-23. This section is fairly standard, although one aspect of these final greetings is so astonishing that it deserves special attention. In Philippians 4:22, Paul sent greetings to the Philippian church from the saints who belonged to Caesar's household. In other words, Paul sent greeting from the household of the emperor of the entire Roman empire. Now, it's important to know that the expression "Caesar's household" designated Caesar's family members and servants, whether or not they lived in the palace with him. And his servants were not limited to laborers. They also included his personal bodyguards, as well as a large number of civil servants.

Of course, the mention of Caesar's household has led many interpreters to conclude that Paul wrote Philippians while he was imprisoned in Rome, rather than earlier during his imprisonment in Caesarea Maritima. But, while it's true that Caesar lived and governed an actual household in Rome, we shouldn't draw this conclusion too hastily. The fact is, all of Caesar's civil servants and guards throughout the empire were called "Caesar's household," including those stationed in Caesarea Maritima. Whatever the case, mentioning believers or saints within Caesar's household was a subtle, but positive and encouraging way for Paul to draw this letter to a close. Although Paul's imprisonment had taken its toll on him, it had not hindered the spread of the gospel. On the contrary, God had called Paul to reach the Gentiles, and his ministry had been very fruitful among them. Even while he was suffering in prison, Paul had faithfully proclaimed the gospel to officials, jailors and even those who represented Caesar's own household. And he had made disciples of Christ among them all.

As we study Paul's letter to the Philippians, his love for them is undeniable. We see it in his personal greeting, in his thanksgiving, and in his prayer for them. And beyond this, we see that even as he struggled in the midst of his imprisonment, he encouraged the Philippians to persevere in ways that would bring glory and praise to God.

Having explored the background to Paul's epistle to the Philippians, as well as its structure and content, we are now in a position to consider the modern application of Paul's teachings in this letter.

MODERN APPLICATION

Scriptures as rich as the epistle to the Philippians can be applied to our modern lives in countless ways. But in this lesson, we've focused on how Paul sought to encourage the Philippian believers as he faced what might have been his last days on earth. From this perspective, one theme moves to the foreground. Throughout this letter, Paul encouraged the Philippians to persevere and to continue walking faithfully before God during difficult times. As we consider what Philippians means for us today, we'll give our attention to this aspect of Paul's letter.

As we think about the implications Paul's epistle to the Philippians has for modern application to Christian life, we'll explore three aspects of Christian perseverance. First, we'll address the nature of perseverance. Second, we'll deal with the mindset of perseverance. And third, we'll discuss the church's ministry of perseverance. Let's turn first to the nature of perseverance.

NATURE OF PERSEVERANCE

In Philippians, Paul's teachings on perseverance are most easily understood in terms of three main factors: the definition of Christian perseverance; the necessity of perseverance; and the assurance of perseverance. So, let's begin by looking at Paul's definition of perseverance.

Definition

Paul conceived of Christian perseverance in terms of the twin ideas of true faith and righteous living. On the one hand, Paul taught that Christian perseverance is maintaining faith in the gospel of Christ, relying on Christ's merit alone for righteous standing before God. Paul emphasized this idea in Philippians 1:27, when he encouraged the Philippians with these words:

[Stand] firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel (Philippians 1:27).

As believers, we must remain steadfast in our commitment to the gospel, never giving up our belief that our salvation has been won by the victorious Christ. This is a crucial dimension of persevering in the Christian faith. True faith in the gospel of Christ can be described in many ways, but in Philippians 3:8-9, Paul described one central focus of Christian faith in this way:

I count everything as ... rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 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 (Philippians 3:8-9).

In this passage, Paul indicated that all his human status and good works were useless for obtaining true righteousness and salvation. The only thing that could gain salvation for him was the righteousness of Christ, applied to Paul by means of faith.

As long as we continue to rely solely on Christ's merit for our righteousness, we are persevering, standing firm in our faith. Now, this is not to say that we never stumble or fall short. Rather, the point is that persevering faith never utterly and finally denies the truth of the Christian gospel. We all have errors in our theology and fail to rely wholeheartedly on Christ's victory over sin and death. But it's only once we no longer believe the crucial Christian teaching that we are saved by Christ and Christ alone, that we truly fail to persevere.

In addition to defining perseverance in terms of true faith, Paul also spoke of perseverance as righteous living, as persistence in faithfully doing good and praiseworthy works. For instance, in Philippians 2:12-13, Paul wrote this:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed ... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13).

Here Paul referred to how important it is for all of us to continue in good works, acting in ways that accord with the salvation we've received by God's mercy. Now, perseverance in good works does not mean that we live perfectly. We'll never reach perfection in this life, and sometimes we stumble in serious ways. Rather, we persevere in good works when we keep striving to obey Christ faithfully.

When Paul states in Philippians 2 that Christians are supposed to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, it sounds like we earn it. Wait a minute. I thought that justification was by faith alone and Christ alone, and here Paul says you've got to work it out. Well, remember in chapter 1, Paul says that it's God who works in us to do his good pleasure. You have to put both of the texts together. God is ultimately the one who works it out in every single believer. What that means for us today is ... you put your faith and trust in Christ and his work. When you do that, you will live in light of that reality. Always. Works comes after faith... It's always God working, but it starts with our identity in Christ, and it's going to get worked out through habits of living and pattern and righteous living. And so we're constantly in contact with the soil of Christ.

— Dr. Benjamin Gladd

As we consider the nature of perseverance, it becomes evident that Paul didn't

want the Philippians to understand just the definition of perseverance. He also wanted them to understand the necessity of perseverance, both in faith and life, in order to obtain salvation.

Necessity

Consider Paul's words in Philippians 3:8-11:

I count everything as ... rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 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 ... that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:8-11).

Simply put, Paul taught that if we fail to maintain true faith, we'll not be found in Christ on the day of judgment, and we'll not be resurrected to a life of eternal glory. In other words, perseverance in faith is necessary for our final salvation. Similarly, in Philippians 2:14-16, he offered this exhortation regarding righteous living:

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation ... so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain (Philippians 2:14-16).

By avoiding grumbling and disputing — that is, by living righteously — the Philippians could become blameless and innocent, giving Paul a reason to be proud of his ministry. But if they failed to persevere, they would demonstrate that they were not children of God — that they did not truly trust in Christ — and they would not be saved on the last day. And the same is true for us. If we do not persevere in righteous living, we prove ourselves to be unbelievers, and we will not be saved.

There is simply never an assumption that because at some point in the distant past you were baptized or made some profession of faith, or did something else, or belonged to a church, or spoke in tongues that, therefore, you were simply guaranteed a place in heaven... In the world we inhabit, it is always a call to faithful perseverance — “He who perseveres to the end will be saved.” Those are the words of Jesus... You need to maintain your faithful witness to Christ in order to receive the eschatological blessings.

— Dr. Sean McDonough

To many of us, Paul's teachings on the definition and necessity of perseverance

might sound daunting, or even harsh. But Paul's doctrine also had a third aspect that is quite encouraging, namely assurance of perseverance. And in light of this assurance, Paul's teachings on perseverance are not a threat to believers, but a comfort.

Assurance

Paul assured the Philippians that every true believer will certainly persevere in both faith and righteous living, so that our salvation is guaranteed. It is still true that many falsely profess faith, and actually do fail to persevere. But these are people who never truly had saving faith in the first place. Those whose faith is true, on the other hand, possess the Holy Spirit, who works in them to guarantee their perseverance. Listen to Paul's words in Philippians 1:6:

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).

Paul was certain that if God had begun to save the Philippians, he would also *finish* saving the Philippians. He would not allow any of them to perish, but would cause all true believers to persevere until the day of Christ Jesus. And Paul's confidence should be our confidence, too. If we truly believe, there is no way that we can fall from faith or from grace. Paul confirmed this idea in Philippians 2:12-13, where he gave this encouragement:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13).

The fear we are to have is not the terror that we might finally fall from grace. It is the overwhelming awe at the realization that God Almighty is working within each of us to ensure that we think and do what he wants. He controls our hearts and minds for his good purpose, which includes our perseverance, so that there is no way we can fail to stand firm until the end.

As we've explored the modern application of Paul's letter to the Philippians, we've seen how the letter reveals the nature of perseverance in our lives. Now, we're in a position to discuss the mindset of perseverance that all believers in every age should adopt.

MINDSET OF PERSEVERANCE

We'll focus on three aspects of the mindset that Paul emphasized in his epistle: humility, optimism, and joy. Let's look first at what Paul had to say about humility.

Humility

As an authoritative apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul had every opportunity to be arrogant. Christ had supernaturally trained Paul for leadership. He had chosen Paul above all others to carry the gospel to the Gentiles, and he had performed many miracles through him. In many churches all over the world Paul was revered as a hero. So, when he was suffering in prison, he could have been tempted to think, “Why has God let this happen to me, of all people? I have been so faithful to him, and yet he refuses to bless me! I deserve better!”

But challenging God's wisdom and goodness in this way is foolish and wrong. Paul knew that he had every reason to be humble before God. And by accepting this fact, he prepared himself to be built up by God, and to persevere through the hardships he faced. In this regard, Paul patterned his own mindset after the mindset of Jesus, who willingly humbled himself in order to obtain God's blessings for himself and for us. In fact, it was in support of Christ's exhortations to be humble that Paul included his famous “Christ hymn,” found in Philippians 2:6-11. Some scholars have suggested that these verses constitute a hymn that was known in the church even before Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians. Others suspect that Paul wrote these verses specifically for this occasion. But whatever their source, the meaning of these verses is clear: Jesus humbled himself, and we are to pattern ourselves after him.

Jesus presents us with a very clear model of humility. Paul tells us very clearly in Philippians 2 that when Jesus came ... his style of service was one of humility. So even though he was God, he didn't consider equality with God something to be grasped. That is humility. Jesus comes in such a way to serve his disciples. He washes their feet. Those actions were not the expected actions of someone who was a leader. So as Christ presents that example to us, whether we're in a position of leadership — whether we're leading the Bible study, whether we're pastoring a church — if we're asking questions, we should ask questions with a humble posture.

— Rev. Timothy Mountfort

Paul's “Christ hymn” describes Christ during three stages of history: his pre-incarnate state, his humiliation, and his exaltation.

Pre-incarnate state. First, Paul spoke of Christ's condition prior to his incarnation. At that time, Christ existed as God the Son, living in perfect, eternal union with the Father and the Holy Spirit, being equal to them in power and glory. Listen to the way Paul described Christ's pre-incarnate state in Philippians 2:6:

Though he was in the form of God, [Christ] did not count equality with

God a thing to be grasped (Philippians 2:6).

This verse tells us at least two things about Christ. For one, before he became a human being, Christ was glorious, or as Paul put it, Christ had the form of God. The Greek word Paul used for “form” was *morphē* (μορφή), which generally refers to one’s outward shape. But, Paul didn’t just mean that Christ looked like God. Rather, his outward appearance testified to the underlying reality that Christ actually *was* God.

Additionally, Paul indicated that Christ was humble. Even before he became flesh, the pre-existent Son made his humility known by his willingness to take on an additional form or nature — that of our humanity. Specifically, Paul wrote that Christ “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” Here, Paul used the word *isos* (ἴσος) to refer to Christ’s equality or sameness with God. His meaning was that Christ’s “form” or outward glory was the same as the glory exhibited by God the Father. But Christ was willing to let go of the glory of his rightful heavenly standing in order to please the Father and purchase our salvation.

Humiliation. After describing Christ before his incarnation, Paul moved on to what theologians call Christ’s “humiliation.” This was the period of his earthly life, beginning with his conception in Mary’s womb and extending to his death on the cross. Listen to Paul’s words about Christ’s humiliation in Philippians 2:7-8:

[Christ] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7-8).

Corresponding to Paul’s words about Christ’s pre-incarnation, these verses tell us at least two things about Christ during his state of humiliation. First, Christ’s humiliation was inglorious. That is, the Son of God put aside his divine glory in order to take the form of a human being. Again, Paul used the Greek word *morphē* (μορφή) to indicate that Christ had exchanged his outward form, so that he no longer exhibited divine glory. Instead, he exhibited the plain exterior of a human being.

Paul says that Christ made himself nothing. He “emptied himself” is another way that it gets said. And some people, I think, have wrongly looked at that and said that Jesus gave up all of his deity and was just simply a man, that he removed himself from all deity and emptied himself of all of that. And that runs completely counter to what we get in the Scriptures, that clearly Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. And so, when Paul speaks about him making himself nothing or emptying himself, he’s really talking about him stepping into the role of being a slave to the point of death... Paul directly connects that idea of becoming a slave to the emptying, making himself nothing to the point of death of a cross for us. So it really is about the humility of Jesus to not make anything of his deity, to not come into the world in

all of his glory but to actually humbly come into the world, still fully divine, but with that glory being veiled as he takes on the role of a servant to the cross.

— Dr. Dan Lacich

Just as Christ's divine form indicated that he was truly and fully divine, his human form indicated that he was truly and fully human. But it's important to keep in mind that in becoming human, Christ did not give up any of his divine attributes. Rather, he simply added a complete human nature to his complete divine nature, so that he is rightly said to be both fully human and fully divine.

Second, Paul's words about Christ in his earthly ministry in Philippians 2:7-8 confirm that Christ was humble. Just as he had been willing to put off his glorious form before he took on flesh, his humility on earth was so extreme that he "humbled himself ... to the point of death." In other words, he permitted himself to be murdered by the very creatures whose form he had taken as his own.

Exaltation. After reflecting on Christ before his incarnation and on his humiliation during his earthly ministry, Paul described Christ during the stage of his exaltation that began with his resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, and continues now in his rule over creation. Paul wrote of Christ's exaltation in Philippians 2:9-11, describing it in these terms:

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).

Again, Paul indicated at least two very important things about Christ during this stage. First, Christ regained his glorious form, being exalted as the ruler of the universe, to whom every creature bowed in submission and worship. Second, Christ continued to be humble, even in this exalted, glorious state of universal sovereignty. As Paul put it here, even his rule over creation was not intended to glorify himself, but to bring glory to the Father.

Paul presented these three outlooks on Christ in his letter to the Philippians because he wanted believers to follow Christ's example. After all, if the Son of God willingly submitted to such debasing humiliation, certainly his servants should be humble as well. And if Christ's humility helped him persevere through his suffering and death, then humility can help us persevere too. And this was precisely Paul's point in Philippians 2:2-4, where he wrote these instructions:

[Be] of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not

only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:2-4).

Humility before God is essential to persevering in righteous living and in faith. On the one hand, it enables us to be like-minded, to create unity, to love and honor others, and to minister to their needs. And on the other hand, it helps us remember that the Father deserves our trust and loyalty even when our circumstances are miserable, even when we are persecuted, and even when we are threatened with death.

In addition to encouraging believers to have the mindset of humility, Paul emphasized the value of optimism, that is, a positive and hopeful outlook on life.

Optimism

In the modern world, it's not uncommon to hear people speak of optimism as foolish. They think optimists don't grapple with the real world, but simply pretend that things are better than they are. But Paul's optimism wasn't like this. His optimism was realistic. He didn't ignore the troubles of life. In fact, he felt them deeply. At its heart, Paul's optimism was a conscious decision to focus his attention on those things that were truly good, while he grappled with those things that were painful and discouraging. His optimism was born out of his faith in God's provision and blessings in the present world, and out of his hope for the full redemption and rewards that God will give us in the future.

For example, during his suffering in prison, insincere preachers began preaching the gospel as a way to hurt Paul. But rather than becoming bitter and angry, Paul chose to focus on the blessing that Christ was being preached, even though these preachers had evil motives. Listen to his account in Philippians 1:17-18:

The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice (Philippians 1:17-18).

Paul's emotional state was complex. On the one hand, he acknowledged that he was suffering. But on the other hand, he also chose to focus on the good things that were true. And this choice helped him endure the sufferings of prison and his mistreatment at the hands of these preachers. And Paul's advice to the church in Philippians 4:6-8 was consistent with this attitude. Consider his words there:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is

lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Philippians 4:6-8).

Thinking optimistically by focusing on what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and praiseworthy is a means of calling upon God to guard our hearts and minds. And therefore, it is also a means of persevering.

Finally, in addition to humility and optimism, Paul also taught that having the mindset of joy is a great help in Christian perseverance.

Joy

For one thing, Paul himself concentrated on finding joy to persevere through his distressing circumstances. And by his example, he encouraged the believers in Philippi to do so as well. For instance, in Philippians 1:18-20, Paul spoke of his joy in this way:

I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that ... Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death (Philippians 1:18-20).

Paul knew that he might be put to death. Yet, rather than focusing on the negative aspects of his death, he focused on the positive outcome his death would bring. And as a result, he was able to rejoice. Notice that in this case, Paul's joy was not a naïve denial of pain and suffering. On the contrary, we've seen there was much sadness and suffering mixed into his feelings. But despite his troubles, Paul was able to look at the good things God had promised and to rejoice over them. He could think about honoring Christ through a courageous death and be satisfied — even pleased — at Christ's exaltation. And that satisfaction and pleasure constituted his joy. Paul did not feel *only* joy, but he did feel *true* joy. And this joy provided him with a desire to press onward, and gave purpose to his suffering. Beyond this, Paul explicitly encouraged his friends in Philippi to adopt a similar attitude, so that their joy would help them persevere as well. Listen to his advice to them in Philippians 4:4-6:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice... The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything (Philippians 4:4-6).

Paul encouraged the Philippians to be joyful because the Lord was near, whether as their help in time of need, or as the King who would return to bring his reign of peace to all the earth. In either case, joy would motivate and enable the Philippians to fend off anxiety. And therefore, it would prepare them to persevere until the Lord's return.

By patterning our mindset after Paul's, by focusing on humility and optimism and joy, we can strengthen ourselves against anxiety and despair. It's inevitable that hardship will come, and that we will suffer — sometimes greatly. So, when we do, we need to

remember Paul's example and advice. We need to temper our suffering with a humble spirit, and to remain hopeful by thinking about the many good things we have in this life and the next. And we need to overcome the troubles of our condition by making a conscious decision to rejoice over those things in our lives that are still worthy of joy. In these ways, we can be strengthened by the Lord to persevere.

Now that we've explored the modern application of what Paul wrote about the nature and mindset of perseverance, we're ready to turn to our third concern: the church's ministry of perseverance. How do our actions help one another persevere in Christ?

MINISTRY OF PERSEVERANCE

Paul recognized that the Philippians had helped him persevere at many stages of his ministry, including his present imprisonment. At different times they had supported him financially and emotionally. And they had even sent Epaphroditus to minister to him in prison. We can summarize the Philippians' ministry to Paul in terms of material support, encouragement, and physical presence. In each of these ways, the Philippians bolstered Paul's spirits, and empowered him to greater perseverance. For instance, listen to Paul's heartfelt words in Philippians 4:13-14:

I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble (Philippians 4:13-14).

In some ways, these simple verses represent the heart of the Philippians' ministry to Paul, and of his feelings about them. Before Epaphroditus had come bearing the Philippians' gift to Paul, the apostle had been drawing strength from the Lord, but he had not had much moral support from others. As a result, his optimism and his joy had faded. He was persevering, but it was hard work. The Philippians' gift provided material support that somewhat alleviated his suffering, so that persevering became a bit easier. And their concern for him, expressed through the gift and the sending of Epaphroditus, provided encouragement and helped him recover his optimism and joy. And, of course, the physical presence of Epaphroditus not only ministered to Paul's physical needs, but also provided him with companionship and friendship to help him persevere all the more. And so, it was with the most heartfelt thanks that Paul told the Philippians, "It was kind of you to share my trouble." Paul deeply appreciated their ministry, and it gave him great comfort and joy to count them as his friends. Through the Philippians' encouragement and help, Paul was able to persevere by keeping his faith strong and by living in ways that honored Christ.

And Paul intended his ministry to help the Philippians persevere through their own trials as well. As we read in Philippians 1:3, 4, he prayed for them. He also wrote his epistle to teach them how to persevere. And he sent Epaphroditus back to Philippi to minister to them, probably as a leader in the church.

It is in church where we encourage one another to persevere. I think church is relationship. I think being [the] church we capture more of what God wants us to be in relationship with one another and also corporately in our relationship with him as a people towards God. God is the one who has always gathered people around him. So ultimately, church is for the glory of God... It is God's design for us, for his glory and for our good.

— Rev. C.S. Tang

In the modern church, we can learn much from the way the Philippians ministered to Paul by providing material support. There are multitudes of Christians throughout the world who have great material needs. Some are so poor that finding food and clothing is a constant challenge. Others are oppressed by evil people in the world. Some are even sold into slavery and severely abused. And of course, there are many other real but less dramatic material needs felt by Christians in every part of the world. And one way we can minister to these believers, one way we can give them hope and help them persevere, is by meeting their material needs.

We can also learn a great deal from the way the Philippians ministered to Paul through their love and encouragement. They didn't just send money to Paul; they also sent their love. Through Epaphroditus, they communicated to Paul that they were thinking about him, and that he was in their hearts just as they were in his. Modern Christians also need encouragement to persevere. We can offer words of encouragement in church, or over the telephone, or through a letter or a messenger, or in many other ways. But the point is that we should go out of our way to let people know that we love them and that they are not forgotten.

Beyond this, just as the Philippians sent Epaphroditus to minister to Paul, we can spend time with people in person. We can simply sit beside them, be with them, and help them with their physical needs. Even in the church, many people are lonely, many need a friend. And many others need help with simple things like shopping and cleaning or caring for themselves and their families. Being physically present with believers is another good way to help them persevere.

We can also learn much from the ways Paul ministered to the Philippians. No matter who we are or where we are, we can always pray, so that God himself will give other believers strength to persevere. We can also teach fellow Christians how to persevere through sound doctrine and practical advice. And, if we are in positions of authority in the church, we can lead the church in ways that encourage, that communicate by word and deed.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've explored Paul's epistle to the Philippians by focusing on the background that forms the historical and social context of the letter, the structure and content of the letter itself, and the modern application of this letter to our lives today.

Paul's epistle to the Philippians has many rich and wonderful truths to teach us about standing firm in our Christian faith during times of suffering and distress. As we submit ourselves to Paul's teachings, we'll realize how utterly important perseverance is. We'll also be greatly encouraged to dedicate ourselves to this awesome task. And most importantly, as we succeed in our own perseverance by following Paul's teachings, and as we help others to persevere as well, we'll bring glory and honor to our exalted Lord Jesus Christ.

CONTRIBUTORS

The Very Rev. Dr. Reggie M. Kidd (Host) is Dean of the Cathedral Church of Saint Luke and Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).

Rev. Larry Cockrell is Senior Pastor of Household of Faith Church and faculty member of Birmingham Theological Seminary.

Dr. Benjamin Gladd is Associate Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary.

Dr. Jonathan Harris is a New Testament professor at Birmingham Theological Seminary.

Dr. Dan Lacich is Lead Pastor at Oviedo City Church in Oviedo, FL.

Dr. Sean McDonough is Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Andy Miller III is Vice President of Academic Affairs and Assistant Professor of Historical Theology at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

Rev. Timothy Mountfort is Academic Dean at Western China Covenant Theological Seminary.

Pastor Johnson Oni is the Lead Pastor and founder of Flowing Grace Ministries.

Dr. Gregory R. Perry is Vice President for Strategic Projects at Third Millennium Ministries, President of Thirdmill Seminary, and former Associate Professor of New Testament and Director of City Ministry Initiative at Covenant Theological Seminary.

Rev. C.S. Tang is Senior Pastor of Cornerstone Presbyterian Church in Sydney, Australia and a director of City to City Australia.

GLOSSARY

agapētos – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “beloved”; commonly used by the apostle Paul to describe his closest coworkers and dearest friends

asceticism – The improper avoidance of physical pleasure

Caesarea Maritima – Capital city of the Roman province of Judea on the coast of Samaria where Paul was imprisoned after his trial in Jerusalem; also known as “Caesarea by the Sea”

Christ hymn – The apostle Paul’s words in Philippians 2:6-11 that may have been from an existing hymn or that Paul may have written specifically for the Philippians; extolled Jesus’ humility and called believers to follow Christ’s example

circumcision – The Jewish tradition of excising the foreskin of the male penis instituted by God as a sign and seal for his covenant people in Genesis 17:10-14

Epaphras – Fellow laborer with the apostle Paul and founder of the church in Colossae who was sent by the churches of the Lycus Valley to minister to Paul in prison

Epaphroditus – Messenger sent from the Philippians to deliver gifts to Paul and to minister to him in prison; while with Paul, he became seriously ill but recovered and was sent back to Philippi, most likely carrying Paul’s letter to the Philippians

Euodia – Woman from Philippi who had worked closely with Paul and was entreated by Paul to end her conflict with Syntyche, another worker in the church (Philippians 4:2)

exaltation – In theology, the period of Jesus’ life that began with his resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, and continues now in his rule over creation; Christ’s resumption of his glorious form as the ruler of the universe

Gentile – Non-Jewish person

humiliation – In theology, the period of Jesus’ earthly life, that began with his conception in Mary’s womb and extended to his death on the cross; Christ’s willingness to put aside his divine glory in order to take the form of a human being

incarnation – Term that refers to Jesus’ permanent assumption of a human nature

isos – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “equal”

Judaizers – False teachers in the early Christian church who tried to force Gentile believers to adhere to Jewish traditions that were contrary to the Christian faith

Luke – Author of the third gospel and the book of Acts; a Gentile convert to Christianity and one of Paul’s co-workers; believed to have been a physician

Lycus Valley – An area defined by the Lycus River in the ancient Roman province of Asia Minor where Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea were located

Lydia – Merchant woman from Philippi; first known convert to the Christian faith in Europe

Macedonia – Name of an ancient Roman province located in and to the north of present-day Greece; region where Paul was told in a vision to go and share the gospel during his second missionary journey

morphē – Greek word (transliteration) meaning "form" or "outward shape"

Onesimus – Philemon's run-away slave from Colossae who appealed to the apostle Paul while Paul was in prison and who became very dear to Paul

pepoitha – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "to trust" or "to be persuaded"

Philemon – One of Paul's close friends from Colossae who labored alongside Paul in gospel ministry; master of the run-away slave Onesimus

Philippi – Important city in the Roman province of Macedonia, located on the main road that connected Rome to the eastern provinces; city where Paul planted a church during his second missionary journey

Syntyche – Woman from Philippi who had worked closely with Paul and was entreated by Paul to end her conflict with Euodia, another worker in the church (Philippians 4:2)

Timothy – Paul's young protégé and companion on his second missionary journey who brought Paul news from the church in Thessalonica; mentioned, along with Silas, as coauthor of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians

Tychicus – One of Paul's close friends from Asia Minor who accompanied Paul during part of his missionary journeys and who brought messages to and from Paul during Paul's imprisonment

Via Egnatia – The main road built by the Romans in the second century BC that connected the city of Rome to the eastern provinces of Illyricum, Macedonia, and Thrace (approx. 695 miles long)