

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 11 – Philippians

It was the apostle Paul who had planted the church in Philippi, and now some ten years later it still delights him to think about the people of this congregation whom he had come to love and so appreciate. Paul is presently locked up in a prison in Rome. However, he is not alone. He has contact with several Christians living there and with others passing through the city to visit him; his young friend Timothy, and Epaphroditus, too, have been particularly helpful in running errands for him in this time of his incarceration.

Epaphroditus had arrived from Philippi with a generous gift from that financially poor congregation to assist Paul in his stressful circumstances and to encourage him in his ministry. Paul is very touched by that. Epaphroditus had been very ill for some time since his arrival, however, and he might well have died, but now after some time he is much better again and is keen to return home to Philippi, so Paul sends him back with this letter of thanks for their generosity.

This letter to the Philippians is altogether different from most of the other letters to churches Paul wrote in that it does not address any heresy or immorality which needs to be confronted. It does refer to a dispute between two of the women, and it gives warning regarding a potential problem of false teachers who may try to lure the congregation away from apostolic teaching, but neither of these is a major theme of the letter. Instead, what we find here is a heart-warming and very personal letter from a most grateful pastor and teacher to his cherished friends in Philippi whom he is pleased to regard as his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Throughout the letter, though, we must not forget Paul's dire circumstances. He is in prison, as I say, and he does not yet know whether he will be released in time or put to death. It could go either way, and it could be soon. When at last he does receive word of what is to happen, he will send Timothy to inform these Philippian Christians what has been decided. So much of what he writes in this letter is all the dearer, and makes an even greater impact upon us in our own walk with the Lord, believer, if we keep these things in mind and consider what it is to live in such wholehearted commitment to Christ.

In chapter 1, after a longer than usual introduction, Paul wants the Philippians to be well aware that his confinement to prison has not impeded his work in spreading the gospel, but has actually contributed to it by presenting him with new opportunities. His incarceration has given him time to write several of his pastoral epistles to churches in need, to be a witness, as he tells us, to the praetorian guard and his fellow inmates, and, effectively, to make him front page news and an example to other believers. His imprisonment has been an incentive for others to preach the gospel – not all with the best motives, perhaps, because for some it has been to get him into even greater trouble – but, whether in pretense or in truth, if Christ is preached, Paul does and will rejoice.

The apostle is prepared for whatever is to happen, whether he lives or dies, because either way it is a good thing, for his living is to serve Christ and his dying is to be with Him. Nevertheless, he is hopeful that he will continue to live, for that would be more profitable for these Christians in Philippi and for any other believers who come under his pastoral care. He is more concerned for them, rather, than for himself, concerned that they not fall apart under persecution but stand together for the faith of the gospel and understand that their calling in Christ is not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake.

In chapter 2 Paul calls the Philippians to a unity of purpose, a unity based on humility, on esteeming others better than oneself and a willingness to serve the interests of one another. He then sets before them that classic passage, verses 5-11, in which he calls them to emulate the example of Christ who humbly emptied Himself – emptied Himself not of His deity, but of His divine prerogatives – that as a man, taking that manhood into God, He might be obedient and offer Himself up unto death on the cross. It was in having so humbled Himself that He was also exalted, was given a name above every other, and will be confessed by everyone to be Lord over all.

The apostle calls these Philippians to such obedience, not in their own strength as if they could ever achieve that, but to an obedience which comes of their looking to the Lord and relying on Him, with the assurance that in doing so it is God who works in them to will and to do His good pleasure. This is what will make them stand out as children of God, what will make them shine as lights in a dark world, and ultimately move them to rejoice with all who suffer with them.

It is in chapter 3 that Paul gives warning about the Judaizers and their false teaching. Circumcision cut off from the gospel is nothing more than mutilation; it is those who have a living faith in Christ and no confidence in themselves who are the true children of God and heirs according to the promise. The Philippians need to remember that. If anyone had cause to boast as a result of his being in the bloodline of Abraham, with all the right breeding, religious training and commitment openly displayed, surely it was Paul himself – even over all his peers – but what things he once considered to be gain for himself he now counts as loss for Christ. Here lies the vital difference.

Paul says that he now considers those former gains as rubbish, that is, unrecyclable garbage – good for nothing but throwing out and being done with them forever – that he may have Christ instead, not claiming his own righteousness through the law, but that unblemished righteousness which is imputed to him by faith in Jesus Christ. The apostle is willing, and even eager, to identify with Christ in His suffering, to suffer with Him and for Him, and that demonstrates his longing to be resurrected, ascended and exalted with Him.

Paul knows that, legally, he has these benefits now; his old man is dead, he has been made a new man in Christ. This is why he can later write, both of himself and of other believers, that our citizenship is already in heaven, from which place we await the second coming of the Lord and His transforming power to make our lowly body like His now glorious body.

Practically, however, Paul also knows that his own life comes frightfully short of reflecting the righteousness of Christ as it should do, that he must continue to mortify the old man and resist the pull of who he used to be in Adam. For that reason, he says that he presses on, forgetting (deliberately leaving behind) those things which are past and reaching forward (consciously striving for) those things which are yet ahead.

Do you, believer, press ahead for this same prize, the upward call of God in Christ Jesus? It is not either one of these alone, forsaking sin or pursuing holiness, but both together. We must pray for such sanctifying grace, to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ, because this when we and all the world should see it is the evidence of God working in us in to will and to do His good pleasure, and this is what will move others to ask about the hope we have within us.

It is in chapter 4 that reference is made to the conflict between two of the women and we see how they are urged to be of one mind if they are to work together in the body of Christ. Their names – Euodia and Syntyche – are thus remembered for this dispute throughout every generation of church history down to our own day, and we should mark that carefully, for they might have been any two of us!

On the contrary, let us rejoice, let our gentleness be known to all, and let us be anxious for nothing. As Christians, we are not to interpret our outward circumstances by what we think we see before us, but through the eyes of faith, committing everything to God who grants us peace even in the midst of our troubles. Let us meditate on the things which are right and good and bring praise to God, and the apostle offers his own experience as a prisoner of the Lord as an example to be followed.

The letter ends with a very tender word of thanks to these believers in Philippi for their generous gift received most recently, and it acknowledges that this is not the first time they have opened their hearts and purses to assist Paul in his very real and practical needs. It is easy to see why the apostle has a special place in his heart for them, and why it is that he so hopes to see them again soon should he be enabled to do that.

At the same time, though, he wants them to know that his suffering has not been for nothing. He has found that, in being so tried and afflicted, he has had to cast himself repeatedly on the mercies of the Lord and has found in doing so, apart from all human aid, what a very present help the Lord is to all who call upon Him in truth. He has learned from such personal experience to come boldly to the throne of grace to obtain mercy and to find grace to help in time of need.

As a result, he has learned in every state, whether in riches or in poverty, to be content, that he can do all things and withstand all things through Christ who strengthens him. O that we, beloved, with believers everywhere might learn that same lesson! It does not come from academic study, but from learning to wait upon the Lord and to trust Him, from experiencing His goodness firsthand and seeing for ourselves how He cares for all who cast their cares upon Him.

Rev. Tom Aicken

