

Philippians Chapter 1

Philippians 1; Matthew 20:1–16

As Paul's letter to the Philippians is in the lectionary for the next four weeks, Helen and I have decided to preach on a chapter of it a week so we can all go through the whole letter together. I hope this week to set the scene and capture what the letter is about.

To do that I invite you to imagine that such a letter is being written to us today and that it might go something like this. It may be helpful for you to have Philippians Chapter One before you as I have in some way paraphrased it for this message. Everything I speak here I speak as truth.

Now my letter in a form similar to that to the Philippians:

“Trish & Helen, servants of the living Christ Jesus,
To all of the saints that comprise the ‘Charnwoodians’ and the ‘Hallatians’.

May God's grace and peace fill you and have you know that grace and peace are a gift from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God for each of you and when I remember you in prayer, I pray with joy because of the partnership in the gospel you and I have been called to in this place. I know deep within that God has called this season into being. He has teamed us up for His purposes and I am confident in this, that He who began a good work in you and in me and in this church will carry it on to completion until the day of the Lord. It is encouraging and exciting to know that the Lord honours us by calling us into partnership with Him and that He not only has the plan but the means to complete it. It is also encouraging to know that He walks together with us to take His life into the world in order to transform it by His Love.

I want you to know fellow Charnwoodians/Hallatians that I hold you dearly in my heart with a deep God given-love for you – that comes from His pure and everlasting love. So that, whenever I am near you, or not in your midst, I hold you in my heart and before the Lord, wanting only your best.

And this is my prayer: that you be filled even more with God's love and that in this increased measure of His love your depth of knowledge and insight will increase to discern what is best. And that you would also live in a pure and blameless way until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of His righteousness that can come only from Jesus Christ, and that your living of that will be to God's glory.

I want you to know brothers and sisters that I preach Christ not out of selfish ambitions but for the joy of seeing Christ known and you knowing and loving Him. I have been licensed to preach Christ to you and I pray that I stay true to that.

I rejoice in this task and in our prayers that would have the Spirit of God enable me to do all God has called me to do in these times.

You will see I used the words 'joy' and 'rejoice' in this letter to you as it was used many times in Paul's letter to the Philippians so ably delivered to them by Epaphroditus (epaph ro ditus).

Yes, you too are blessed to have a copy of Paul's letter to the Philippians and I encourage you to read and study it again. I make a few comments about it here for your edification.

1) the message in it can be summed up by the heading: "The Apostle and His Friends".

It was carried by his friend and Philippian church elder Epaphroditus who had to delay his return to Philippi because he became seriously ill. In referring to his friends the Philippian church was the first European church founded by Paul and Paul remained very emotionally attached to the people there. But Paul wrote the letter to them because Epaphroditus had come to see him with a couple of tasks. One to give him some physical things for his comfort in prison, but Epaphroditus also came to tell Paul that the church was troubled by some internal disputes. Paul knew that division destroyed churches and that unity was essential to hear the leading of God's Spirit to the church. Disunity in the church makes the Spirit of God flee. Over and over in the NT we hear of how when they were all together with one accord the Spirit of God came¹ or while they were worshipping – they hear the voice of the Lord². One modern church leader said: *"I'm terribly jealous of the unity of this congregation because I know that without it the voice of God is silenced in the church"*³

So ensuring the unity of the church was one motive in Paul writing this letter to the Philippians – so too this letter to our churches. For as we seek and guard out unity our ability to hear the voice of God grows. It is a joy to see the Parish Council move in this way, under Joe's prayerful and wise leadership.

Paul also wanted to let the Philippians know that even in this extreme situation that he is in – he assures them that although he hopes to be set free

¹ Acts 1 & 2

² Acts 13

³ Bob Slosser – Miracle in Darien. P 124 the leader is Terry Fulman

to visit them soon, he expresses his conviction that whatever may happen to him it will be for the good – whether that be life or death for him. He is telling them not to be concerned about whether he is executed or not as he has Christ. That too can be our attitude as people we love die in Christ. It is all gain.

Epaphroditus presented Paul with information of the difficulties and potential problems presenting in the life of the church.

All churches find there are struggles and internal difficulties and all are encouraged to sort them out. In the case of the Philippian church, the rigorous Jews, who hated Paul and his teaching, were active in Philippi. They were asserting, like other Jew-da-isers in Galatia and other places, that true relationship with God could be established only by circumcision and by following the Law strictly. In Philippi, when their arguments had failed to make church members leave the church and abandon Christianity, then argument was followed by persecution.

Yet this did not shake the steadfast loyalty of the Philippian church. No wonder Paul gives thanks as he remembers them! Loyalty is key value in a church community, as it is in a family.

Yet along with this good news about the loyalty and steadfastness of the church, Epaphroditus also report that the church was not free from internal, but small, troubles. There was some discord because some were self-opinionated and intent on their own importance. And there was a squabble going on between two devout women. It seems to be Epaphroditus' suggestion that Paul's writing of a message to the church may end these troubles. This is a reason why Paul wrote to the church of Philippi.

Paul has another reason for writing to his beloved Philippian church too – to thank them for their support, both physical and spiritual. When one is locked up in prison it is good for the morale to have people send greetings and personal items.

But there is a theological depth to this letter of Paul's far above the above reasons apparent for his writing of it. This letter is known as the 10th of his great letters. It is also know as a Captivity letter as Paul wrote it while he was in chains. In it he shows that he has formed something like a philosophy of religion. He ponders not on the things of the world alone, but the inward meaning of the whole cosmic process, as he did in Colossians where he identifies Christ with the creative, pre-existing Word. We trace these ideas in his letters. In a letter to the Galatians he defends Christianity against dangerous attack. In 1 Corinthians 13 we find the Christian ethic at its best and in chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians there is a statement of the Resurrection

doctrine. In the letter to the Romans we have a splendid meditation on the nature of Atonement.

Finally in Philippians, Paul extols the virtue of humility by relating what he has to say with the profoundest mystery of the Incarnation – the relationship of the Godhead with humanity in Christ. The prayer he offers for others is obviously being fulfilled in his own life – by this letter we can see that Paul has himself grown in grace, wisdom and understanding. Often when we pray a blessing for others, like Paul regularly does for the churches he formed, we receive a similar blessing.

Paul has now learnt to not only be content in all things but to rejoice in all things. In this short letter to the church in Philippi Paul uses the word ‘joy’ in its verbal and noun forms 16 times.

One well-known commentator sums the content of this letter as saying: ‘I rejoice, (now) you rejoice’.⁴

I love that – I rejoice now you rejoice. Paul’s physical circumstances were awful – as a prisoner he had lost everything, especially freedom which is particularly hard when his passion was to travel and share Christ and the good news, and to begin churches.

Yet with this massive loss – Paul has clearly gained all there is to gain declared out in the words in v 21 “*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*”

Paul has not taken the suffering in his life lightly – he has not been in a place of just blind faith or saying if the Lord wills it. Vv 29-30 show that walking with Christ involves not only believing in Christ but also a willingness to suffer for Him. Paul’s theology of suffering comes up further in the other chapters of this letter, and hold some of the most inspired insights into Christ’s attitude to suffering and to coming into a depth of relationship with Christ gained in the fellowship of sharing in His suffering. Facing the real possibility that he might die or might be set free Paul exhorts the Philippians to do what he did in verse 27 ie whatever happens conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. This is a good reminder to ourselves – that no matter what happens whether there be financial hardship with a global impact, or physical suffering, or relational difficulties, continue to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel we all carry with us.

As with Paul, I am here among you by the grace of God. I thank God for you and bless you. From Paul’s letter today I pray that each of us would reflect

⁴ Bengel, quoted in Tyndale, p 45

more deeply on two verses in particular and seek deeper insight and understanding of their meaning for us.

The first one is verse 21: *“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is to gain.”*

Let us ask ourselves – how does this verse influence my walk with Jesus. If we have died to Christ – dead people don’t take offence easily, don’t get hurt by insensitivities, or find fault with each other. Dead people alive in Christ rejoice at each new day. Dead people who are alive in Christ rejoice in the things of God growing and taking root. They rejoice in seeing new people come to Jesus. They rejoice in helping each other abound in love and knowledge and depth of insight. They rejoice in speaking blessings about and over each other.

So let us seek deeper insight into that verse’s impact and meaning in our lives.

The second one is vv 27-28. *“Whatever 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, without being frightened in any way of those who oppose you...”*

Then as Paul says in this – whether he is physically with them or not – they will stand firm in one spirit – ie unity, contending as one person for the faith of the Gospel. This way the church keeps its focus and in its unity is able to hear the voice of God showing the next direction to take.

Doing this my friends will bring great joy to you and me as we stand in such unity together for the sake of Christ and His message to the world and it will bring great glory to God as we live out our faith-race this way.

Let us pray: