

The Letter of Paul to the Philippians

Introduction

From Fr. Michael's *Bible Overview*:

Written from prison to a church in what is now northern Greece, Philippians is Paul's most joyful letter. He has learned how to be content whether with little or plenty (4.12-13) and confidently says that "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (1.21). The closing blessing we use in church is taken from Philippians 4.7. Written ~ A.D. 61



From the *ESV Study Bible*:

After their victory at the Battle of Philippi in 42 B.C, Antony and (later) Augustus re-founded this Macedonian city with army veterans. Its special status as an Augustan colony exempted the city from significant forms of taxation and gave it additional privileges of land ownership. The city encompassed good agricultural land, and it was on the Egnatian Way, an important Roman commercial road.

The church at Philippi had a special significance for Paul, since it was the first church he founded in Europe (see Acts 16.6-40). The first convert was Lydia, a seller of purple goods, and women continued to have a prominent role in the Philippian church (e.g. Phil. 4.2). Paul and Silas were imprisoned there for exorcising a demon from a fortune-telling slave girl, but God miraculously delivered them, and they proclaimed the gospel to the Philippian jailer. Paul likely visited the Philippians a few times after his initial departure, and they maintained active support for his ministry (4.15-16).

Paul...wanted to encourage the Philippians in their faith, and his imprisonment meant he could do that only through a letter. Even a house imprisonment (assuming Paul was in Rome, Acts 28.16) could have been a source of great anguish, particularly with the possibility of execution looming, and so Paul wanted to assure the church that he was still in good spirits through his faith in Christ (Phil 1.12-18).

Paul...is above all concerned that the Philippians continue to make progress in their faith (1.25). While there were no doubt conflicts within the congregation (notably that of Euodia and Syntyche, 4.2), the Philippians appear to be a healthy congregation, in contrast to the troubled groups in Corinth and Galatia.... [Nevertheless] they must follow Paul's example and "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3.14).

Christian maturity does not come through special mystical insights available to only a few, but rather through the patient practice of the familiar virtues of love and service to others.... Spiritual progress involves effort: they are encouraged to "work out [their] own salvation with fear and trembling" (2.12).

Philippians is unified by its joyful, almost exuberant mood (the words for "joy" or "rejoice" occur more than a dozen times); by the strong personal relationship between its author and its recipients... and by the many connections Paul draws between the saving work of Jesus Christ and the servant ministry of his followers, who are called to live and die according to the pattern of the sufferings, death, resurrection, and glorious exaltation of Jesus himself.

The Rev. Nicky Gumbel:

The apostle Paul did not see the prolonging of life as a major objective. Indeed, he regarded death as something of even greater worth (Phil 1.21). Yet for him, Jesus Christ had made life profoundly worth living. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul writes directly and indirectly about why this is the case and how it can be for his readers as well.

Philippi [was] situated in the break of a line of hills separating Europe and Asia. It was on the high road that divided the two continents. The city's name came from the father of Alexander the Great, Philip II of Macedonia.

One of the glorious features of the Christian faith is that it brings together, in a unique way, people of different nationality, background, race, color, sex, and age. The first person to be converted in Philippi was a wealthy woman called Lydia (Acts 16.14). Then she opened her home to Paul and to the Gospel. The second person to be converted was a native Greek slave girl, and the third was a middle-class Roman prison officer. They comprised an extraordinary cross section of ancient life.

Philippians is a letter of encouragement. Paul was not correcting any doctrinal error nor berating them for their immorality. It was really a "thank-you" letter. The language is unclouded by any shadow of disappointment or displeasure.... Polycarp, the early Christian bishop and martyr, tells us that Paul used to boast about the Philippians all over the world. The attitude of positive encouragement is a much needed example for church leaders today.

Paul was under house arrest in Rome, attached by three feet of chain to a Roman soldier. He was unjustly accused and awaiting trial and possible execution. Yet his joy was overflowing.... In our day, we need a revival of the association of joy with Christians and the church.

William Barclay:

When Paul chose a place wherein to preach the gospel, he always did so with the eye of a strategist. He always chose one which was not only important in itself but was also the keypoint of a whole area. To this day many of Paul's preaching-centers are still great road centres and railway junctions. Such was Philippi.

The Roman Colonies were amazing institutions. It was the custom of Rome to send out parties of veteran soldiers, who had served their time and been granted citizenship, to settle in strategic road centres. Usually these parties consisted of three hundred veterans with their wives and children. These colonies were the focal points of the great Roman road systems which were so engineered that reinforcements could speedily be sent from one colony to another. Wherever they were, these colonies were little fragments of Rome and their pride in their Roman citizenship was their dominating characteristic.

It was on the second missionary journey, about the year A.D. 52, that Paul first came to Philippi. Urged on by the vision of the man of Macedonia with his appeal to come over and help us, Paul had sailed from Alexandrian Troas in Asia Minor. He had landed at Neapolis in Europe, and thence made his way to Philippi.

Paul had to leave Philippi after a storm of persecution and an illegal imprisonment. That persecution was inherited by the Philippian Church. He tells them that they have shared in his bonds and in his defence of the gospel (1.7). He bids them not to fear their adversaries for they are going through what he himself has gone through and is now enduring (1.28-30).

For many of us *Philippians* is the loveliest letter Paul ever wrote. It has been called by two titles. It has been called *The Epistle of Excellent things*—and so indeed it is; and it has been called *The Epistle of Joy*. Again and again the words *joy* and *rejoice* recur. “Rejoice,” writes Paul, “again I will say rejoice,” even in prison directing the hearts of his friends—and yours—to the joy that no man can take from us.

For further study:

- *The ESV Study Bible*
- *A Life Worth Living*, Nicky Gumbel
- *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, William Barclay

The Letter of Paul to the Philippians

Chapter 1

The church at Philippi was founded by an extraordinary display of God's power. ~ Nicky Gumbel [read Acts 16.9-end]

Verses 1-2—Greeting:

Paul does not identify himself as an apostle but designates Timothy and himself as servants. The emphasis on service anticipates the rest of the letter, and this emphasis is seen especially in what is said of the humiliation of Christ Jesus (2.5-11). It is uncertain what level of formal church governance is implied by overseers and deacons. The former are presumably elders, who would be charged with spiritual oversight of the congregation...while the latter would be entrusted with matters of practical service.

~ *ESV Study Bible*

The opening sentence sets the tone of the whole letter. It is characteristically a letter from a friend to his friends. In the other letters Paul begins with a statement of his official position, why he has the right to write, and why the recipients have the duty to listen; but not when he writes to the Philippians. Of all his Churches, the Church at Philippi was the one to which Paul was closest.

Paul claims to be the servant (*doulos*) of Christ; but *doulos* is more than *servant* it is *slave*. A servant is free to come and go; but a slave is the possession of his master for ever.

Just as the Jews had once been *hagios*, *holy*, *different*, so now the Christians must be *hagios*; the Christians are the holy ones, the different ones, the *saints*. To say that the Christians are the saints means, therefore, that the Christians are *different* from other people.... When Paul speaks of *the saints in Christ Jesus*, he means those who are different from other people and who are consecrated to God because of their special relationship to Jesus Christ.

~ *William Barclay*

Verses 3-11—Thanksgiving and Prayer:

Paul prays for the Philippians with joy, a word that will become a keynote theme in ch. 4. This joy springs from their partnership in the gospel, which involves not only their financial support of the apostle (4.15-16) but also their deep personal concern for his well-being. (vv. 3-5)

The foundation for spiritual growth is recognizing that it is God who began a good work in you and will bring it to completion. Genuine spiritual progress is rooted in what God has done, is doing, and will do. (v. 6)

The first petition in Paul's prayer is that God would cause the cardinal Christian virtue of love to abound more and more, and that it would be accompanied by knowledge

and all discernment, so that the Philippians' love would find expression in wise actions that would truly benefit others and glorify God. (vv. 9-11) ~ *ESV Study Bible*

We cannot have eternal life one minute and not the next. A Christian may lose a job, money, liberty, or even life, but never eternal life. Jesus added, "No one can snatch the out of my hand" (*John 10.28*).

Paul was a man of love and compassion. This extended even to his jailer: without such love Paul would no doubt have taken revenge on his torturer. Instead, he led him to Christ; he had the compassion of Jesus Christ. Paul Negrut, a Romanian pastor who was severely persecuted under the Ceausescu regime, is now one of the leaders of the church in Romania. He spent six months in a concentration camp and a further six months being interrogated all day, every day. Attempts were made to kill his family by connecting the water pipes in his house to the electrical system. After the regime had fallen, he heard one day that the man who had persecuted him for six months was in the hospital dying of cancer. Paul Negrut went to visit him. The man's mother was crying and asked Paul to pray for her son. He laid hands on his persecutor and prayed for him. He recovered, and they have since prayed together.... Without love, it does not matter how doctrinally correct or how gifted we are, for Paul writes elsewhere that without love we are nothing (1 Corinthians 13). ~ *Nicky Gumbel*

The words Paul uses for *to begin* and for *to complete* are technical terms for the beginning and the ending of a sacrifice.... Paul is seeing the life of every Christian as a sacrifice ready to be offered to Jesus Christ. It is the same picture as he draws when he urges the Romans to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (*Romans 12.1*). ~ *William Barclay*

Verses 12-18a—The Advance of the Gospel:

Paul realizes that the Philippians are grieved over his imprisonment, so he encourages them by pointing out that his circumstances are furthering the proclamation of the gospel. His joy in difficult circumstances is meant to be an example to the Philippians to likewise rejoice even in difficult times. (vv. 12-18) ~ *ESV Study Bible*

The first Christians saw Paul's condition and realized that they had far less to fear. In the same way, as we read of the boldness of Christians in persecuted countries, it encourages us to speak more courageously.... We in the West, who have the least to fear, are the most frightened. Our fears are of unpopularity or social isolation, but others have to face torture, imprisonment, and death. ~ *Nicky Gumbel*

Paul was a prisoner but so far from his imprisonment ending his missionary activity it actually expanded it for himself and for others. The word Paul uses for the *advancement* of the gospel is specially used for the progress of an army or an expedition.

Paul's imprisonment, so far from shutting the door, opened the door to new spheres of work and activity into which he would never otherwise have penetrated.

~ William Barclay

Verses 18b-30—To Live is Christ:

Paul, who has prayed for the Philippians, now solicits their prayers for deliverance. The crucial thing for Paul is not life or death. It is maintaining his faithful witness to Christ. Paul's life is not a matter of seeking his own comfort or advancement. It is all about seeking the advancement of Christ's kingdom: to live is tantamount to serving Christ. In fact, to die should be seen as gain, because it would mean that Paul would be freed from his trouble-filled life on earth to rejoice in Christ's presence.

Philippi prided itself on being a Roman colony, offering the honor and privilege of Roman citizenship. Paul reminds the congregation their primary allegiance is to God and his kingdom.

Troubles will come, because the reality is that believers in Christ will suffer for his sake. Paul teaches that both suffering and faith are gifts of God; for both, Paul says, have been granted to you. Suffering for the sake of Jesus is a great privilege (see Matt 5.10-12; Acts 5.41).

~ *ESV Study Bible*

Paul Negrut said of his experiences of persecution: "the strongest weapon that the world has is to sentence you to death. After they kill you there is nothing else they can do to you. That was the lesson that I learned time and again from the secret police in Romania." Again and again they threatened him with death.

How do you respond to that? The greatest threat and power that they have is the power to kill you. Our greatest victory is to die. So whenever they told me, "We are going to kill you," I said, "I can hardly wait. That will be my greatest victory. Because then you will lose me forever and I will be forever home. I will reach my destination—I can hardly wait."

We are united with a common faith in a hostile world. There will be opposition (v. 28). There will be suffering and struggling (vv. 29-30). But we need not be frightened (v. 28); we are not in this alone.

~ Nicky Gumbel

What does Paul expect from them? He expects them *to stand fast*. The world is full of Christians on the retreat, who, when things grow difficult, play down their Christianity. The true Christian stands fast, unashamed in any company. He expects *unity*; they are to be bound together in one spirit like a band of brothers. Let the world quarrel; Christians must be one. He expects a certain *unconquerability*. Often evil seems invincible; but the Christian must never abandon hope or give up the struggle. He expects a *cool, calm courage*. In times of crisis others may be nervous and afraid; the Christian will be still serene, master of himself and of the situation.

~ William Barclay