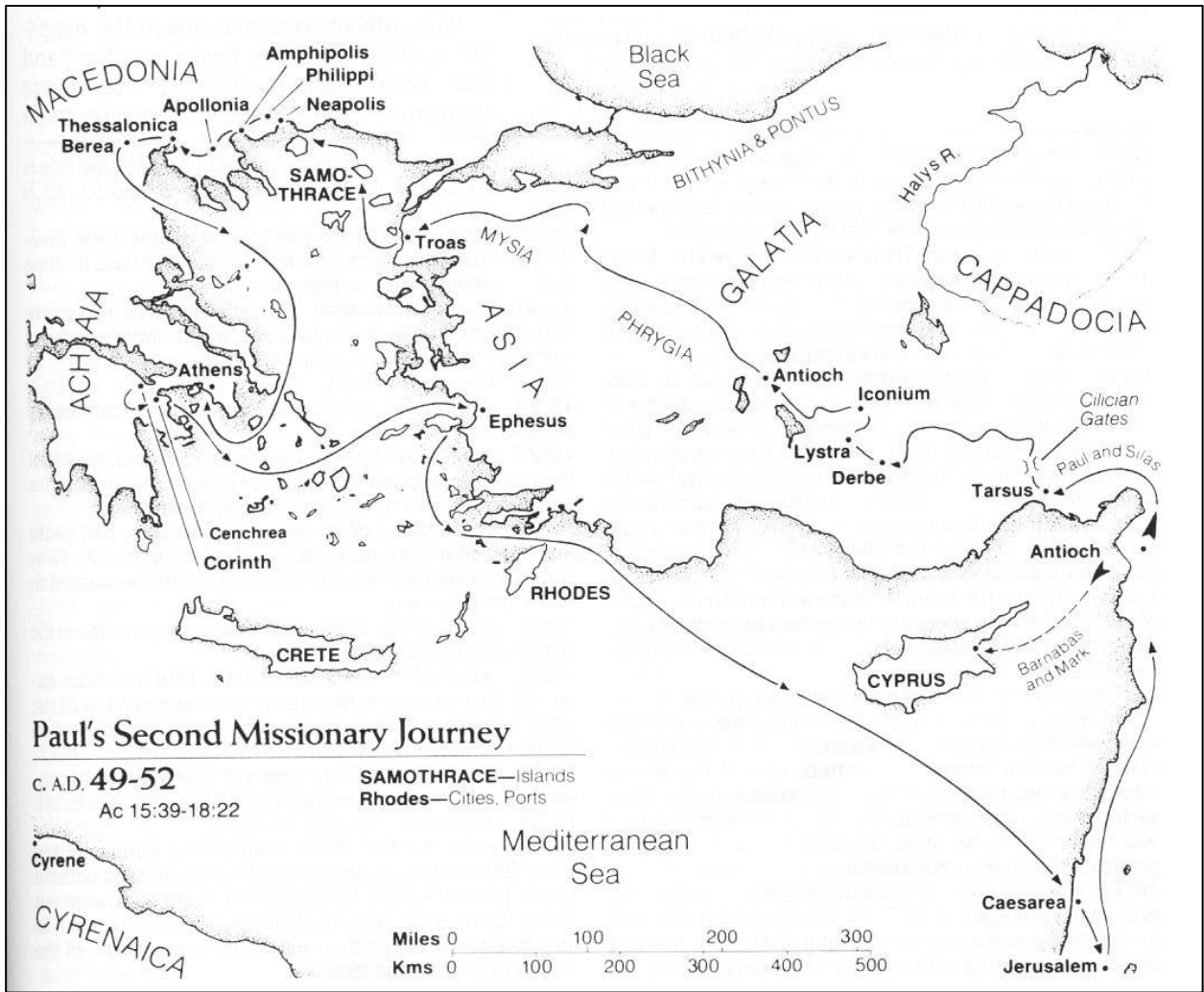




STUDIES IN

PAUL'S LETTER to the PHILIPPIANS





BACKGROUND

Philippi was a city of Macedonia, lying on a great trade route of the Roman Empire called the Egnatian Way, which linked East and West. It was named after King Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. It had been made a Roman colony in 42 BC which meant that its citizens had Roman citizenship of which they were very proud. It was a city of military and commercial importance (see Acts 16:12, 21; Phil 1:27; 3:20).

See Acts 16 for Paul's visit to Philippi on his second missionary journey (see map) and for the first steps in founding a church there. There seem to have been too few Jews there to form a synagogue (12 men needed) because Paul's first contacts were a group of women at prayer by the river (Acts 16:13). We read of the conversion of Lydia (a prominent woman) and the exorcism of a slave girl and the consequent arrest, beating and imprisonment of Paul and Silas. After an earthquake the jailer and his family are converted and baptised. Paul and Silas have to flee the town but the church continues to support Paul in his ministry.

THE LETTER

This letter was written by Paul from prison, most probably in Rome in 61AD. He is awaiting the outcome of his trial expecting to be released but a death sentence was possible. The letter is to be carried to Philippi by Epaphroditus who had been sent to Paul by the church at Philippi carrying the money they had collected for his ministry (2:25-30; 4:10-19).

THEMES

I suggest that 1:27-28 are the key verses that summarise the main message of the letter and draw together the main themes of the letter. It is important for a right understanding of the sections of the letter to see how they relate to its main message in terms of the action God is saying we should take. Keep these verses in mind as you look at each section.

There are several important themes which run through the letter:

1. PARTNERSHIP IN THE GOSPEL

Paul treasures this relationship and is grateful for the gift they have sent him (1:3-8; 4:10-19). Note what he calls them in 4:1.

2. THE GOSPEL

Paul's central concern is for the preaching of the gospel and for the Philippians to stand firm for the gospel and for their behaviour to be worthy of the gospel. (1:27) He gives his own example (1:15-21 & 3:7-14) and commends the example of Epaphroditus and Timothy for their dedication to the work of the gospel (2:19-30).

3. UNITY IN LOVE

Central in this theme is the example of Jesus (2:5-11). They are to be united as one contending for the gospel (1:27), not acting selfishly (2:2-4), dealing with specific strained relationships (4:2-3)

4. THE CONTEXT OF SUFFERING

Not only is Paul in prison, they also are being persecuted (1:28-30). It is in this context that they are called to stand firm and to rejoice.

5. JOY AND REJOICING

Paul talks about his joy, rejoicing and thanksgiving and exhorts them to rejoice. These words occur 16 times.

6. THE RETURN OF CHRIST

"The day of Christ" is mentioned at 1:6, 10; 2:16, other references are to the day when "every knee shall bow before him" (2:10-11), the resurrection (3:11), awaiting Jesus' return (3:20-21), etc.

7. OBEDIENCE, RIGHTEOUSNESS, PURITY

STUDY 1 - Philippians 1:1-11

1. Read Acts 16. How did this church begin? What sort of people did it begin with?

2. Paul describes his relationship with the Philippian church as a “partnership in the gospel” (1:5). How does he describe this relationship and what does it mean to him (see also the appendix for the theme especially 4:1, 10-19)?

3. What does it mean for this to be a partnership “in the gospel”? The word “partnership” is the word *koinonia* often translated “fellowship”. Is our fellowship just a cup of tea after church? With whom do you share a partnership in the gospel? How does this express itself?

4. What place does prayer play in this partnership (1:3-4, 9, 19)? What place does it play in our partnerships with each other, our church leaders, missionaries, people we are seeking to reach or minister to, etc? What does Paul pray for?

5. Joy and rejoicing are a central theme of this letter. What is the source of Paul’s joy, rejoicing and thanksgiving (See also the appendix)?

6. Paul speaks about “the Day of Christ (Jesus)” (1:6, 10, 2:16, see also the appendix). What place does the return of Christ play in his life? What does it mean to you?

STUDY 2 - Philippians 1:12-26

1. "Chains" means imprisonment (1:7, 13, 14, 17). How do you think the church at Philippi would naturally feel about Paul's incarceration? What has been the effect in Rome? How does Paul react to the situation?

2. What is Paul's first concern that he puts before his own welfare? What does he want to achieve? (note: the word translated "deliverance" (v.19) is literally "salvation" but it is unlikely to refer to eternal salvation here). How does he expect to be able to remain faithful (1:19)?

3. The church at Philippi is going through persecution (1:28-30). Being a Roman colony Caesar worship was probably required of those living in the city: making an offering to Caesar and saying, "Caesar is Lord". Note that Jesus is called Lord 15 times in the letter especially at 2:11. How would Paul's example encourage the church? What does it say to us?

4. How does Paul's life demonstrate his statement, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain"? (note v.25 that Paul does not expect to die). What does he want to achieve by continuing life in the body?

5. How can Paul be so calm about those who preach Christ out of envy, rivalry and selfish ambition (cf. 2:3)?

6. What is your reaction to this passage, especially words like, "to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly" (v.14).

STUDY 3 - Philippians 1:27-2:11

The NIV really messes up this passage! Not only is there a chapter break but they also put in a heading before 2:1 and leave out the connecting word “therefore”. 2:1-11 continues the exhortations of 1:27-30 and must be read in that context.

1. Discuss in detail the importance of the instruction in 1:27. If we were to do this in our church what would it involve? What place should the gospel play in our thinking?

2. In 1:28-30 they are told to stand firm in the face of opposition and suffering. What might they fear? What do we fear? How should we approach our fears? (See also 1:20; 2:17-18; 3:10 and Study 2 Q3)

3. How does 2:2-4 relate to 1:27? In practical terms what does this mean for our thinking and action? (See the appendix for the theme of unity as we serve each other, especially 4:2). What do you think is going on at Philippi? What issues do we need to address at our church?

4. 2:6-11 sets before us Jesus’ example of humble service. Look at the details. What do they mean? What does it mean for us to have the same attitude (see p.16 “Mindset”)?

5. 2:6-11 presents a very high view of who Jesus is (Christology). What does it say about him? How does what we believe about Jesus affect our lives?

6. Why does he speak about Jesus’ exaltation (2:9-11; cf. 3:10-11)?

STUDY 4 - Philippians 2:12-30

This passage continues the call for the Philippians to live in a manner worthy of the gospel (1:27) and gives examples of two people who do.

1. What does it mean to “work out your salvation” (2:12)? What do we need to do and what does God do (2:13)?
2. What does it mean to “hold out the word of life” (2:16)? How does complaining and arguing undermine this?
3. “...poured out like a drink offering” probably refers to Paul’s suffering not his death. How does he think of his suffering and theirs? How does this lead to rejoicing? How do we tend to react to suffering?
4. Timothy is to be sent later when the outcome of Paul’s trial is known. How is he an example of the instructions of 1:27-2:11?
5. Epaphroditus is coming first bringing this letter. How is he an example of the instructions of 1:27-2:11? How are we to regard such people?
6. What place does the work of the gospel play in this instruction and in these examples?

STUDY 5 - Philippians 3:1-4:1

Paul now gives his own example to encourage the Philippians (3:17). Judaizers were Jews who had been converted to Christianity but insisted that Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the laws of Moses. It does not seem that they were a problem in Philippi yet but Paul still warns the church. It may be that there was pressure to be circumcised to avoid persecution as Jews were exempt from the requirements of Caesar worship .

1. What are “those dogs” trusting for salvation? Why does Paul list his own credentials as a Jew? What false things might we trust for salvation today? What does it mean to be righteous? What does faith mean here (3:9)?

2. What has he lost and gained? How is knowing Christ a surpassing greatness? What does knowing Christ mean for you?

3. What place do suffering (cf. 1:29), power (cf. Ephesians 1:19), death and resurrection play in knowing Christ (see 3:10-11)? What place do these things play in our own Christian lives? Note the similarities with 2:6-11.

4. Paul pictures himself in a race (3:12-14). What is the goal or prize for which he strains forward? (Note “made perfect” (3:12) is probably not the right translation. “brought to completion” is better.) How should we “take such a view of things”?

5. What characterises the thoughts and aspirations of those who are enemies of the cross and of those who follow Paul’s example? What is the outcome for each group? What needs to change in your perspective of life?

6. Paul begins this section by saying, “Rejoice in the Lord” (3:1) and ends with “...stand firm in the Lord.” (4:1, cf. 1:27) How are these tied to what he says between?

STUDY 6 - Philippians 4:2-9

1. We don't know what had happened between these two women. Why does Paul treat this as a serious issue (cf. 1:9, 27; 2:2-4)? What does it mean to "agree with each other in the Lord"? What is the responsibility of others in the congregation? (Note the even handed way Paul deals with these people.)

2. What are the causes of division between people in a church? How can we work to overcome these? What should others see in us (4:5)?

3. Why the emphasis again on rejoicing (cf. 2:17-18; 3:1 and appendix)? What does he mean by "in the Lord" (cf. 1:14; 2:19, 24, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 2,4, 10)? What in their situation might cause them not to rejoice? (cf. Habakkuk 3:17-19)

4. What are God's promises to us regarding prayer? What is the effect of God's peace? Share your experience of God keeping these promises. What things can we pray about?

5. What difference does it make what we centre our thoughts on (4:8)? How do we train our minds to think of the things mentioned here? How do we exclude other thoughts (What about TV & pornography etc)?

6. What are the main things they (and we) are to imitate from Paul's example (4:9; cf. 3:17)? Do you actively think of Paul's example?. What is the promise given here (cf. 4:7)? To what extent is "peace" individual or corporate?

STUDY 7 - Philippians 4:10-22

Paul put his thanks for their gift last because he wants to finish on a positive note . The letter is one of friendship, not of confrontation, and he wants to finish by acknowledging what their partnership means to him and to encourage them in their Christian lives.

1. What has the Philippian church done for Paul over the years and now (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:1-5)? ? What did this indicate about their relationship with Paul What did this mean to Paul?

2. How should we relate to those who are sent out to serve God in other places? In practical terms, what should we be doing?

3. Our society is one of discontent. What are the causes of this and how can we find contentment in Christ? Why is this contentment important?

4. How does Paul view the gifts they have sent him (4:17-18)? How do we view our giving? What does God promise to those who faithfully give to support his work?

5. Go back to 1:27-28. Do you think these verses summarise the main message of the letter? How well does they draw together the main themes of the letter?

6. What will you take away from studying this letter? Don't leave the letter without responding to what God is saying to you. Share your thoughts

NOTES

APPENDIX

CHAPTER 1

¹Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

²Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. ⁸God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

⁹And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

¹²Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

¹⁵It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. ¹⁷The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

²⁷Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel ²⁸without being

frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

CHAPTER 2

¹If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
⁷ but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself
and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!
⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

¹²Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

¹⁴Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe ¹⁶as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour for nothing. ¹⁷But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. ¹⁸So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

¹⁹I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. ²⁰I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. ²¹For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²²But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with

me in the work of the gospel. ²³I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. ²⁴And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

²⁵But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs.

²⁶For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. ²⁷Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. ²⁹Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour men like him, ³⁰because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.

CHAPTER 3

¹Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.

²Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. ³For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—⁴though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:

⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

⁷But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

¹³Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

¹⁷Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. ¹⁸For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

CHAPTER 4

¹Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

²I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

¹⁴Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. ¹⁷Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. ¹⁸I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received

from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

²⁰To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

²¹Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send greetings. ²²All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.

²³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

MINDSET - This is an important theme in Philippians. See how one Greek word may be translated in different ways in English so that we lose the sense of a theme. The word group is used 10 times in the letter.

Phronein (fronein) = think of, be intent on, be careful about, set ones mind on.

Not thinking in general but having a particular mindset.

1:7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you,

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

2:5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

3:15 All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

3:19 Their mind is on earthly things.

4:2 I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.

4:10 I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me.

Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.