

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 28

Paul's Letter to the Church at Philippi

INTRODUCTION

A pastor is never free from his calling to “shepherd the flock”: to protect, nourish, and instruct the body of Christ under the rule and authority of his “chief Shepherd” (1 Ptr 5:1-4 ESV). Pastors are always concerned for the well-being of those they love, praying for spiritual strength and growth, mindful of ever-present threats to their devotion to Christ and His Kingdom.

This relationship was especially true for Paul and the church in Philippi. He founded the church, meaning he had a special relationship with them as the one who specifically introduced them to the gospel and disciplined them as a father. They were his spiritual children, and he loved them, likely as he did the church in Thessalonica, where he shared both the gospel and his very life (1 Thes 2:8 ESV).

As Paul, then, is facing possibly his last days upon the earth under house arrest in Rome, he cannot help but think of this church he loves. Since he was unable to Skype or send a text message, he decides to write a letter to communicate to this body of believers a message of joy to encourage them to stand firm in the gospel in the midst of any circumstance, good or bad; a reminder that should encourage us today as well.

THE ART OF THE NEW TESTAMENT LETTER OR “EPISTLE”

Letter writing was a learned art in Paul's time. There were manuals put together to teach scribes how to write various types of letters in Paul's day. Two of these manuals are still available today for study. An unknown person, now called “Pseudo-Dionysius,” wrote one of these manuals.¹

In his manual, Pseudo-Dionysius gave examples of 21 different kinds of letters. One of these letters was a basic form letter as a “letter of friendship.” Gordon Fee has analyzed the form noting three important features of this type of letter:

- (1) A beginning note about the separation of the friends;

¹ For a while, the manual was attributed to Demetrius Phalereus, a Greek philosopher from the 4th century B.C. Scholars have subsequently realized someone else sometime between 2nd Century B.C. and 2nd Century A.D. wrote the book.

- (2) A concern in the letter about the affairs of the sender and the recipient; and
- (3) The note of appreciation and request that the needs of the sender are attended to.

The letter Paul sent to the church of Philippi seems to clearly fall into this category of writing. Paul wrote the Philippians a friendship letter that set out his love and concerns for the church. For a long time, scholars have recognized Philippians as a letter of joy. That is the letter of friendship expressing the joy that flows from a deep friendship rooted firmly in a common fellowship with God.

BACKGROUND TO PHILIPPIANS

Paul and his friends were in Rome where Paul was under house arrest awaiting his appeal to Caesar. Acts ended with, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:30-31).

While we can reasonably date this imprisonment as starting around 59 or 60 A.D., we ask, “What happened to Paul during this time?” Scripture does not tell us precisely, but we have some indications from the letters of Paul. Scholars call four of Paul’s letters his “Prison Epistles.” Scholars use this label because these are letters that Paul was writing while imprisoned; and, while a minority of scholars disagree, most scholars believe Paul wrote these letters during this Roman imprisonment. The four letters are Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

A brief review of Paul’s interactions with the Philippian church (covered previously in lesson 14) is useful before addressing the letter itself. So, we begin our study reviewing what we know from Acts, especially 16:12-40.

Sometime between 49 and 52 A.D., Paul started the Philippian church on his second missionary journey. Philippi was a major Roman town placed on the major road that connected Rome to Asia. Because the city was a Roman colony, the citizens would have dressed like Romans, used a good bit of Latin, and most likely carried a good bit of pride on being a Roman city. There were not enough Jews to form a synagogue (ten males required!), so a good bit of the church must have been Gentile (This might explain why Paul never quotes the Old Testament in all of Philippians).

We should also remember that it was in Philippi where Paul and Silas were imprisoned and failed to escape when an earthquake opened the doors to the cells. This event ultimately led to the salvation of the jailer and his family. No doubt, these were some of the people who received Paul's letter some ten years later.

Luke was either from Philippi or at least seems to have stayed there quite a bit. When Paul and Silas left after the incident with the jailor, Luke stayed behind in Philippi (as we see from the "we" passages in Acts).

Paul kept up his relationship with the church at Philippi. Acts 20:1-3 indicates that Paul likely visited Philippi again during the autumn/winter of 54 or 55. The Corinthian correspondence implies that Paul made another trip into Philippi (and the area of Macedonia) during the spring of 55 or 56.² This would have been during the time Paul was struggling with the Corinthian church over personally touching issues. One scholar notes:

This was a difficult time for the apostle, for he was in the midst of the Corinthian crisis. However, warm relationships with the Macedonian churches continued throughout this bleak time in the apostle's life, and he was grateful for their generosity and sincerity.³

No doubt Paul had a special bond with the Philippian church, and it is clearly reflected in the letter. Reading the letter shows this bond. In the letter Paul uses the word "joy" 16 times in just four chapters! No wonder many refer to this as the letter of joy! In writing, Paul also encouraged the Philippians in holiness, in humility, in worry-free living, and in the confidence that Christ enables Christians to do whatever is needed in God's plan. Paul also placed in Philippians one of the most profound biblical passages on the mission and work of Christ found anywhere in scripture.

² These dates are all subject of discussion among scholars and we use them here not because we are wedded to the years. Rather, they are here to show the scope of Paul's relationship with the church. Every two years or so, Paul had a chance to stay with the church and deepen his fellowship with them, at least until Paul's difficulties in Jerusalem and his journey to Rome.

³ Peter O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans 1991) at 8.

THE LETTER

The text can fairly be outlined as:

1. Letter basics and missionary report (1:1 – 1:26).
2. Exhortations (1:27 – 2:18).
3. Plans (2:19-30).
4. Warnings and exhortations (3 – 4:9).
5. Concluding thoughts (4:10 – 4:23).

1. Letter Basics and Missionary Report (1:1 – 1:26)

Paul wrote his friendship letter with Timothy addressing it to “all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi,” together with the elders and deacons, announcing God’s grace and peace to them. Paul then told them how much he prayed for them. The prayers were always prayers of joy as Paul realized the conviction of the Philippians in helping Paul’s missionary efforts. Paul knew that God had not only started working in the lives of the Philippians, but also that God would not quit prematurely. God would finish and bring to a completion the good works he began in their lives.

Paul missed the Philippians but knew that they shared in not only his ministry, but also the travails that accompanied the work. Through the sharing, they continued to grow. Paul prayed that their growth and love would continue to deepen in knowledge and insight appreciating God’s will – things that are pure and blameless.

Paul alerted the Philippians that his imprisonment had not been a ministry set back. In fact, the opposite was true. Everyone had learned that Paul was a prisoner not because of criminal misdeeds on his part. Paul was a prisoner of faith. Paul’s convictions about Jesus as God and Savior kept him in chains. That was causing the word of God to grow and multiply in the mouths of other believers, as well as among the others guarding Paul. No doubt the Philippian jailer had a chuckle over Paul’s reference to those guarding him hearing the gospel. How well the jailer knew the effect of Paul as a prisoner!

Paul had heard about others who were preaching about Christ from various motives, some from love and others from conceit. Paul never endorsed selfish motives for preaching, but Paul was able to recognize how God could work in the midst of all circumstances and motives to get his message across. In that, Paul rejoiced.

Paul was confident that the prayers of the Philippians and others would ultimately lead to his release. Paul's attitude was not one of great concern because Paul knew his owner! Paul belonged to Jesus, whether Paul was in chains or free, whether Paul was alive or dead. Paul in fact knew that death brought him more than living. Death was uniting with Christ; living was serving for Christ. Knowing that service was important and his current calling, Paul was intent on staying his course. Paul would then have the joy of seeing the Philippians progressing in their Christian walk as they spent time with Paul and his teachings.

2. Exhortations (1:27 – 2:18)

Paul wanted the Philippians to live in “a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Paul added that they should live in such a manner that whether he visited them or merely heard of them, he would know that they were united and standing firm in the faith against suffering and adversaries. Paul pleaded with them to focus on their unity in Jesus, their fellowship in the Holy Spirit, their tenderness and compassion, and being “one in spirit.” They were to do “nothing” – NOTHING – out of “selfish ambition or vain conceit” but do “everything” – EVERYTHING – with humility, considering others better than themselves.

To drive home his point, Paul spoke of Christ in a most profound way. Many scholars reference the poetic nature of Paul's illustration and consider it an early Christian hymn or poem. Paul wrote that the Philippians should have the same attitude of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (2:6-11).⁴

⁴ Scholars have studied and written on this song/poem for decades trying to understand the full depth of Paul's meaning as well as the nuances of some significant vocabulary he used. We are not going into great depth at this point in the study on this passage. Instead we anticipate going into a more exhaustive study of the passage at the point in this class where we consider Paul's teaching on Christ. For now we are recognizing that “Paul is dealing with a question of practical ethics, the marvelous condescension and unselfishness of Christ, and he brings into view the several stages in this process as facts of history.” Robertson Nicoll, *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (Eerdmans 1956) vol. 3 at 435.

This passage rises to equal heights of any in the Bible as it speaks of Jesus. Jesus truly models humility and service on a supreme level. After such an incredible discourse, how could any reader dare not follow Paul's exhortation to live in humility?

Paul urged the Philippians to work through their salvation with due respect and with regard to the work God was doing within each of them. Their lives were to reflect God's glory rather than the complaining and arguing typical with many people.

3. Plans (2:19-30)

Paul hoped to send Timothy to the Philippians soon. Timothy, who was like a son to Paul, shared Paul's care and concern for them. While Timothy's visit was to be in the future, Paul was apparently sending Epaphroditus back to the Philippians, (probably with the letter Paul was writing). Epaphroditus was originally sent by the Philippians to Paul to assist Paul. While working with Paul, Epaphroditus had become very ill and almost died. But God had mercy; Epaphroditus was healed and was now fit to return to Philippi.

4. Warnings and exhortations (3 – 4:9)

In this section, Paul warned the Philippians against religious problems that surfaced from several different fronts. From the Jewish camp often arose a legalism that set one's position with God as arising from one's own degree of worthiness. To these folks, Paul set out his own "reasons to put confidence in the flesh." Paul had the heritage, the upbringing, the schooling, and the deeds that could not be bested by any of the holy. Yet, all of that was garbage for Paul compared to the relationship and knowledge he had of Jesus Christ. Paul considered everything else "rubbish" compared to the righteousness he had from his faith in Christ. It was important for Paul to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (3:10).

Even while Paul wrote this, he modeled the humility he had written of earlier. Paul was quick to add that he had not yet reached any kind of perfection, but pressed on toward the goal of the upward calling of Jesus Christ. Paul did not live a life looking behind him at accomplishments or failings. Paul sought to live for the future.

Paul did not just address the legalism facing the church, but the lawlessness as well. Scholars use the term "antinomianism" to reference those who live without regard to law. While Paul did not use that term, Paul wrote of it nonetheless. Paul

warned that there are those who lived to satisfy earthly appetites rather than Christ. These people, Paul termed “enemies of the cross.” The Philippians should not imitate those who gloried in shameful things. Instead, the Philippians were to glory in the Lord who gives each believer a glorious body like that of the Lord himself.

Paul reached out by name to two ladies who were not getting along in the church. It was very important to Paul that they live in harmony and love.

Paul ended this section urging the Philippians to rejoice always in God. They should be known for gentleness. They were not to worry about anything. Instead, they were to prayerfully set their concerns before God with thankfulness that God would answer the prayers. Doing this, God’s unfathomable peace would uphold them through life’s travails. The Philippians were to work on thinking about the things that were noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. As they did so, they would find not only peace, but the God of peace as well.

5. Concluding thoughts (4:10 – 4:23)

Paul thanked the Philippians again for remembering him in his ministry with their gifts. Paul had known plenty and poverty, and Paul had reached contentment with however much he had. Having explained that, however, Paul wanted the Philippians to know his appreciation for all they had done for him. Paul told them his contentment came from his confidence that he could achieve all God wanted him to do through Jesus Christ. Ultimately, it was God who supplied all of Paul’s needs, just as God did for the Philippians and all his children.

For Paul, God had used the Philippians on more than one occasion! They were among the first to support his ministry. Paul could not say thank you enough! Paul wanted them to know that just as they had met Paul’s needs, God himself would meet the needs of each of them.

Paul closed, noting not only his personal greetings, but also those of the church in Rome as well, especially those working for Caesar.

TEACHING NOTES BY JARED RICHARD

In light of the background and general overview given by Mark, let's now look at the letter itself to see what Paul was teaching to both the early church and us today.

I. Major Point: Therefore, my brothers, _____ (4:1).

A. Stand firm in the midst of _____.

1. Exemplified by Paul in 1:12-18

B. Stand firm in the midst of _____.

2. Exemplified by the Philippian Church

II. How do we stand firm, as Paul challenges us to do?

A. Remember the _____ of Jesus Christ. (4:1-9)

B. Rejoice in God's _____ in the midst of any circumstance. (4:10-20)

C. Reject the _____ of this world. (3:17-4:1)

III. Questions for thought.

A. What does your reaction in the midst of negative/positive circumstances say about your faith in the Lord?

B. How does the gospel encourage us to be steadfast in the Lord?

C. What are you most afraid of losing because of Jesus? Whatever it is may be an idol in your life.