

GOD WITH US

Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Message 27 – Philippians Living Above your Circumstances Philippians 1&2

Introduction

Paul and his team planted a church in Philippi on the 2nd missionary journey, amidst great opposition from the local authorities (Acts 16). A small group of believers was formed, including the jailor and his household who had been guarding the jail cell after Paul and Silas had been beaten and imprisoned. The Philippian church was possibly meeting in the house of Lydia (Acts 16:40), a female businesswoman. Based on the change in pronouns in Acts (from “they” to “we” and back to “they” again-16:7,10, 40) we can surmise that Luke, the author of Acts, stayed in Philippi after the rest of the team was forced out of the city. He likely pastored the church for its first 5 years. Now, many years later, Paul is writing to these believers in Philippi from his prison cell in Rome. He encourages them to maintain strong unity and humility as they live alongside each other. From a prison cell, Paul models the fact that they can experience joy and contentment in any of life’s circumstances, if they maintain an eternal perspective on life.

Paul and his Friends: 1:1-11

Paul opens the letter, as always, with greetings. He then expresses his love and thanks to the believers in Philippi. PhiThey are commended for having participated with Paul in the progress of the gospel from the first day until now. They have shared with him, by means of their prayers, encouragement, and the regular sending of financial gifts and physical aid to Paul (as in the gifts he had just received from them through Epaphroditus). Paul is confident that God will continue His good work in these believers both individually and as a group, until the day of Christ Jesus (1:6).

“For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and

confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me” (1:6,7).

Paul exhorts the believers in Philippi to “abound in love for one another.” This is an early signal as to a *need* in this group of believers. Based on the admonitions in 2:1-11, we can surmise that there was some degree of disunity in this church. In this opening section, he simply notes that he is *praying* that their love for one another will grow.

“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (1:9-11).

Jesus said: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, IF you love one another” (John 13:35). When Christians are beset by disunity and quarreling, their testimony for Christ is diluted. On the other hand, when believers are able to walk in humility and grace toward one another, respectfully pursuing reconciliation in difficult situations, their witness for Christ is strengthened. What can you do, in your relational contexts, to pursue unity? Where can your “love abound still more and more?”

Paul’s Circumstances: 1:12-20

Paul’s circumstances (imprisonment) were very difficult, yet, he was able to see God’s purpose even in such times. God was advancing the gospel of Jesus Christ through Paul’s trials, both by being in prison, but also through others who were out in the towns and cities (1:12-18). That was what mattered most to Paul.

“Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole Praetorian guard and to everyone else ...” (1:12,13).

The Praetorian guard were the elite unit (the “special forces”) in the Roman military. Perhaps they had been assigned to oversee Paul’s imprisonment. In any case, the gospel of Christ was reaching these elite soldiers through Paul. On the outside of the prison cell, the gospel was advancing in a different way. Believers were actually

filled with courage to sincerely speak about Christ without fear. Yet others were taking advantage of Paul's imprisonment to advance their own reputation through selfish ambition, by boldly preaching about Christ. Nevertheless, Paul was not so concerned with his own reputation, rather, he was content to know that the message of Christ was being spread far and wide, no matter the motives. He was not "self-centered" even when thinking about his ministry compared to that of others (a good example for the admonitions coming in chapter 2).

To Live is Christ – To Die is Gain: 1:20-26

Here Paul gives us clear insight into his heart about life and death (and everything in between).

“. . . Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake” (1:20-24).

Paul believed that as long as he remained submitted to Christ, the Lord would be exalted (lifted up) in his physical circumstances, whether in life or death (1:20). He was a servant of Jesus Christ, thus his destiny was controlled not by men or circumstances, but by his Lord. To “live” was to have opportunity to continue serving Jesus – to serve God's purpose in his generation (Acts 13:36). On the other hand, to “die” was actually a “gain” for Paul, since he knew he would immediately be transported into the presence of Jesus. For the apostle, death was not a tragic loss; rather, it was “very much better” than remaining on in this life. Yet, he lived with the tension that as a shepherd of God's people his continuing presence in this world was necessary for their sakes, so that they could be strengthened to grow in their faith. Paul was convinced that God wanted him to remain on earth for a while longer, serving the spiritual needs of people. And he was willing to do that, regardless of the cost to himself.

What a fabulous dual perspective: to live is CHRIST – to die is GAIN. If we live with this perspective, we can trust God through anything, knowing that He is advancing His purposes through any and all kinds of circumstances. If we are given more time to live, this means more time to honor Christ with our lives as His servants; more time to serve His purposes in our lifetime (Acts 13:36). On the other hand, if He sees fit to take us to our heavenly home, then death is “gain,” because in that moment of death we go to be with Christ. The key is that we must remain submitted to Christ as we journey through this life. This is the only way that we can confidently declare, with Paul, that “to live is CHRIST and to die is GAIN.” (Paul was likely thinking of Jesus’ words to this same effect: see Mark 8:34-36.)

Standing as one in Christ: 1:27-30

There is significant emphasis in this letter on *unity in the body*. It may be that there were small factions and divisions brewing just beneath the surface in Philippi (eg. 4:2,3). In any case, Paul encourages them to stand firm in one spirit.

“Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents—which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict (struggle) which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me” (1:27-30).

Paul reminds them that they had actually witnessed the suffering he had experienced when he had first spent time in Philippi, when he was beaten and thrown in jail (Acts 16). Perhaps the suffering that they were experiencing was producing the kinds of anxiety and fear that caused tension in the church. Paul reminds them that their unity, in the face of suffering, will be a sure sign of victory over the very forces that are seeking to tear them apart.

Did you note the fact that Paul says that suffering for Christ is a gift from God (1:30)? To believe in Him is one blessing. To be able to suffer for His sake is another blessing. Wow! What a different way of looking at suffering. Fear and anxiety that we feel when experiencing people who oppose us, cause us to suffer physically, relationally, financially, etc. We can gain perspective from Paul's example and his encouragement. Peter said the same thing: "For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God" (1Peter 2:19). To be clear, there is no blessing from God when we suffer due to our own poor choices. Yet, there is blessing from God when we suffer for honoring Christ in our lives.

Unity in the body - Humility in the heart: 2:1-11

How should such unity be attained? Unity between individuals comes from humility in the heart and mind of each one (2:1-11). Further, unity in the heart and mind is encouraged by *contemplating and imitating the humility of our Lord Jesus*. His self-emptying provides the model for the surrender of our rights to one another.

“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (2:3-8).

This passage is important practically *and* theologically. Practically, it gives us the incentive for self-denial and putting others first: Jesus' example of leaving heaven's glory to pursue our need for reconciliation with God. Theologically, it gives us insight into *how* Jesus, the Son of God, took on *humanity*. He "emptied Himself" to take on the form of a bond-servant. Early theologians discussed the question: Of what did Jesus "empty Himself?" It became clear that He did not empty Himself of deity itself (of the divine attributes). It was impossible for Jesus to "stop being God" for a time. Thus, He

must have emptied Himself of the *right to display or exercise His divine attributes during His time on earth*. Thus, while being “fully God and fully man,” He willingly laid aside the *independent exercise of divine rights*, all the while still possessing in His being the full attributes of God. We see hints of such “self-emptying” for example, on the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus displayed His physical glory momentarily, a sight that stunned Peter, James and John. Then, in an instant, He “hid” that divine glory from them as He descended the mountain.

Another example: When He was being arrested in Gethsemane, and Peter pulled out his sword to try to defend Jesus, the Lord rebuked him saying *if He wanted to*, He could have called to the Father and commanded twelve legions (12,000x12=144,000) of angels to defend Him in an instant. Yet, in order to fulfill the Scriptures concerning His death, He set aside the right to call for those angels in that moment (Matthew 26:53,54). Similarly, Jesus withheld the display of many of His divine attributes during His time on earth *so that* He could live among us and accomplish the work of salvation for us. Paul was teaching that it was this very humility of Jesus, in setting aside *His personal rights* that was to be the motivation for the Philippian believers to place the needs and rights of others before their own.

It is important to note how Paul ends this section on the self-emptying, self-humiliation of Jesus Christ. When he refers to Jesus becoming “obedient to the point of death” he goes on to specify the *uniquely cruel, humiliating kind of death* that Jesus died. Paul uses one word (that takes 5 words in English) to describe Jesus’ horrific death: *even death on a cross*. In Greek it reads: *even cross-death*. Paul, a Roman citizen, knew that the Romans reserved death for the worst kinds of criminals. Crucifixion was not merely an execution. It was a display of vicious cruelty, the public, slow, painful way of extracting human life drop-by-drop from the victim. Only slaves and foreigners could be crucified, according to Roman law. Paul catches his breath as he contemplates the incarnation, emptying, life *and death* of his Lord and Savior, Jesus – *even cross-death!*

Whether we are dealing with relationships in a church, in the home, at school, at work, or anywhere for that matter, this principle remains true: Humility in the mind and heart leads to unity in our relational circles. When we put the needs of others before our own needs, this fosters an atmosphere of love where selfishness cannot thrive. “Christ humbled Himself” (2:8). Where might you choose to humble yourself in your relational circles? Ask God to show you where you need to surrender your self-will, and choose humility and self-lessness. Your choice might foster relational healing and wholeness.

Letting God Shine Through You: 2:12-18

A Christian cannot *work for* salvation, but we must *work out* our salvation (bring forth the full fruit of the gift of salvation), because God is at work in us to will and to work for His good pleasure.

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (2:12,13).

Living our life that pleases God is a partnership between God being at work within us, and we choosing to work out our faith with a healthy reverential fear, in a God who is all powerful and just. God has plans that He wants to advance in us and through us in our lifetime. When we walk in step with His Spirit, we are cooperating with Him to “will and to work for His good pleasure.” Paul had earlier mentioned how Christ would be “exalted in his body, whether through life or through death” (1:20). Here he expresses a similar idea: That God’s good pleasure will be fulfilled in believers as they walk in step with Him.

More specifically, believers are called to live as lights in a dark world as we live out these God-given purposes.

“Do all things without grumbling or disputing (complaining); so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain” (2:14-16).

Paul saw his own life as a “drink offering” being poured out to the Lord. Figuratively speaking, Paul’s energies were being poured out for the sake of others to whom God had called him to minister. (Recall 1:24-26 where Paul spoke of his need to remain in this world, for their sakes.)

Two examples to follow: 2:19-30

Timothy and Epaphroditus are commended by Paul. They are both singled out for their exceptional qualities. Timothy was Paul’s “spiritual son” for whom he always had high praise:

“For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father” (2:20,21).

Epaphroditus was also a model of Christian character. He apparently was from Philippi, and had been sent to Paul with a gift from the Philippian Church. He had come close to death in rendering this service, and presently was concerned that the Philippians were worried about him.

“But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need; because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick” (2:25,26).

Paul was sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi, with this letter in hand. He asks the Philippian church to receive him in a manner worthy of his commitment to Christ and His people.

“Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me” (2:29,30).

Discussion Questions

1. Read 1:12,13. Have you experienced a situation where your difficult circumstances were used by God to reveal Himself to others through you, or to advance His mission through you?
2. How does Paul's perspective on life and death impact you (refer back to 1:20-26).
3. Think about the self-humiliation of Christ, even to the point of dying on a cross (2:1-11). How does this change your perspective on your relationships with other people?
4. What do you see in the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus that you would like to emulate in your own life?