

Philippians

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Myrtlefield House Study Notes



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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the English Revised Version (1885) or from the *King James Version*. Sometimes Dr Gooding gives his own translations or paraphrases.

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Preface

The biblical authors used the literary conventions of their day to convey their message. These included structures and patterns that are less obvious to us in an age of typesetting and digital display. David Gooding has brought his considerable experience of reading and teaching ancient literature to bear on the biblical text, and these study notes represent his thinking about the structure, patterns and thought-flow of Philippians. He has often said to groups of Bible students, 'When it comes to Bible study, there is structure, pattern and thought-flow, and the greatest of these is thought-flow. Here are the thoughts of God expressed. Our job is to follow the thought-flow'. The most important thing to grasp is the way the author develops his argument or message, and discovering the structure and patterns that the text exhibits should always be to that end.

The study notes have been developed over a number of years and were distributed at talks he gave in various places publicly and privately. Audio recordings and transcripts of some of these talks are available for free download from myrtlefieldhouse.com.

These study notes are not meant to be the last word on Philippians, and may not cover the entire book. They are offered publicly to help Bible students, preachers and teachers to stimulate further thinking about the Epistle, so that its message may be understood.

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Preliminary Survey

I. How the Divine Persons Are Presented

- A. God the worker: he initiates and completes the work of salvation in us (1:6); he works in us the willing and the doing of his good pleasure (2:13)
 - B. Christ the voluntary slave (2:7–9)
 - C. The Holy Spirit: the inspirer and protector of our witness (1:19); the enabler of our worship (3:3)
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II. How Salvation is Presented

- A. God initiates and completes the work of salvation (1:6); he grants us to believe in Christ and to suffer for him (1:29). He works in the believer the willing and the doing of his good pleasure (2:13).
 - B. Justification is not by works but by faith in Christ (3:9); present spiritual progress and ultimate perfection are by union with and conformity to Christ (3:10–11). Christ begins the process by taking hold of us (3:12). To die is to be immediately with Christ (1:23); when the Saviour comes he will transform our bodies (3:20–21).
 - C. But we have to work out our salvation (2:12) and strive towards the attainment of ultimate perfection (2:12–14).
 - D. And one of the chief evidences of our salvation is our vigorous participation in the spread of the gospel and our willingness to suffer for it and for Christ (1:7; 27–29).
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III. The Main Topic of the Epistle: Fellowship in the Work of the Gospel

The theme is developed through the epistle in the following way:

Chapter 1: Paul's tactics in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. The Philippians' involvement with him in this defence and in striving for the faith of the gospel.

Chapter 2: But striving for the faith of the gospel must be done in the Spirit and with the attitude of our great example, Christ.

Chapter 3: To follow Christ as example in our service necessitates knowing him as Saviour, both initially in justification, and thereafter in constant striving towards perfection in union with him.

Chapter 4: Striving effectively for the spread of the gospel will be facilitated by our learning the secrets of enjoying the peace of God amid the practical problems of life and service.

IV. Causes for Joy and Rejoicing

- A. The evidence of salvation in one's converts (1:4)
- B. The joy that Christ is preached, and that one's defence of the gospel shall be successful (1:18–20)
- C. The joy of sacrificial service (2:17–18)
- D. Joy in the Lord and the excellence of knowing him (3:1)
- E. Joy in the Lord and in his nearness (4:4–5)

Chapter One

Confidence in Contending for the Gospel

In striving for the faith of the gospel (v. 27) and in the battle for the defence and confirmation of the gospel (v. 7), the following are of supreme importance: confidence (vv. 6, 14, 19, 25); boldness (vv. 14, 20); fearlessness (vv. 14, 28).

I. Paul's Confidence in the Philippians' Final Salvation

1:1-11

How could one joyfully contend for the truth of the gospel if one could never be sure of the salvation of the converts it produced? Paul argues that it is right for him to be sure of the Philippians' final salvation because their fellowship in the gospel is evidence that God has begun a good work in them; and if God has begun the good work in them he will most certainly complete it unto the day of Jesus Christ. On these grounds he prays for the development and perfecting of their Christian perception, character and works.

II. Paul's Confidence in His Own Practical Salvation

1:12-16

Paul is thinking of the success of his defence of the gospel. His imprisonment has gained publicity for Christ and has encouraged some to speak the gospel boldly. Others are preaching Christ with the ulterior motive of making trouble for Paul. If Paul reacted in selfish anger against them, instead of rejoicing that Christ is being preached, he would ruin the case for the gospel and be made to look and feel ashamed. But he is confident that he will be saved from falling into this trap and from letting Christ down, and that for two reasons:

- A. For him to live is Christ, not ease or selfish interests; and therefore if Christ is preached, no matter what affliction it unjustly brings him, he can and will rejoice and not retaliate;
- B. If the affliction leads to his death, to die will be gain and he will have no cause for feeling injured or resentful.

He would, in fact, prefer to die; but since the Philippians' spiritual progress requires his presence he is prepared to waive his personal preference, and is sure that he will be released and able to visit them again.

III. The Philippians' Confidence in Their Own Salvation

1:27-29

Paul exhorts the Philippians to stand fast and contend for the gospel in spite of opposition. Unity is all important; so is fearlessness in the face of persecution. But how will they contend fearlessly for the faith of the gospel, if they are not sure they are saved themselves? So Paul points out that their suffering for Christ is a God-sent indication that they have been, and will be saved.

Chapter Two

Joy in Christ-Like Unselfish Humility, Sacrifice and Service

The Philippians cannot properly contend for the gospel of Christ and commend it to others, if they attempt to do so in a spirit that is contrary to the spirit and attitude of Christ himself. In this chapter, therefore, Paul appeals to the Philippians to follow the example of Christ in their life and work; just as he, Timothy and Epaphroditus are doing in their work for the Philippians.

I. The Appeal to the Philippians to Adopt the Mind of Christ

2:1-18

A. The grounds of the appeal (2:1):

The appeal that Christ makes to the believer's heart; the motivating power of love; the reality of partnership with and in the Holy Spirit; the power of compassion.

B. Some detailed objectives of the appeal (2:2-4):

Unity of mind, affection, heart, outlook; renunciation of competition, party-spirit, and self-glorification; humble and sincere regard for others as more important than oneself; no selfish concentration simply on one's own interests and work, but unselfish concern for the interests and work of others also.

C. The self-emptying service, self-humbling obedience and the exaltation of Christ Jesus (2:6-11):

In Isaiah 45:23-24 God declares that every knee shall bow to him and confess that in him alone is righteousness and strength. The question arises: what is this God like, who demands that all shall bow the knee to him? In exalting Jesus and ordaining that in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Yahweh), the Father is showing what that Godhead is like which compels universal worship and submission. It is important therefore to notice that the self-emptying service and the self-humbling obedience of Christ Jesus are said in these verses to be the expression of the mind of one who always was God, and never ceased to be God, even though his service involved him in becoming man, and that permanently.

D. The appeal for the Philippians' obedience, sacrifice and service (2:12-18):

As children of God, the Philippians are to show to this perverse world what their Father is like, and what they think of him; so that men may come to believe in him. To do this, they must obey God in un murmuring, un rebellious behaviour, as Christ did; and by offering to God joyful, self-sacrificing service, as Christ did. They are able to live like this, for salvation means that God is working in them both the willingness and the power to do his purpose and pleasure. They are, therefore, to co-operate with God in the working out of this salvation. Paul is joyfully prepared, unselfishly like Christ, to pour out his life in order to help the Philippians to render their sacrifice to God, so that in the day when accounts must be rendered, he has something solid to show for his work for Christ.

II. Timothy's Expression of the Mind of Christ

2:19-24

Shown in:

- A. His genuine, unselfish care for other people's interests, and
- B. His loyal service in the gospel with Paul, as a son with a father.

III. Epaphroditus' Expression of the Mind of Christ

2:25-30

Shown by his willingness to go so far as to risk his life for the work of Christ in the humble task of carrying the Philippians' gift to Paul. As all will honour Christ one day for his self-sacrifice, so in a lesser sense the church is to honour and value such servants as Epaphroditus.

Chapter Three

Safety in the Pursuit of Perfection

If the Philippians are going to exhibit the mind of Christ in their lives and service, it will only be as they are progressively conformed to Christ. In this chapter, therefore, Christ is presented, not as an example (as in ch. 2), but as the Saviour in whom, and in union with whom, believers find justification, present progressive experience of his resurrection-power and of sharing his sufferings; and ultimate moral, spiritual and physical perfection. But there are dangers along the road to spiritual perfection, and the Philippians will need to avoid them.

I. A False Way Described and Contrasted with the True

3:1-3

- A. The false: dogs, evil workers, concision.
- B. The true: those who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

The contrast is not between atheists and believers, or between immoral people and chaste; but between those who seek salvation through faith in racial privilege, self-effort and religious rituals and disciplines, and those who seek salvation solely by faith in Christ, and by union with him.

II. The Only True Way, Exemplified in Paul

3:4-14

- A. Initial and final acceptance with God (4-9).

This is solely on the ground of being in Christ, and possessing a righteousness received through faith in Christ. Faith in Christ means the abandonment of faith in all other supposed merits and attainments. The temptation of the Philippians would be to compromise their faith in Christ by subsequently submitting to the teaching that circumcision (or other such ceremonies) and law-keeping are, after all, necessary for acceptance with God.

- B. Progress towards the goal of perfection (10-12).

The goal is knowing Christ fully; to take hold of that for which Christ has taken hold of us; to attain to (not the event of, but the state of) the resurrection from among the dead, (i.e. complete moral and spiritual conformity to the risen Christ, which shall be accomplished in the believer at the coming of Christ); the prize of the 'calling above', (i.e. that glorious goal to which God has called us in Christ). Progress toward the goal is by experiencing the power of Christ's resurrection, which enables us to share his sufferings; and by being progressively conformed to his death (the form of his death was that of the cross).

The temptation of the Philippians would be to think they could be Christians and yet deliberately avoid suffering with Christ; to attempt to make progress by submitting to the 'basic principles of the world, religious ordinances and disciplines, vain human philosophies', etc. (cf. Col 2:8, 20-23); by 'setting their minds on things on the earth, instead of recognising themselves as crucified and risen with Christ and setting their minds on things above' (cf. Col 2:11-13, 20-23; 3:1-4).

- C. Attitude to present attainments (3:13-16).

Refusal to settle down in false contentment with present attainments, and an unrelenting pursuit of the perfection that will always lie beyond us until the Lord comes. The temptation of the Philippians would be to imagine that this kind of perfection (as distinct from true Christian maturity) is attainable in this life, and then to imagine that they had already attained it.

III. A False Way Described and Contrasted with the True**3:17-21**

- A. The false: people who are enemies of the basic principles of salvation and true spiritual progress, and the principle of the cross. They will not accept that the flesh is under God's judgment, that salvation is only through being crucified and raised with Christ. For them, salvation is a form of self-improvement which is simultaneously a form of self-indulgence. Their outlook is that of men to whom this world is all. Their end is not salvation, but perdition.
- B. The true: our true community and home is not of this world, but in heaven. Our present body has been spoiled by sin. We wait for the Saviour from heaven to complete our redemption and conform our bodies to the body of his glory.

Chapter Four

Peace Amid the Practicalities of Life and Service

Progressive spiritual conformity to the risen Christ and concentration on our heavenly calling will not relieve us of the necessity of facing the practical necessities of life in this world. Indeed, genuine involvement in the spread of the gospel will make us more, and not less, aware of the practical problems.

In this chapter, therefore, Paul points the way to peace amid life's difficulties and the problems of evangelism.

I. How to Help When Christian Workers Fall Out 4:1-3

- A. The workers concerned should remember that both of them are in and under the same Lord.
- B. Other Christian workers should not abandon them, but remember their former labours and help them.
- C. However important our work for the Lord is, we should keep things in proportion by remembering that, much more important than our work (over which we may disagree) is the fact that our names are in the Book of Life (cf. Luke 10:20).

II. How to Experience the Peace of God 4:4-7

- A. Rejoice in the Lord, in what he is and has done, and in his providence. Filling the mind with Christ will help us to see all other things in their true proportions.
- B. Remember the Lord is at hand: we can therefore afford to show reasonableness even towards the unreasonable.
- C. Make requests known to God, with thanksgiving.

III. How to Cultivate the Presence of the God of Peace 4:8-9

- A. Fill the mind with positively good things.
- B. Practise what the apostles taught, and imitate their example.

IV. How to React to Financial Support in the Lord's Work 4:10-20

- A. Be grateful for financial support.
- B. But learn how to be independent and content with little or none.
- C. Encourage believers to support the Lord's work by their gifts, because
 - 1. Their gifts will earn reward for them when the Lord comes, and
 - 2. Their gifts are a sacrifice that delights God's heart.
- D. Teach believers that God will never be in their debt.

V. Final salutations 4:21-23

Be conscious of the worldwide fellowship of the saints, and of the constant grace of Christ.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.