

Introduction

Ask a few dozen Christians what their favorite book of the Bible is and there is a good chance Philippians will come out on top. There is a good reason for this. In Philippians we find a warm-hearted apostle Paul writing with genuine affection to his friends in Philippi. While there are warnings and encouragements, there is no major crisis. The letter is full of joy. In large part, Paul is writing to say thank you for the financial gift brought to him by Epaphroditus.

The letter also reads like the greatest hits of Paul's sayings. There may be more memorable statements in Philippians than in any other New Testament book:

For me, to live is Christ to die is gain.

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Why did Paul write Philippians? What is the central theme of the letter? There are certainly some substantive issues that Paul addresses. He is very concerned about unity in the church and, in a break from his normal writing, mentions two women by name, strongly encouraging them to agree with each other in the Lord (4:2). Unity of the body is what is worrying Paul.

The apostle is also concerned about opponents to the gospel. He expresses concern, several times in this letter, that his friends at Philippi might capitulate to false teaching. The church, at some level, is under attack. Since Paul is absent he wants to warn his friends of the impending danger.

It is also a letter that reflects Paul's imprisonment and hope in the return of Christ. With six references to the return of Christ and the victory this implies, Paul is looking forward to the *day of Christ* (2:16). It is a letter that anticipates *the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus* (3:14).

Philippians is also a letter filled with joy. Sixteen times Paul will use the word *joy* or *rejoice*. Some commentators see joy as the controlling theme of the letter. Indeed, one of

the reasons that Philippians is such a popular New Testament letter is because it is so positive and joy filled.

Finally, at the end of the letter, Paul gets to the issue of thanking the church at Philippi for their financial gift. This gift was crucial to his sustenance while in prison. It was Epaphroditus that brought this gift to the imprisoned apostle and Paul is now sending Epaphroditus back to the church. The letter is full of first century church housekeeping.

It may be best, however, to see Philippians as a wandering letter that Paul writes to his friends covering several themes but lacking in one central purpose. The letter is not so much argumentative as pastoral. The tone is warm, joy filled, and contains several warning and encouragements from their founding pastor.

Where is Paul writing from? One thing is certain in the letter to the Philippians. Paul is writing from prison (1:13). Along with Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon, Philippians was most likely written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome. While some objections have been raised to this view, the evidence for this location is impressive. The terms *praetorian guard* (1:13) and *Caesar's household* (4:22) most naturally point to Rome. The particulars of Paul's imprisonment as recorded in Acts harmonize well with those in Philippians.

What about the church at Philippi? The Philippian church was the first church that Paul founded in Europe. It was on the second missionary journey that the apostle met Lydia and a group of women worshipping by the river (Acts 16:11-15). Lydia and her family responded to the gospel and the church was born. Though the initial converts were Jews or Jewish proselytes, Gentiles made up the majority of the congregation.

Taking its name from the father of Alexander the Great, Philip of Macedon, Philippi was a significant Roman colony in eastern Macedonia (present day eastern Greece). Situated on the important Roman road know as the Via Egnatia, Philippi was of strategic influence. According to Luke, Philippi was the leading city of that district of Macedonia (Acts 16:12).

Paul's relationship with the church at Philippi was warm and loving. Of all the New Testament churches, Philippi may be the one with which Paul enjoyed his closest friendship. It is to this body that Paul writes a wonderful and thought provoking letter. This is a letter full of intricate (and elusive) details, sharp warnings and heartfelt thanks. A pastor, who has time to think while in prison, writing to his beloved friends.

As you read and study Philippians during the next ten weeks always keep in mind the context of this letter and the setting in which it was received. The Greco-Roman world of the New Testament period was primarily an oral culture. Only about fifteen percent of the population could read and write. This letter would have been first of all heard as it was read to the gathered congregation at Philippi. There was no chance to get the CD, pick up the study guide or the latest Bible translation. We, however, have a great privilege. We can grab a cup of coffee, find a quiet place, and in fifteen or twenty minutes read and contemplate the entire letter. Do this and do it often.

As you read always ask the three basic questions of Bible study.

1. What does it say?
2. What does it mean?
3. How can I apply this to my life?

May God be gloried as SBCC spends the next ten weeks in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Sermon Notes. . .

Study One

The Thankful Apostle

Philippians 1:1-11

I thank my God . . . (1:3) and so begins Paul's pastoral letter to the believers at Philippi. This imprisoned and chained church planter who had suffered numerous hardships, both physical and emotional, was somehow able to maintain a life characterized by thankfulness. In this brief and remarkable New Testament letter we will be reminded of attitudes that go hand in hand with a relationship with Jesus Christ. Throughout this letter we will see that when a Christian experiences God's grace and peace there is a corresponding sense of gratitude and joy (cf. 4:4, 6). There is also a pattern in the Christian life that when one is thankful and joyful, prayer is never far from our lips. In another context Paul writes to the saints at Thessalonica:



Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this [all three!] is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

In these opening eleven verses we find these three essential ingredients to living the Christian life — thanks, joy and prayer.

As we begin our ten-week study in the book of Philippians take the time to read all four chapters in one sitting. Read slowly. It won't take long. Make note of every time the words *joy* or *rejoice* come up and jot down the reference (*rejoice* is the verbal form of *joy*). At the same time make note of any time you notice Paul being thankful and any time he mentions prayer. Ponder and share with your group how this triad of *thanks*, *joy*, and *prayer*, finds expression in this letter.

Thanks

Joy

Prayer

How do you see these attitudes of *thanks, joy* and *prayer* being manifested in your life? What are the things in your life that create obstacles to *thanks, joy* and *prayer*?

In your eagerness to dig into these first eleven verses of Philippians it may be a temptation to quickly skip Paul's introductory words in verses 1-2. Don't!

How does Paul describe himself and Timothy in vs. 1? Why?

One of the key New Testament words used to describe Christians is the title *saint*. Here in verse 1, Paul addresses the *saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi*. The Greek word *hagios* is used. As a noun it is translated *saint* and as an adjective it is translated *holy*. What comes to mind when you hear the word *saint*? What does it mean to call a Christian a saint? How are you living out the title *saint* in you home, office, neighborhood and school?

What is the relationship between being called a *saint* and being *in Jesus Christ*?

Grace and *peace* (vs. 2) are much more than simply a polite way to start a letter. In these two words we find a key to Paul's vision of salvation and the Christian life. Consider the observation of Gordon Fee.

The sum total of God's activity toward his human creatures is found in the word *grace*; God has given himself to his people bountifully and mercifully in Christ. Nothing is deserved, nothing can be achieved. The sum total of those benefits as they are experienced by the recipients of God's grace is *peace*, God's shalom, both now and to come. The latter flows out of the former, and both together flow from *God our Father* and were made effective in our human history through *the Lord Jesus Christ*. (Fee, p. 43)

Knowing God's grace leads to experiencing God's peace. Give some thought as to how God's loving forgiveness and acceptance of you has brought you internal peace. Let Homer Kent's definition of peace stimulate your thoughts. Add to what he says and write your own definition of how you personally have experienced the peace of God in your life.

[Peace is] the inner assurance and tranquility that God ministers to the hearts of believers and that keeps them spiritually confident and content even in the midst of turmoil. (Kent, p. 104)

In Philippians 1:3-8 Paul says a great deal about his emotional attachment to the believers in Philippi. These six verses are loaded with statements that describe how the apostle “feels” about his friends. Look for words that describe this relationship and list them. What type of picture do these words and concepts draw of how Paul feels about his brothers and sisters in Philippi?

In 1:7 Paul says, *It is right for me to feel this way about you . . .* Why is it *right* to feel this way? What seems to be the foundation for Paul’s affection for the Philippians?

When we see how Paul feels about the believers in 1:3-8 it should cause us to consider how we feel about those in our own body of believers at SBCC. Describe your relationship with others at SBCC. Think of the body as a whole including those you know well, casually, and hardly at all. Does this passage give you insight into how to deepen your relationships at SBCC?

What can you learn from Paul about our emotional relationships with each other? Is there a correct feeling we should have toward others in our church?

Consider the phrase in 1:8, *the affection of Christ Jesus*. What does this mean? How does this help you understand the relationship Christians enjoy with each other?

It is not uncommon for Christians to be insecure about their salvation. Paul, however, expresses great confidence in 1:6 about the completed salvation of those in Philippi. What is the basis of the believer’s confidence in God? How does verse 6 help you to be spiritually confident?

Everyone's spiritual temperature vacillates. Ponder the statement below.

Salvation would be a wretchedly unsure thing if it had no other foundation than my having chosen Christ. The human will blows hot and cold, is firm and unstable by fits and starts, it offers no security or tenure. But it is the will of God that is the ground of salvation. No-one would be saved had not the Lord been moved by his own spontaneous and unexplained love to choose his people before the world was, and, at the decisive moment, to open our hearts to hear, understand and accept "the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation" (Ephesians 1:13). This, then, is assurance: God has willed my salvation. (Motyer, p. 44)

How does this statement help you when the winds of your own Christian life blow "hot and cold"?

In 1:9-11 we find Paul's prayer for the spiritual growth of the Philippians. Paul was passionate for the spiritual development of Christians and hence all of his recorded prayers concern themselves with spiritual needs. Try and outline this brief pray. What specifically is Paul praying for the Philippians?

This prayer describes true spiritual growth. Commenting on this prayer, Gordon Fee points out that "the life of the Christian is a life of programmed growth." (Fee, p. 53) Essential to this spiritual growth is spiritual knowledge.

The word translated *knowledge* (*epignosis*) occurs twenty times in the New Testament, always referring to knowledge of the things of God, religious, spiritual, theological knowledge. Often it has the idea of seeing right to the heart of the matter, grasping something as it really is, as when Paul speaks of the law bringing "*knowledge of sin*." . . . We grow in proportion to what we know. Without knowledge of salvation there can be no progress to maturity. If we do not know the Lord, how can we love him? And the more we know of him, the more we shall love him. . . . Ignorance is a root cause of stunted growth. (Fee, p. 57)

How have you seen this prayer for a growth in knowledge of God be answered in your life? What are some specific areas where you would like to see your knowledge of God grow? What are some areas where your knowledge of God has grown?

Paul's letters often contain his prayers for believers. Compare this selection of his prayers with the prayer here in Philippians 1:9-11. What common themes do you see? What exact words are duplicated?

Ephesians 1:16-18

Ephesians 3:14-19

Colossians 1:9-12

Think about your own prayers and how you pray for friends, family, fellow SBCC members. Are your prayers like Paul's? What do you learn about your pattern of prayer from Philippians 1:9-11?

Sermon Notes. . .

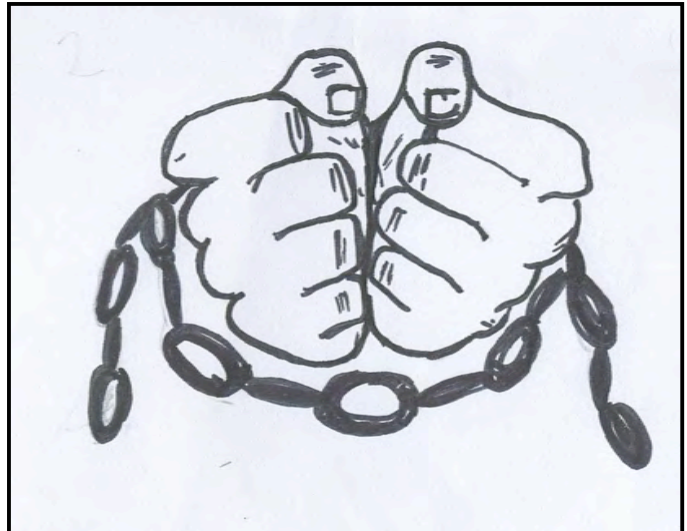
Study Two

The Defining Relationship

Philippians 1:12-26

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 1:21

The church at Philippi eagerly awaited news from the apostle Paul as to his circumstances and well being during his imprisonment. Was he being mistreated? Would he soon be executed? What was his state of mind? How had his faith been affected by his dire circumstances? What could they do to help? The verses in this study are a window not only into Paul's experience in prison, but into his mind and spiritual responses. While Philippians 1:12-26 reads somewhat like a personal diary, it also is an encouraging example of true



Christian living in a difficult situation. As such, these verses serve as a model for guiding Christians today in navigating the ups and downs of life. Through all of Paul's ruminations in these verses one truth rings clearly. It is the believer's relationship with Jesus Christ that should shape his responses to the circumstances of life.

Read Philippians 1:12-26. This is an intensely personal and self-reflective portion of Scripture. One commentator points out that, "There is nothing else quite like this passage in Paul's extant letters." (Fee, p. 57) Make note of the prolific use in these verses of "I" or "me." If you are given to underlining your Bible highlight the abundant use of these two words. As you do so, keep in mind this simple outline. Jot down any preliminary thoughts or questions you have of the text.

Paul reflects on the past, 1:12.

Paul considers his present circumstances, 1:13-18.

Paul ponders his future, 1:19-26

Paul is in prison as he writes to his friends in Philippi. While scholarly opinion is somewhat divided on which of Paul's imprisonments this is, in this study we are adopting the majority position that he is in Rome. He is being guarded by the *palace guard* (v.13), which is a reference to a select group of the emperor's elite troops.

The *praetorian guard* was originally composed of some ten thousand handpicked soldiers. It had been established by Caesar Augustus, who was emperor at the time of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:1). These men were dispersed strategically throughout the city of Rome to keep the general peace and especially to protect the emperor. . . . Members of the *praetorian guard* served for twelve years, after which they were granted the highest honors and privileges, including a very generous severance pay. (MacArthur, p. 59)

Consider vs. 12-14. Is Paul just an optimistic person, or does he have a view of how God works in life and painful circumstances that we can learn from? What precisely is the lesson that we can learn from Paul's attitude?

Now take this lesson and apply it to your life. What can you learn and how can you apply this God-drenched vision of life to the difficult situations you are currently facing?

Paul is suffering. Life is not going as planned. For a host of reasons, prison is not a fun place. Respond to and discuss the statement below.

[Paul] did not see his suffering as an act of divine forgetfulness ('Why did God let this happen to me?'), nor as a dismissal from service ('I was looking forward to years of usefulness, and look at me!'), nor as the work of Satan ('I am afraid the devil has had his way this time'), but as the place of duty, the setting of service, the task appointed. When the soldier came 'on duty' to guard Paul, did the apostle smile and secretly say to himself, 'But he doesn't know that I am here to guard him—for Christ?' (Motyer, p. 72)

Look again at vs. 15-18. Evidently in Paul's absence some leaders in the church at Philippi were preaching out of impure motives.¹ Why does Paul seem so unbothered by this turn of events in Philippi?

¹ "As far as one is able to gather from the text, none of the heralds are preaching a false doctrine. None of them, for example, is giving undue prominence to the observance of the law as a means of salvation. None of those referred to here in Phil. 1:15-18 is 'preaching a different gospel' (Gal. 1:6, cf. 5:1-6) or 'another

To get an accurate picture of Paul's spiritual thinking go back and re-read all of Philippians 1:1-30. Simply count how many times Paul mentions *Jesus, Jesus Christ, Christ Jesus, Lord, or Christ*. How many did you come up with in these brief 30 verses? What does this tell you?

In 1:19 the apostle gives two reasons why he is confident of his future *deliverance: your prayers and help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ*.¹ Paul often wrote to the churches asking for their prayers for his safety and guidance (Rom. 15:3-31, 2 Cor. 1:10-11, 2 Thess. 3:2, Philemon 22). How is it with your prayer life in your current season of life? Do you find your prayers are confident in God or more fearful of life circumstances? Why?

In one of the most famous statements in the New Testament Paul says, *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain* (v. 21). In the Greek text this sentence has no verb and literally reads, *to live Christ, to die gain*. When we study the Bible we have to ask, what does this mean and how can I apply it to my life? What is Paul getting at when he says, *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain*? Can you say this in your life? Why or why not?

Read Galatians 2:20 and Colossians 3:3-4. How do these verses help you understand Paul's statement in Philippians 1:21?

In Philippians 1:21-26 Paul seems to lapse into a discussion with himself that we get to listen in on!

Having raised the possibility of execution, Paul sets out to explain his desire for Christ to be glorified even if the verdict were to go against him. Picking up on the final words of verse 20, he avows that since Christ is the singular passion of his life, he wins in either case, whether released or executed! . . . Paul now begins a personal reflection on these two alternatives, whose point seems easy enough. If he had a real choice between the two, he would choose execution, for clear christological and eschatological reasons. But he gets there by a somewhat circuitous route. (Fee, p. 70-71)

Jesus' (2 Cor. 11:4). None of them is 'a dog' or 'an evil worker' (Phil. 3:2). But while all are proclaiming the true gospel, not all are actuated by pure motives." (Hendrickson, p. 71)

¹ The phrase in Philippians 1:19, *turn out for my deliverance* comes from the Old Testament book of Job. "He quotes directly from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), citing Job's reply to Zophar: 'This also will be my salvation' (Job 13:16). Job correctly understood that his terrible suffering was not God's punishment for sin. (MacArthur, p. 72)

Try to outline Paul's reasoning in vs. 21-26. Yes, it is a little convoluted but have fun with it.

What is the final outcome to Paul's reasoning? How did he get to this place?

Before ending this study take a deep breath and think through Philippians 1:12-26 again. Get the big picture. Where do you find it difficult to identify with Paul's thinking and attitudes? Why is this the case?

In what ways practically is Jesus the defining relationship of your life? How does this relationship shape your response to the circumstances of your life?

Study Three

United We Stand

Philippians 1:27-2:4

*... make my joy complete
by being like-minded,
having the same love,
being one in spirit and
purpose. 2:2*

Our study of Philippians now turns a critical corner. After discussing his own affairs and state of mind, Paul now turns the attention of his letter to the situation of the church at Philippi. His concern is how the believers at Philippi *conduct* themselves, meaning how are they to live out their faith in Philippi. While the church at Philippi was one of the more mature churches described in the New Testament, they were not without problems and potential pitfalls. Paul's words here are encouragements for spiritual integrity in living out the gospel in a hostile context. In our text for this study Paul is pleading for the believers to have a set of attitudes toward each other within the church that would help them withstand the pressures that come from outside the church in an antagonistic world. Paul is encouraging the believers to stand together in humble unity.



As with all the letters of the New Testament they were first read aloud to the churches. A believer did not go into a quiet corner with a cup of coffee, taking several translations and sit down for a quiet time of reading. Philippians was first spoken and heard. Voice inflection, intonation, and volume would have had a profound influence on how the message was received. Before answering the questions in this study try reading Philippians 1:27-2:4 aloud. Go into a room, close the door, and belt it out! Work to emphasize what you think Paul himself would have emphasized. See if this changes how you hear the letter.

Paul is concerned about Christian *conduct* (v. 27). He probably chooses this word because of its political nuance.

Pivotal to the present appeal is that instead of the ordinary Jewish metaphor “to walk [in the ways of the Lord],” Paul uses a political metaphor, which will appear again in 3:20-21. The people of Philippi took due pride in their having been made a Roman colony by Caesar Augustus, which brought the privileges and prestige of Roman citizenship. Paul now urges them to live out their citizenship (*conduct yourselves*) in

a manner—and the sentence begins with these emphatic words—*worthy of the gospel of Christ*. What is intended by the wordplay is something like “Live in the Roman colony of Philippi as worthy citizens of your heavenly homeland.” (Fee, p. 78)

What does it mean in our present day context to have our lifestyle measure up, or be, *worthy of the gospel of Christ*? To what lifestyle standards do you normally measure yourself?

Respond to the statement below. When you think of your life do you see yourself as part of a “third race”? How?

The New Testament writers and early Christian fathers wisely stressed the alien status of the believer within the world. Christians were citizens of a different commonwealth. They were neither Jews nor Greeks but a third race, and this world was not their home. (Thielman, p. 104)

According to v. 27 how is the Christian to *stand firm*?

Many of us try to face the difficulties of life and faith with individual resolve and strength. The emphasis in these verses is on corporate strength through unity, not individual resolve and strength. Think practically about what this means at SBCC and in your life in this body. What does it mean, or what should it mean, *to stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel*? Be practical as you answer.

Verse 28 makes it very clear the church was facing some type of opposition. Gordon Fee takes a guess as to the nature of this hostility.

Although we cannot be certain, the best guess is related to the fact that Philippi was a Roman military colony, whose populace for very good historical reasons were devoted to the emperor. In fact the cult of the emperor, whose “divine” titles were “lord” and “savior,” apparently flourished in Philippi, so that every public event also served as an opportunity to proclaim “Caesar is lord”—in very much the same way as “The Star-Spangled Banner” or “O Canada!” is sung at public events in North America. (Fee, p. 79)

The problem for the church is obvious. They worship another Lord and Savior (3:20). It is in this context that Paul encourages them to face the situation, *without being frightened in any way*.¹ Our context in Santa Barbara in 2007 is much different than that of first century Philippian believers. But, we too face opposition and at times may find ourselves *frightened*. List the ways you find yourself *frightened* in living out the Christian faith. Looking back to v. 27, what is the remedy for this fear?

Because of the reality of opposition, Paul introduces the very real possibility of suffering. Verse 29 says, *For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him . . . Granted to you*, literally reads “graced you!” We could frankly ask, who needs such “gracing”? Suffering, in its many forms, is part of the experience of many, if not the majority, of the Christians in the world today. Believers in the United States may be somewhat naïve or even glib about this fact. This is a mistake.

People who reflect an attitude that suggests “Oh boy, I get to suffer for Jesus” cause most of us to squirm. Somehow they haven’t got it quite right; and they surely cannot appeal to Paul for such an attitude. Paul’s attitude toward Christian suffering is altogether theological and christocentric at its core. It is based on Christ’s teaching on discipleship, that servants are to be like their masters . . . (Fee, p. 81)

How do you see suffering as a part of your relationship with Christ? Look ahead to Philippians 3:10 where Paul speaks of *the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings*. What does this mean for your Christian life? What does it tell us about how we should relate to our brothers and sisters around the world for whom suffering is a daily and much more intense reality than most of us experience?

In the NIV, chapter 2 begins with four *if* clauses. These come in rapid succession to have a rhetorical effect on the listener.² Write out the four *ifs*. How do they shed light on Paul’s request for unity in verse 2?

¹ “The word translated frightened (ptyromai) is found only here in biblical Greek and denotes ‘the uncontrollable stampede of startled horses.’” (Motyer, p. 97)

² “The NIV and other translations, following the unfortunate chapter divisions at this point, obscure the clear relationship of this paragraph with what immediately preceded. Paul’s sentence begins with a ‘therefore’ (=‘for this reason’), which is probably intended to pick up on all of 1:27-30.” (Fee, p. 84) Only the NASB translates this conjunction in 2:1 as *therefore*.

if —

if —

if —

if —

In verses 2:2-4 we find a thorough description of what Christian unity looks like. There is nothing ambiguous about the practical outworking of the unity Paul is pleading for. List the ingredients of Christian unity found in these verses. You should find at least six (if not more). Which of these ingredients are the most difficult for you?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

If the Philippian church were to live out this type of unity, what practical difference would it make in their situation? Why would this unity make Paul's *joy complete*?

How is the spiritual unity of the body of Christ essential to the very core of Christian faith? Respond to the statement below.

Paul's repetition of the subject [unity] not only underlines its importance but lifts it to a higher level: unity is not just a useful weapon against the world, but rather belongs to the very essence of the Christian life, for it is the way in which Christians display outwardly what the gospel is and means to them. (Motyer, p. 102)

Paul's plea for Christian unity is much more than theoretical. As we will examine in more detail in study #9 (Phil. 4:2-3), the church was being threatened by the squabbling of two women, Euodia and Synthe.

Christian unity is not easy. Let's just admit it. We have to ask what it means. Take a stab at answering the question below.

But how, exactly, is the church today supposed to obey Paul's command to be "like-minded" and to be "one in spirit and purpose," or to follow the Greek more literally, "think the same thing, having the same love, united in soul, thinking one thing" (2:2)? Does this mean that Paul supports some rigid set of detailed norms to which everyone must conform, in thought as well as in deed? (Thielman, p. 102)

Ponder your own experience of Christian unity. Think of SBCC and other church bodies you may have been a part of. Have you experienced the unity Paul is describing in our text? Why? Why not?

Name some things that you individually, and SBCC corporately, can do to build greater unity in Christ.

Based on the Scriptures we have studied here in Philippians what practical steps will you take to enhance and preserve the unity God intends for SBCC? Don't be vague here. Get practical and specific. If we don't apply this text to our lives we have not really done Bible study!

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Four

Ultimate Humility

Philippians 2:5-11

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself 2:8

In this study we come to seven brief verses that are one of the most important and informative portions of the New Testament. In these seven verses we find a discussion of the mystery of the deity and humanity of Jesus. It is also one of the most hotly debated passages of the Bible; New Testament scholars and Christian theologians earn their salaries pondering the complexities of these verses. In Philippians 2:5-11 we find information about Christ's preexistence, his relationship with God the Father and his costly identification with humanity. The passage also provides insight into Christ's status after his death on the cross and his present existence. While brief, it would be an easy portion of Scripture to lose sight of the forest by gazing at a tree. As with all good Bible study, begin by trying to understand the big picture first before asking questions about the details.



In Philippians 2:1-4 we have already studied Paul's plea for a church unity based on personal humility. He wants the believers at Philippi to, *in humility consider others better than yourselves* (2:3). Now, in Philippians 2:5-11 the apostle proceeds to give a model or an illustration of the ultimate humility seen in the life of Christ. Read Philippians 2:5-11 in several translations.¹ Write down several of the main themes in this text that are clear. Next, make note of some of your questions concerning these verses.

Many Christian scholars and commentators encourage humility as we ponder the relationship of the deity and humanity of Jesus. How can this be? It is a mystery beyond our full comprehension.

¹ Many scholars see Philippians 2:6-11 as a hymn or a poem. This is the reason why many modern translations (NIV, RSV) print the passage in verses form. It is, however, probably best to leave the printing of these verse in normal text (NASB, ESV). "Although it is often set out in English translations as a hymn, there is no historical evidence that it was ever a hymn in the liturgical sense of having been sung in Christian churches . . ." (Fee, p. 90)

Mystery indeed, but at the same time the testimony of the Bible. How could it happen we cannot know; that it did happen we are assured. (Motyer, p.109)

Verses 6-8 form a very short passage; but there is no passage in the whole New Testament which so movingly sets out the utter reality of the godhead and the manhood of Jesus Christ, and which makes so vivid the inconceivable sacrifice that Christ made when he laid aside His godhead and took manhood upon him. How it happened, we cannot tell. The end is a mystery, but a mystery of love so great that we can never fully understand it, although we can blessedly experience and adore it. (Barclay, p. 46)

The appeal in v. 5 points back to vv. 2-4. Believers are to have the same *attitude* (NIV) or the *mind* (ESV) of Jesus Christ. At first glance this can seem daunting! You mean I am supposed to be like Jesus? Am I supposed to adopt his mentality and attitudes for my life? At second glance it seems even more daunting, because the obvious answer is yes! Don't stray too far from the lessons of our text here in Philippians, but refresh your memory from the verses below that point to how the followers of Jesus are to imitate his example. Which of these have to do with this theme of humility?

John 13:12-17

1 Thessalonians 1:6

1 Peter 2:21-23

1 John 2:6

Based on vv. 6-8 describe the *attitude* or mindset that is to characterize Christians. What are the specific obstacles in your life that make it difficult to live out this kind of *attitude*?

Verses 6-8 describe what is often referred to as the humiliation of Christ. Jesus left his exalted position in heaven and *made himself nothing*. Who made the decision in Jesus' life that, *he be made in human likeness*?

According to this text, why did Jesus do this? What was the motivating factor in this self-humiliation? What does this tell you about the character of Jesus?

In verses 6 and 7 we find two Greek words that are usually translated by one English word. The NIV translated both these words *nature*, while the ESV translates them both *form*. It can be a little confusing.

Verse 6 = *Who, being in very nature (morphe) God (NIV) or, though he was in the form (morphe) of God (ESV)*

Verse 7 = *taking the very nature (schema) of a servant (NIV) or, taking the form (schema) of a servant (ESV)*

The tension comes in that these two Greek words, *morphe* and *schema*, are translated with one English word, yet mean very different things. William Barclay gives us some help.

Morphe is the essential form which never alters; *schema* is the outward form which changes from time to time and from circumstance to circumstance. For instance, the essential *morphe* of any human being is humanity and this never changes; but *schema* is continually changing. A baby, a child, a boy, a youth, a man of middle age, an old man always have the *morphe* of humanity, the outward *schema* changes all the time. (Barclay, p. 44)

Why is this important to understand the difference between these two words? How does this help us understand the divinity of Jesus? How does it help us to understand ourselves as followers of Jesus?

Verse 7 says Jesus *made himself nothing*. The NASB, and others, translate this, *emptied himself*.¹ Going back to verse 6, list the stages or steps of how this emptying took place in verses 6-8. You should come up with at least six (maybe more) downward steps in this emptying process.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

¹ "It must always be kept in mind that Jesus **emptied Himself** only of certain prerogatives of deity, not deity itself. He was never anything, and never will be anything, but fully and eternally God, as Paul was careful to state in the previous verses." (MacArthur, p. 126)

Think through the humility of Christ and this process of making himself *nothing*. What can we learn about our own humility from what Jesus did? In the gospel of John (3:30), the imprisoned John the Baptist says, “He (Jesus) must become greater; I must become less.” What are some practical ways you can begin to live out this humility in your own life? Be specific.

The humility of Christ finds its climax on the cross. Ponder the depth of Jesus’ humility. Is there anything more Jesus could have done to lower himself? Respond to the statement below.

Here is where the One who is equal with God has most fully revealed the truth about God: that God is love and that his love expresses itself in self-sacrifice—cruel, humiliating *death on a cross*—for the sake of those he loves. The divine weakness (death at the hands of his creatures, his enemies) is the divine scandal (the cross was reserved for slaves and insurrectionists). No one in Philippi, we must remind ourselves, used the cross as symbol for their faith; there were no gold crosses embossed on Bibles or worn as pendants around the neck or lighted on the steeple of the local church. The cross was God’s—and thus their—scandal . . . (Fee, p. 97)

How does what we have studied to this point in Philippians 2 help you to understand Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 8:9?

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

The second half of our passage, verses 9-11, describe the exaltation of Christ. Describe this glory that Christ receives after the humility of the cross. Use the three categories below to help. How does his *place*, *name*, and *confession* give light to his exaltation?

The *place* of Jesus -

The *name* of Jesus -

The *confession* about Jesus –

Have Christians missed something important, in fact essential, with our relative minor emphasis on the glorification and exaltation of Christ? Respond to the statement below.

We are oddly choosy as Christians. Most of us would count it odd not to celebrate Christmas Day in some form or other, even though we know that the day itself is somewhat arbitrarily fixed – and that by an ecclesiastical authority which by no means all of us would recognize! Likewise we do not let Good Friday and Easter Day pass unnoticed. But Ascension Day? Did I hear you ask, ‘Is there an Ascension Day?’ The Bible, however makes much of the ascension of our Lord Jesus . . . (Motyer, p. 119)

How would verses 5-8 be understood by you, if verses 9-11 were not in the Bible? What difference does the ascension and exaltation of Jesus make in your understanding and application of this text?

Gather up your thoughts from this study. Summarize and be ready to share with your group the following areas.

What has challenged you?
What has encouraged you?

Based on what you have learned in this passage set a few specific goals for yourself. Write them down and be ready to share them with your Homegroup.

Sermon Notes. . .

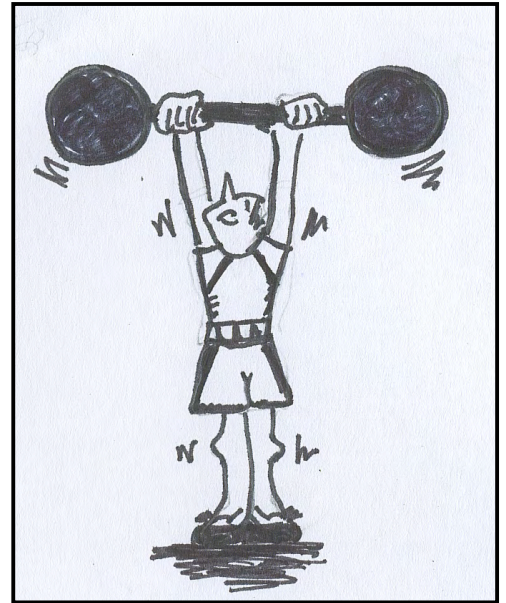
Study Five

Working it Out

Philippians 2:12-18

The Christian life is about faith in Jesus and a corresponding response in how we live. Paul wants his friends in Philippi to go the distance with Christ. To that end he gives some very practical advice for living a spiritual life. J.A. Motyer sets the stage for our study.

Thus we learn from the Bible not only what is true but also how to respond to the truth; not only what is the example of Jesus [Phil. 2:5-8] but also along what lines to make it real. Let us therefore sense the proper seriousness of what lies in front of us in 2:12-18, for Christlikeness is the Christian's greatest concern, and here is the procedure for attaining it. (Motyer, p. 126)



Christians have always struggled with the relationship between the power of God to transform their lives and the responsibility of believers to work hard to live this new life. Are Christians to be passively trusting in God's work to change them or actively pursuing a life of obedience? Is holy living, sanctification, all God's doing, all a believers doing, or a combination of both? It is to these concerns, and others, that Paul now turns in Philippians 2:12-18.

Read this brief passage in several translations. Look for differences and take notes as to what is clear and what is unclear in this section. Record your initial impressions.

Philippians 2:12-18 begins with the word, *therefore*. What is *therefore* there for? Why does Paul, as he begins this section, want us first to look backward to what he has just said in the preceding verses?

In verse 12 Paul reminds his Philippian friends about their obedience. When he says, as *you have always obeyed*, is he referring to obedience to Christ or obedience to himself as an apostle?

Incorrectly understood, verse 12 may cause some to think salvation and godly living is a matter of our own self-efforts. We can *work* for our salvation. We can strive for godliness in our own strength. In the late fourth and early fifth centuries a teacher named Pelagius made this mistake, teaching that man could take the initial steps toward salvation independent of God's grace. Throughout the history of the church this error reemerged in various forms.¹

Others have taught that believers are to be very passive in living a holy life. Christian slogans such as, "Let go and let God" or "I can't; God can" would reflect this viewpoint.² This approach stresses that to live a holy life is all God's doing. The balance comes when we read verses 12 and 13 together.

In Philippians 2:12-13, Paul presents the appropriate resolution between the believer's part and God's part in sanctification. Yet he makes no effort to rationally harmonize the two. He is content with the incomprehensibility and simply states both truths, saying in effect, that, on the one hand sanctification is of believers (v. 12) and on the other hand, it is of God (v. 13). (MacArthur, p. 153)

At some level, when Paul says, *work out your salvation*, he is referring to the believer's role in living the Christian life (sanctification). In what sense is a person's spiritual growth his own responsibility? In answering this question can you think of other passages of Scripture that give you insight into this responsibility?

Is Paul's intention in saying, *work out your salvation*, similar to what Peter says in 2 Peter 1:10-11? How?

Be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

What steps are you currently taking to *work out your salvation*? Be specific.

¹ This overly optimistic understanding of human nature and a corresponding inadequate understanding of God's grace was condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431.

² A prominent exponent of this approach to sanctification was the Quaker writer Hannah Whithall Smith. Her book, The Christian's Secret to a Happy Life, was read by millions.

This working out of our salvation is to be done with *fear and trembling*. What does this mean? At a bare minimum *fear and trembling* is at odds with a casual, light approach to living out the gospel. How have you experienced *fear and trembling* in living out your faith in Christ?

Verse 13 is the other side of the coin to verse 12. Gordon Fee points out the tension.

By putting his appeal this way—urging the Philippians to *work out your salvation with fear and trembling*—Paul recognizes that he may have painted himself into something of a corner regarding his essential theology. So he immediately puts it in the context of God's action. For, he explains, God is the one who empowers you in this regard. (Fee, p. 105)

Apply vs. 13 to your life. How have you experienced God empowering you as you *work out your salvation with fear and trembling*? Can you think of specific examples?

Why is *complaining or arguing* (v. 14) inconsistent with a Christian life? Are there any other sections of this letter that would help us understand verse 14?

When are you most tempted to *complain* and *argue*? (The ESV translates this as *grumbling and questioning*, while the NAS translates it *grumbling or disputing*.) If you're not sure ask your Homegroup to tell you!

Paul borrows three images from the Old Testament to enhance his argument in verses 15-18. Enjoy the rich imagery of the Bible.

a crooked and depraved generation = Deuteronomy 32:5

you shine like stars in the world (NIV universe) = Daniel 12:1-4

being poured out like a drink offering = Numbers 28:1-7

It is the midst of the dark pagan city of Philippi, that Paul encourages the believers to *hold out the word of life* (v. 16).

The *word of life* has thus two distinct sides. It is the message which both tells of life and also imparts the life of which it tells. It stands broadly for the total message of the Scriptures, and specifically for the ‘word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.’ (Motyer, p. 134)

What does it mean for you individually and SBCC as a church to *hold out the word of life*? Evaluate yourself in this area. How could you improve? How could SBCC improve?

As this section of our study comes to a close, Paul, the master of mixing his metaphors, paints a picture of the Christian life.

The final appended phrase, that I did not run or labor for nothing, is vintage Paul. The two verbs, taken from the games and from manual labor respectively, are among his favorite images for ministry. Life in Christ has the features of a race, with the prize awaiting those who finish (see 3:14). More often in Paul, ministry involves labor; one “works hard in the Lord,” just as the tentmaker does in his shop. (Fee, p. 109)

With which metaphor, *run* or *labor*, do you identify in this season of your Christian pilgrimage? Come up with one or two other metaphors that would describe your current Christian life.

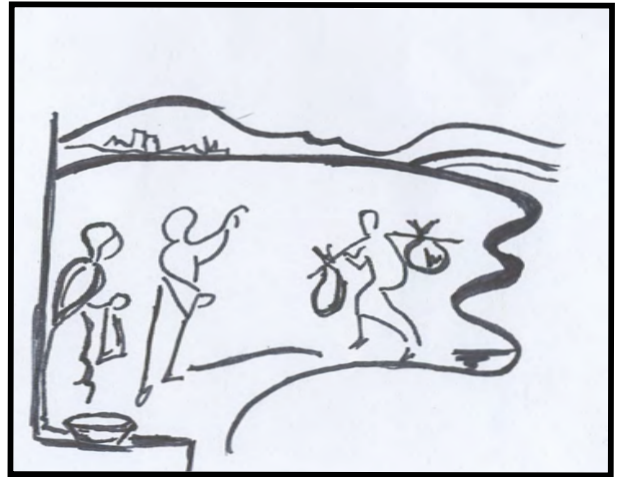
In verse 18 Paul uses two words to describe the state of his soul: *glad* and *rejoice*. He goes on to say that these two attitudes should also describe how the Philippians are responding to life. Paul is not the least bit timid in telling these believers how they should feel! Why is Paul glad and rejoicing? Would these words describe you? Why or why not?

Study Six

Band of Brothers (and Sisters!)

Philippians 2:19-30

As apostles of Jesus Christ, Paul, Peter and John are the dominant figures in the New Testament. A surface reading of the Scriptures can give the impression that these leaders accomplished great things for God on their own. Nothing could be further from the truth. A more careful reading of the New Testament makes it very clear that these “giants” were very much dependent on—and in cahoots—with a larger group of friends and co-workers in ministry. What we find is a band of brothers and sisters pursuing the task of building God’s Kingdom.¹ In Philippians 2:19-30 we get a glimpse into this teamwork approach to ministry. In particular we see how Paul and the church in Philippi were dependent on the leadership of Timothy and Epaphroditus.



After the depth and profound nature of the material we studied in the first part of chapter two, you may be tempted to skim past these verses which can seem somewhat like early church housekeeping and wait for the “good stuff” that is coming up in chapter three. Don’t do it! The Bible reader who rushes past what, at first glance, appears to be mundane, can miss out on a treasure of insight into the Christian life.

Read Philippians 2:19-30. Notice the language Paul uses to describe both Timothy and Epaphroditus. What stands out to you on first reading?

Our passage divides very neatly into two sections:

- #1 — Verses 19-24 explain why Paul will send Timothy to Philippi eventually.
- #2 — Verses 25-30 explain why Paul intends to send Epaphroditus to Philippi right away.

Why does Paul intend to send his co-worker Timothy to the church at Philippi? What does he hope this visit will accomplish?

¹ The apostle Paul was rarely without the company of other believers in his extensive missionary travels. Even while in prison he often had his friends nearby. Often in the book of Acts and in his letters he simply refers to the “brothers who are with me,” (Phil. 4:2) leaving us uncertain as to their exact identities.

Timothy was an integral part of Paul's missionary team of brothers. But who was this man who shows up so often in the pages of Paul's letters?

Timothy was a native of Lystra in the province of Galatia (part of modern day Turkey). His mother, Eunice, was Jewish and his father was a Greek and probably pagan. Paul led him to Christ (1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:2,18; 2 Tim. 1:2), probably during the apostle's visit to Lystra on his first missionary journey (Acts 14:6-23). Both his mother and his grandmother, Lois, were believers (2 Tim. 3:15). That he was not circumcised as a child suggests that his father had educated him in Greek learning and culture. Along with his spiritual maturity, his combined Jewish and Greek heritage made him uniquely qualified to minister the gospel with Paul to the Gentile world. To make Timothy more acceptable to the Jews, especially to those in Galatia who knew him, Paul circumcised him (Acts 16:3). By the time Paul wrote Philippians, Timothy had been his almost constant companion for about ten years. (MacArthur, p. 195)

It would be easy to survey numerous New Testament passages that describe Timothy's character. For the purposes of our study let's stay with our passage in Philippians. In verses 19-24 we find a brief description of Timothy's character. What type of person was Timothy? In what ways was Timothy like Christ?

Compare Philippians 2:21 with 2:4. How is Timothy an illustration of Paul's teaching in 2:4?

In verse 20 Paul says he has, *no one else like him*. The word is a compound adjective, composed of *isos* (equal) and *psuche* (soul). Literally this means "of like soul" or "equal-souled" or "one-souled." What a great relationship to have with a friend and co-worker in God's kingdom!

The Paul-Timothy relationship was much more than just being good friends. They had a common purpose in serving Christ and building his church. Think about your Christian life. Do you have a Timothy in your life? How could you benefit from such a partnership? What could you do to develop this type of spiritual relationship?

In 2:25-30 we see Paul's desire to send Epaphroditus back to his church family in Philippi. Epaphroditus has been the liaison between Paul and the church in Philippi, bringing a financial gift to the imprisoned apostle (Phil. 4:10-18). He will now bring back this letter to the church in Philippi.

Again, we get a snapshot of one of Paul's co-workers in ministry. In verse 25 Epaphroditus is described with five titles. The first three pertain to his relationship with the apostle

himself and the second two pertain to his relationship to the church at Philippi. How is Epaphroditus described in verse 25?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

These five descriptive phrases give us clues as to the nature of spiritual work. What do these descriptions tell us about the nature of Christian service?

Evidently Epaphroditus came very close to death and this is part of Paul's eagerness to send him back to his church family in Philippi. Think of what this must have been like.

It is difficult for most of us to enter into the worldview of the first century, especially regarding matters like communication and medicine. By way of telephone, fax or e-mail we can be in instant communication with people almost anywhere on the globe; and we are so used to the results of medical science that they now cease to amaze us. In our world most people expect to live through even the most dreaded of diseases, not realizing how recent such a worldview is. In the Greco-Roman world people expected to die of disease or illness and were amazed by recovery; and the only way one could find out about a friend from afar was through courier—and then only if someone happened to be going that way. (Fee, p. 121)

In sending Epaphroditus back, Paul tells the Philippians in verse 29 to, *welcome him in the Lord with great joy*. What does it mean to welcome someone *in the Lord*?

It would be a mistake to leave this study that has focused on Paul's band of brothers, his co-workers in ministry, without briefly considering Paul's female friends in ministry. Given the social structure of the first century Paul's male brothers find prominence in his letters. That being said, we do find consistent mention of women who labored as leaders in the growth of Paul's churches. Consider Euodia and Syntyche from Philippi who Paul says, *contended at my side in the cause of the*

gospel (Phil. 4:3), or Lydia, in whose house the church at Philippi most likely gathered (Acts 16:40), or Phoebe, *a servant in the church in Cenchrea* (Romans 16:1), or Priscilla who, along with her husband Aquila, Paul calls his, *fellow co-workers in Christ* (Romans 16:3), or . . . scores of other women who functioned as laborers in the building of God's church. What we find in the New Testament is a large group of men and women who heeded the call to ministry and service of God in the churches of Asia minor.

While these are, admittedly, brief portraits of Timothy and Epaphroditus we do get a sense of their character and purpose in life. What can **you** learn from these two men and their relationship with Paul and the church? When you ponder their lives and ministry what changes are you prompted to make in your own discipleship?

Study Seven

Our Confidence

Philippians 3:1-11

Philippians is often referred to as the *joy* filled letter. In many respects this is an accurate description of Paul's epistle. Our text for this study begins with bubbling enthusiasm, *Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!* This is now the sixth time in this short letter that Paul has used the verb *rejoice* (joy). It won't be the last. In 4:4 he will reiterate this command, *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* In spite of this prompting to joy, Paul now focuses on what concerns him. He is worried for the church at Philippi.



In our passage for this study we find the most impassioned rhetoric in the letter. Paul will quickly turn from the theme of rejoicing, to lash out against people he refers to as *dogs* and *mutilators of the flesh* (v. 2-3). His language seems harsh and unloving, especially in today's climate of tolerance. We might say, "Not a nice way to talk Paul!" What is at stake, however, is the gospel itself. Paul will pull no punches or even clean up his language, for the issue he is addressing in these verses is of foundational importance in knowing God and understanding our salvation.

Read Philippians 3:1-11 and take some preliminary notes. Does anything stand out immediately to you in this passage? What are the three or four key words in this section?

If you could ask Paul one question about just these verses, what would it be?

The threat of teachers infiltrating the church at Philippi was either a distinct possibility or in fact had already happened.¹

Paul is concerned that Judaizing missionaries, like those who have invaded his churches in Galatia, will come to Philippi. Their "gospel" mixed the notion of faith in Christ for salvation with the idea that all who want to belong to God's people must accept the yoke of the Jewish law. Gentile believers, in their view, had to become Jews in order to be saved. (Thielman, p.166)

¹ The church at Philippi straddled the Egnatian Way, which was the main east-west road through Macedonia. The potential threat from itinerant teachers traveling through the area was pronounced.

This Judaizing threat, that in particular taught that literal circumcision was necessary for salvation, plagued many New Testament churches. Refresh your memory of this conflict by reading Galatians 1:6-9, 2:1-3:14.

List the three ways Paul characterizes those who would require circumcision for salvation in verse 2. What do you make of the raw language?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The NIV misses the repetitive sarcasm of the structure of the Greek sentence in verse 2. The ESV captures it as three times it literally reads, *Look out for . . . look out for . . . look out for*.

Circumcision was the cutting off of the fore-skin of the penis, done as a symbol that identified Jews as belonging to God's covenant family. Unfortunately, the symbol tended to breed a false spiritual confidence. Thielman explains.

Physical circumcision was a visible mark that identified those who bore it as members of Israel, God's chosen people (Gen. 17). At times, however, the Israelites placed such confidence in possession of the physical mark itself they felt their election secure even if their hearts strayed after other gods. In these instances, the writers of the Old Testament reminded them that the physical rite should be symbolic of a deeper commitment. (Thielman, p. 168)

In verse 3 who does Paul refer to as the *circumcision*? Does this include you?

Paul gives two reasons for spiritual confidence in verse 3. What are they?

Read the verses below to gain a better understanding of this issue. How did the Old Testament writers warn about circumcision?

Deuteronomy 10:16-17

Jeremiah 4:4

How do these New Testament passages help you to understand circumcision?

Romans 2:29

1 Corinthians 7:19

Galatians 5:6, 6:15

Ephesians 2:11

Colossians 2:11

Misplaced spiritual confidence can plague anyone. In verses 4-6 Paul uses himself as an example as someone who, in his past, had a false confidence based on his *fleshly* spiritual pedigree. These verses could be seen as Paul's B.C. (Before Christ) credentials. List the seven things that Paul lists from his religious past that had been a source of spiritual pride and confidence.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

What at one time impressed Paul about himself (and undoubtedly others), he now sees as, *loss for the sake of Christ* (v. 7). In other words, all the religious stuff that was a part of Paul's life didn't really add up to much when it came to salvation. Think about your own spiritual background. Think of things like family, church background, and where you may

have gone to school. While it is difficult to jump from Paul the religious Pharisee, to your life, give it a try. Where might you have developed a misplaced spiritual confidence? Can you think of ways that you have developed and relied upon things for spiritual security that really leave Christ at the margins of your life?

In verses 7-11 Paul comes to the heart of his argument. The key word in this section is *righteousness*, which comes up three times. Here we find two types of righteousness compared. How are these two approaches to righteousness different? What does Paul have to say about each of them?

a righteousness of my own

the righteousness that comes from God

Write a simple definition of *righteousness*. If you had to explain the biblical idea of *righteousness* to someone who was not a Christian and unfamiliar with this term how would you describe what Paul has in mind here? If you are struggling a bit consider these verses.

Romans 3:21-26

2 Corinthians 5:21

1 John 1:9

Spiritual security and confidence are essential to a relationship with God. Respond to the statement below. Where are you finding your security? On what is your confidence in God based?

Being 'found in him', Paul has no wish for a *righteousness of my own, based on the law*. This is a 'do it yourself' righteousness; it has arisen through self-effort or personal good works. . . Of what worth is this conformist righteousness? Just that

and nothing more, a 'certificate of good behaviour'! It was a righteousness that based on *law*, literally 'out of the law', such a righteousness as proceeds from conforming to a standard. Now, such a righteousness does not give security. (Motyer, p. 165)

Paul is passionate to embrace *knowing Christ Jesus my Lord* (v.8). In verses 10-11 Paul now continues this thought and explains in more detail what is involved when he says, *I want to know Christ*. What three or four ingredients does Paul mention here as essential to an experiential relationship with Jesus?

Be ready to share with your Homegroup how you are *knowing Christ* at this point in your spiritual journey. How do you resonate with Paul's desire for intimacy with Jesus as described in verses 10-11?

Think back through this study. The main point is that our spiritual confidence is to be in the sacrifice of Christ. How does this truth comfort you?

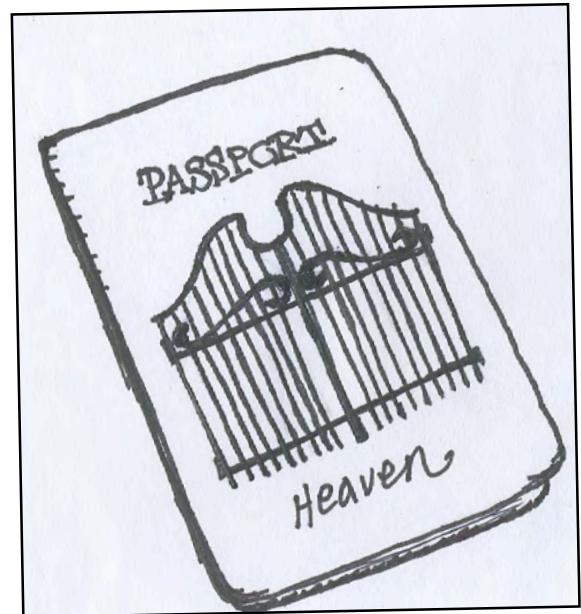
Sermon Notes. . .

Study Eight

Heavenly Citizenship

Philippians 3:12-21

Do you ever find yourself so preoccupied with the here and now, the pressures of daily existence, that you lose sight of what life is all about? Does God get marginalized by the immediacy of work, soccer games, mowing the lawn, family and friend commitments, and financial stresses that result in a pace of life such that your spiritual life becomes a seldom visited corner? Do you ever think about the goal of the Christian life? Have you ever found yourself thinking that because you have faith in Christ that you have “arrived” spiritually and your relationship with God needs little or no work? It is to these types of questions that Paul now turns in Philippians 3:12-21.



But our citizenship is in heaven . . . is one of the more well known phrases out of all of Paul's letters (v. 20). The apostle has his gaze firmly fixed on the future in Philippians 3:12-21. Using athletic imagery, these verses call the believer to a spiritual maturity that focuses on our *heavenward* calling (v. 14). They are a summons to grow up in our attitudes toward life because of our relationship with Christ.

Read Philippians 3:12-21. This section is vintage apostle Paul. The language is clear, forceful and compels to action. Jot down a few thoughts and any questions you have of these verses before going through the rest of this study. Which verse is your favorite? Why? You may want to start your Homegroup by having everyone share their favorite verse.

Focus on verses 12-14. Count how many times Paul uses the personal pronouns *I* or *me* in these three verses. Paul is obviously using himself as an example that he wants the church at Philippi to emulate. Try making a simple outline of these three verses. What is the pattern of life that Paul is modeling? What are the attitudes toward the future the believer is to adopt?

Paul wants to *press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me* (v. 12). What does this mean? What did Jesus take *hold* of us for?

These verses are full of athletic imagery. Consider this comment by Gordon Fee.

The flip side of the image is the runner's *straining toward what is ahead*. The picture is of coming down the home stretch, leaning forward, extending oneself to break the tape. It is generally hazardous to press metaphors, and this one can be pressed in all kinds of wrong directions. Paul's purpose—both his use of the metaphor and its intent—is singular; not “perfection” is in view, but perseverance. As Paul “runs” toward the Christ who has already taken hold of him, he does so in the same focused, full tilt way a runner does who is intent on winning. (Fee, p. 155)

Ponder your life. What does it mean for you to persevere in the Christian life? Make a practical list of the things you need to *forget* (v. 13) and then another list of concrete ways you are going to persevere and *press on toward the goal* (v. 14) in the Christian life.¹

forgetting

pressing on

¹ “This passage deals a devastating blow to the false doctrine of perfectionism that still prevails in some denominations and churches. Perfectionism is the teaching that believers can reach a place of spiritual and moral perfection in this life. Perfectionists teach that in a second work of grace, believers may instantaneously be made sinless. Some even go so far as to teach the eradication of the sin nature. But the apostle Paul, undoubtedly the most committed, dedicated, spiritually mature Christian who ever lived, confessed gladly that he had failed to reach spiritual perfection thirty years after his conversion.” (MacArthur, p. 243)

How has dwelling on your past hindered or even paralyzed you from pressing on toward the goal?

Paul is clear that we have a *heavenward* call as Christians. After all, our *citizenship is in heaven*. Many culture watchers have observed that Americans are probably the most death-denying culture in history. What does this passage have to say to you as a modern American Christian about death and heaven?

In verses 15 & 16 Paul is urging a particular type of mindset or way of thinking. If we are *mature*, we are to have a *view of things* that is informed by the gospel. How would you describe this mindset, world-view or mentality that Paul is talking about? How has being a Christian changed the way you think about life? Be ready to share with your Homegroup concrete examples.

The apostle Paul was not the least bit squeamish about encouraging believers to imitate him in the Christian life. He unashamedly says, *Join with others in following my example* (v. 17). Elsewhere, Paul even goes so far as to say that Christians should be *imitators of God!* (Ephesians 5:1) This idea of following the life pattern example of another believer, or even God, comes up often in the New Testament. It is similar to how we might learn to swing a golf club, shoot a basketball, play the piano or even cook a gourmet meal. We copy or imitate someone else who has developed these skills. Read and ponder the verses below that talk about this idea of imitation. Answer these questions:

What Christian or Christians have you imitated in your life? (Think because you may have done this unconsciously.) What were the qualities in them you wanted to emulate?

If you have been a believer for some time, how would you feel about telling a new convert to the faith to copy your way of life? If you would feel uneasy about telling a young believer to imitate you ponder why this is the case. Refer to the verses below as you formulate your answer.

1 Corinthians 4:16, 11:1

Ephesians 5:1

1 Thessalonians 1:6, 2:14

2 Thessalonians 3:7, 9

In verses 18 & 19 Paul briefly returns to the theme of *enemies of Christ*. Who are these enemies? Is Paul referring to the *dogs* (3:2), the Judaizers, that we looked at last week? We can't be completely sure and, in the end, it is probably best not to attach these verses to any particular situation. What are the characteristics of these *enemies*? What type of person do these statements point to?

their destiny is _____

their god is their _____

their glory is in _____

their mind is on _____

Paul is warning the church at Philippi with *tears* (v. 18) about these *enemies*. Can you identify some of the enemies of Christ in our culture and our out time? What should our response be to *enemies* of Christ in our day?

But our citizenship is in heaven (v. 20). Roman citizenship in the first century world was a tremendous privilege and source of pride. William Barclay gives us the background.

Here was a picture the Philippians could understand. Philippi was a Roman colony. These Roman colonies were amazing places. Here and there at strategic military centres the Romans set down their colonies. They were not like modern colonies out in the unexplored wilds; they commanded great road centres . . . No matter where they were, Roman dress was worn; Roman magistrates governed them; the Latin tongue was spoken; Roman justice was administered; Roman morals observed. Even in the ends of the earth these colonies remained unshakably and unalterably Roman. So Paul says to the Philippians, "Just as the Roman colonist never forgets that they belong to Rome, you must never forget that you are a citizen of heaven." (Barclay, p. 86)

What does it mean for you, as a 21st century American, to understand that you are a citizen of heaven? As a Homegroup discuss the implications for your life and SBCC to find our citizenship in heaven.

And we eagerly await a Savior from there (v. 20). A heavenly citizenship tells us that our true home is heaven. Often, however, this great truth is lost on a modern believer who is attached to the things of this world. Respond to this statement by pastor James Boice. Do you agree with him? Is SBCC guilty of his criticism?

Unfortunately, in our day belief in the second coming of Jesus Christ has faded into a remote and sometimes irrelevant doctrine in many large segments of the Christian church. And it is entirely possible that our present lack of courage and lack of joy flow from this attitude. (Boice, p. 247)

Verse 21 reminds us that God is in control of our salvation. The final victory will be God's accomplishment. What specific comfort do you find in this verse? How will God transform you?

This has been a rich section of Scripture to think through. You may feel somewhat like you have just eaten a five-course meal at an expensive restaurant. What are one or two main thoughts that you will take with you this week? How does your life need to change as a result of pondering this passage?

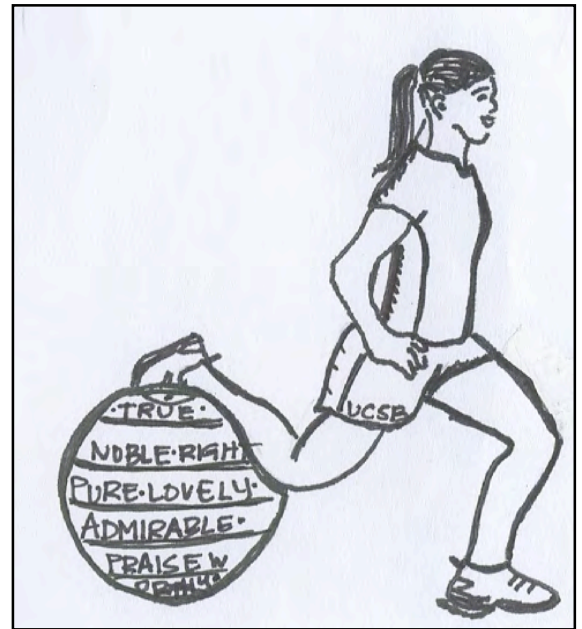
Sermon Notes. . .

Study Nine

Spiritual Stability

Philippians 4:1-9

While the apostle Paul was a keen theological thinker, he was at the same time a very down to earth practical leader of the churches under his direction. As we have already seen, a primary motivating factor in the writing of this letter was to motivate the Philippian believers to, *conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ* (1:27). Real life, functional, Christ-like living was Paul's goal. Two sections of the letter (3:1-11, 3:18-19) have indicated that the church was under attack. Paul was emphatic how the church should respond. With both feet on the ground Paul continues with practical instructions about living a stable spiritual life.



Here in Philippians 4:1-9 the Christian finds help in navigating the storms of life. Sometimes these storms come in the form of interpersonal conflict, such as *Euodia* and *Syntyche* are experiencing (vs. 2-3). At other times we may face pressures from the outside that cause great anxiety in our lives (vs. 4-7). Whatever the source of the trouble, Paul is writing encouraging the believer to *stand firm in the Lord* (v. 1).

Read Philippians 4:1-9. Read slowly and in several translations. This is a good place to be reminded of the personal nature of this letter. In spite of the problems being addressed the language is warm and tender. In verses 1-9, list particular words that point to the intimacy Paul enjoyed with this church.

Consider verses 2 and 3. As you ponder these two verses remember that this is a letter that would have been read aloud to the entire church as they gathered to hear from the apostle. Picture sitting in a good sized group of people that you know well and with whom you worship. Listening to this letter being read you suddenly hear your name! *Euodia* . . . *Syntyche* . . . What a shock! Interestingly, we have no idea as to the nature of the conflict these two women were experiencing. Was it doctrinal, ethical, or personal? We simply do not know. In verse 3 what does Paul tell *Euodia* and *Syntyche* to do?

In another intriguing part of this drama Paul asks a *loyal yokefellow* (*true companion* in NES) to help these women mend their differences. While we do not know who this individual is, we do learn that conflict in the church is not just a private matter.¹ Have you ever been involved at SBCC in helping two people who were in conflict attempt to get beyond their differences? What lessons did you learn?

Why is disunity and conflict between people in a church body so devastating?

Notice that *Euodia* and *Syntyche* are encouraged to *agree with each other in the Lord*. Paul will frequently use this little qualifying phrase, *in the Lord*. Just one verse earlier we saw this same wording when the Philippians were instructed to *stand firm in the Lord*. What does this mean? How would it help *Euodia* and *Synthche* to work out their differences when they understood the remedy was to be found *in the Lord*?

All of us know that human relationships can be problematic. We all tend to be sinful, selfish and we see things from our vantage point. Motyer states what we all know to be true. “Relationships can become atrociously tangled, and Christian relationships are no exception.” (Motyer, p. 203) Try and make some practical application to SBCC. What can we do to protect our body from conflict between people that would damage our unity and love for one another?

In Philippians 4:4 Paul returns to one of the dominant themes in this letter, joy or rejoicing in the Lord. This verse makes it clear that the believer is to rejoice *always*. This verse is also a command. We are not invited to rejoice if it suites our mood, but rather to make rejoicing a part of our daily life. This can be a difficult command to swallow if you are in a time of pain, suffering or depression. Consider the statement below. How can you *rejoice* even in the midst of your personal darkness?

Joy, unmitigated, untrammelled joy, is—or at least should be—the distinctive mark of the believer in Christ Jesus. The wearing of black and the long face, which so often

¹ Gordon Fee ponders that this person is Luke. “Most likely he is one of Paul’s itinerant coworkers who is presently on the scene there. Luke would fit the description perfectly. Not only was he such a ‘true companion,’ but in Acts 16 the ‘we’ narrative takes Luke to Philippi where it leaves off until Paul’s return to Philippi some four to six years later in 20:1-5.” (Fee, p. 169)

came to typify some later expressions of Christian piety, are totally foreign to Paul's version; Paul the theologian of grace is equally the theologian of joy. Christian joy does not come and go with one's circumstances; rather it is predicated altogether on one's relationship with the Lord and is thus an abiding, deeply spiritual quality of life. (Fee, p. 173)

How is joy and rejoicing a vitally important factor in the spiritual stability of the believer?
How have you seen spiritual joy produce spiritual stability in your life?

Can you recall a time when you lost the joy of the Lord? A time when rejoicing was impossible? What steps did you take to return to a place where joy was a part of your life?

Ponder verse 5. How can your *gentleness be evident to all*? Why is this important?
(Consider the context of Philippians in your answer!)

What does the phrase, *The Lord is near* (v. 5) mean?

Most of us can be anxious about life. We worry about the kids, our job, relationships, money, the Chemistry test we have on Friday, and what to buy our mother for her birthday. Verses 5b-7 address this issue of worry and anxiousness in the life of the believer. These verses are meant to be a comfort and to help produce spiritual stability in the uncertain times of life. What promises from God do you find in these verses (you should find three)? What are the conditions for receiving these promises (again, you should find three)?

Promises

Conditions

Christians who give their anxieties and worries to God in prayer are promised *peace* from God (v.7). While most believers have experienced this *peace* it can be a bit difficult to explain. Yes, *it transcends all understanding*. But give it a try anyway. Describe times in your life when, in prayer, you have given your anxiousness to God. How would you describe the *peace* you experienced?

Notice the little phrase *with thanksgiving* in verse six. Why is it so crucial that our *prayer and petition* be accompanied by *thanksgiving*?

In verse eight Paul is reaching the climax of his teaching. He simply says, *finally*, and then concludes this section of the letter. As we have seen in Philippians and indeed all of the New Testament, how we think is of crucial importance to how we act. Here in verse eight Paul lists eight ways the believer is to think. List them. What is the common theme in all of these eight commands? Is Paul simply suggesting some sort of positive, optimistic outlook on life or are these thought commands somehow tied to God? How would your life be different if you thought in this way?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

The God of Peace, is Paul's favorite way of referring to God. (Compare Romans 16:20, 1 Corinthians 14:33, and 1 Thessalonians 5:23) Ponder how the God of the Bible is a *God of peace*.

What has Philippians 4:1-9 taught you about God? What has it taught you about living the Christian life and attaining spiritual stability in your life?

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Ten

Being Content

Philippians 4:10-23



In 1965, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones released their smash hit song, “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction.” The song may describe our culture more accurately than we like. Ours is a society that is constantly looking for more, in a never-ending search for satisfaction. A bigger house, better job, increased salary, a more toned body, a more perfect wave, a more authentic band, a church that will meet all our needs, and better friends than our old ones. Everyone wants satisfaction

and contentment in life and most find it very elusive to attain.

For the Christian, however, contentment in life comes from being rightly related to God, as we trust in his loving and sovereign care for us. In our last section of Philippians Paul is thanking the church at Philippi for the financial gift he has received from them. In the midst of this thanks we catch an unmistakable glimpse of a man who has learned the lesson of spiritual contentment.

Read Philippians 4:10-23. Before going on in this study write down a few of your thoughts. What stands out in the text? What questions do you have?

Paul is about to get to the main point in his writing to the church at Philippi. He wants to say thank you for their financial gift. Ten years had passed since Paul had founded the church. As the years had gone by the church was unable to support Paul. We are not sure why. Perhaps it was due to their own poverty, or they were simply unaware of the apostle’s needs or unable to even locate him. All of this changed with the arrival of Epaphroditus in Rome bearing a gift from the church. Try and picture Paul’s situation.

The Philippians’ generosity was especially meaningful to Paul because it reached him during a very trying time in his life. He was a prisoner in Rome, confined to a small apartment (Acts 28:16) and guarded around the clock by a Roman soldier (Acts 28:16). He could no longer minister with the freedom he had once enjoyed. Being unable to work to support himself, he was in a dependent condition, probably existing on a bare subsistence level on help from generous friends. The only contact he had with the churches that were his constant concern was through letters or the occasional visitor who sought him out. Constantly looming over him was the anticipation of his trial before the emperor—the infamous Nero. (MacArthur, p. 296)

Before Paul really says thanks he addresses the issue of contentment. Look again at verses 10-19. In spite of the fact that Paul is not in the best of circumstances he is content. What can we learn from the apostle? What were the key ingredients in Paul's contentment?

verse 11 –

verse 12 –

verse 13 –

verse 19 –

Do you find that you are content in life or do you find yourself singing with Mick Jagger, "I can't get no satisfaction!"? Apply these principles of spiritual contentment to your life. Be specific. How can your relationship with Jesus Christ result in satisfaction and contentment for your life?

Part of what hinders contentment for the Christian is the blurring of the distinction between "needs" and "wants." How do you separate needs and wants in your thinking?

Verse 12 reads, *I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.* What is the *secret* Paul has learned? What evidence is in your life that you have learned this *secret*?

Respond to this statement by Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs. Try writing a paraphrase of this statement in modern English to read to your Homegroup.

Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition. (The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment, Banner of Truth, p. 19)

Turn your attention now to the gift sent to Paul by the church at Philippi. Paul was always sensitive about receiving monetary help from the churches he founded. The last thing in the world he wanted was to be accused of being motivated by receiving money from these churches.¹ It is peculiar in this letter how Paul waits until the very end of his letter to finally say thank you. Gordon Fee gives us an example of what this might look like in a modern context.

So how would you feel? Your financially strapped college group has scraped together a considerable amount of cash in order to help a former member do humanitarian missionary work in Central Africa. After some time you receive word back—a long letter in fact—which goes on and on about how the group might better serve the Lord on its own campus, but nary a word about the gift. And then at the end, with a kind of “by the way,” the gift is mentioned; but even more time is spent on how little the gift was really needed than on the thanksgiving itself. You would have a right to be miffed. Both our secular and spiritual cultures expect something better of friends, and no one likes an ingrate. Which is exactly how many feel about Paul at this point in the letter. (Fee, p. 182)

Put yourself in the place of the Philippians and answer Gordon Fee's question. “So how would you feel?”

How does this real life example of giving and receiving financial assistance help you to understand giving and receiving in the Christian life? Are there any principles here that we miss in the modern church?

¹ “Although he recognized the principle that those primarily responsible for the spiritual nurture of a Christian community could ask for the community's financial support (1 Cor. 9:3-14, 2 Thess. 3:9, 1 Tim. 5:17-18), he usually refused such support to avoid even a hint of an unfair scandal over his proclamation of the gospel. ‘We did not use this right,’ he explains to the Corinthians. ‘On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ’” (1 Cor. 9:12b; cf. 1 Thess. 2:1-12). (Thielman, p.235)

Much of Paul's language concerning this gift comes out of the marketplace. In verse eighteen when he says, *I have received full payment*, he is using a technical term from the business world of the first century that referred to the receipt of payment. As we see often in Paul's letters he is never afraid to mix his metaphors or change his illustrations quickly. In the same verse Paul goes on to use the language of the Old Testament to say that this gift was, *a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God*.¹ How is your giving at SBCC, *a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God*? When you place your gifts in the offering box do you see it as an act of worship? Do you think about how God views this gift?

And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus (v. 19) is one of those verses that is often misused in Christian circles. The "prosperity gospel" movement is full of references to Philippians 4:19 that push the meaning far beyond what Paul intended. Consider and respond to the interpretation of Thielman.

The promise of verse 19 must instead be linked with verse 13, and both verses must be read in light of verses 11-12: God supplies the needs of his people by giving them the resources to cope with hardship. Hardship tempts us to think that God is unmoved by our plight or is against us, and so we despair. Thus, when we experience difficult times, we need the moderating presence of God, who shows us by the cross of Christ that he is for us, not against us(Thielman, p. 241)

How have you experienced verse 19? How has God met *all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus*?

Paul concludes his letter to the Philippian church in much the same way he began it (1:2), centered on the grace of God. *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen* (4:23). Think back over the last ten weeks of our study of this remarkable letter. How have you experienced the grace of God? What lessons did you learn that were new to you?

How has Paul's letter to the church at Philippi had an impact on your spiritual life? What were the highlights of this letter for your Christian walk?

¹ For use of this imagery see Ex. 29:18, 25,41, Lev. 1:3-4, 17:4, 19:5, 22:19-20.