

## Bishop's Bible Study on St Paul's Letter to the Philippians

### Introduction

St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians is different from his other letters. It doesn't focus on the congregation's pathology. Rather, its aim is the joy of the Christian life. The word *joy* is used 16 times in this letter, more times than in any other of Paul's letters. For Paul, joy doesn't preclude suffering (the word *joy* actually comes from the word *God*, so to *enjoy* something is to be *in God*). For Paul, joy embraces and overcomes suffering. The joy he writes about is communal joy rooted in Jesus as he's exalted and worshiped in the Body of Christ. Those who are "in Christ," or "in the Lord Jesus," or "in Christ Jesus" don't experience joy as an abstract theological proposition, but rather it's an organic reality of the church's common life.

Paul writes from prison (1:14,17) in Rome around 61-63 A.D., so the sufferings and indignities he's experiencing make his message of joy all the more powerful. The letter was written at least in part as a "thank you" note. Epaphroditus, a member of the church at Philippi, had visited Paul in prison and had brought him a monetary gift from the Philippians. While there, Epaphroditus fell ill. Paul uses the occasion of this letter to thank the Philippians as well as assure them that Epaphroditus is now well.

The letter was also written to shore up the faith of the Philippian Church. Philippi was an important trade city in the Roman province of Macedonia. It was quite polytheistic and religious syncretism was widespread. Its citizens also held an inordinate pride in the city's importance and in its pagan shrines, so Paul's letter emphasizes how humility is necessary for the Christian life and he warns them strongly against idolatry.

### Greeting (1:1-2)

1:1-2 Paul identifies himself as the co-author of the letter along with Timothy. Timothy was a native of nearby Lystra and after his conversion had helped Paul begin the church at Philippi. Notice the "in Christ Jesus" language in the greeting and address. It's a recurring theme.

### Paul's Prayer for the Philippians (1:3-11)

1:3-5 Paul offers thanks for their Gospel *partnership*. *Partnership* here more than just working together the way business partners might work. The Greek here is *koinonia* (κοινωνία), which means a partnership that's grounded in covenantal fellowship. *Koinonia* is a recurring theme of the letter. Paul states that *koinonia* is a necessary prerequisite to living the Christian life. One can't be *in Christ Jesus* (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) without it. *Thanksgiving* is grounded in the previous verse's emphasis on God's grace and peace. *Thanksgiving* thus emanates out of one's trust in God's grace.

- 1:6 The good work that God has begun refers to God's activity in bringing his saving grace to the Philippians.
- 1:7-8 Paul then compares the grace they have received with his own situation in prison.
- 1:9 Paul's hope is that their love will grow with a maturity that comes from the knowledge of God and the discernment of the Spirit. Love that isn't purposeful or focused is easily manipulated and abstracted. Godly love comes from knowing God's purposes in the world and by the ability to make truthful decisions.
- 1:10-11 The knowledge (ἐπιγνώσει) of God and the discernment (αἰσθησεί) of the Spirit (vs.9) is a prerequisite for a life that's pure and blameless. This life won't be idle, but it'll produce what Paul calls the fruit of righteousness (καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης), which comes to those in Christ.

### **Paul's Circumstances as he writes the letter (1:12-30)**

Paul follows the greeting with a reflection on his personal circumstances and what has led him to write: Paul is in prison waiting to hear Caesar's judgment. Will he be freed? Will he be executed? Paul writes of rejoicing, come what may, because God is always faithful. God uses our circumstances to work out God's purposes.

- 1:12-14 Paul isn't interested in self-pity. His imprisonment has advanced the Gospel, which is the most important goal. Note: *Praetorian Guard* = Rome's elite military group.
- 1:15-18 Paul makes a fascinating argument here. He writes that some preach Christ for the right reasons (good will), while others do it for the wrong reasons (out of envy and rivalry). Paul concludes that the motivation isn't important, but rejoices that in both cases, Christ is preached!
- 1:19-26 Paul is joyfully circumspect. He thanks them for their prayers and clearly hopes his imprisonment results in his freedom, but also accepts the other possibility (i.e., execution) as long as Christ is honored. Paul gives a personal preference to move on (to depart) to be with Christ, but he also understands the necessity of remaining to help build up the Church.
- 1:27 manner of life = politeuesthe (πολιτευεσθε). This Greek word is the same word from which we get our word *politics*. Paul here refers to

Christ's example of humility and servanthood, which must define the Church and be our basis for unity. Also, one's manner of life is political in the sense that it is lived among others.

- 1:28-30 It's the church's steadfastness of faith and its unity in the face of suffering that becomes the *omen* to those who oppose the church's mission. The Philippians should accept their suffering because it's to be expected. The Gospel always produces conflict.

### **Our call to Imitate Christ's Humility (2:1-11)**

- 2:1-4 Paul calls the Philippians to full *participation* (again, the word: *koinonia*) in the life of the Spirit which then results in a selflessness and modesty that presumes another's interests are as at least as important as our own.
- 2:5 *Have this mind* = refers to vs. 1-4, that is, the mind of Christ, which is by nature humble and selfless.
- 2:6 Christ didn't exploit his divinity for selfish aims.
- 2:7 *emptied* = *enkenoseo* (ἐκενώσεν). This means a thorough purging of all rights and benefits to something. His incarnation as a human being is crucial to understanding the very nature of God.
- 2:8-11 Being human wasn't enough, he had to also be humbly obedient, which could only mean death on the cross. Because of his humble obedience and his willingness to purge himself of all claims to divinity, God has reversed the status quo. In human terms, to become humble means to be humiliated, but to God it means exaltation.

### **We are lights shining in the World (2:12-18)**

- 2:12-13 *Therefore* = this refers back to vs. 5-11. Because Christ was obedient, we also ought to be obedient with fear (awe of God) and trembling (acknowledging God's sovereignty over our lives) recognizing that God is at work in us for God's good pleasure (not necessarily our own).
- 2:14-15 This is where the rubber meets the road. The reason behind this call to radical obedience is for the Philippians to be lights in the world, a world that Paul deems crooked and perverse.
- 2:16-18 Paul sees his martyrdom as a possibility (*poured out as a libation*). This is a reference to the act of pouring wine on the ground as part of a religious

sacrificial act. This symbol wasn't lost on the Philippians who were well-aware of such pagan rituals in Philippi. Paul doesn't begrudge this possibility because he sees it in the larger context of his life in Christ. If his offering advances their faith, then his sacrifice wouldn't be in vain.

### **Paul's Fellow Laborers (2:19-30)**

2:19-24 Paul's desire to send Timothy to see how the congregation is growing and developing (he was the founding pastor, after all. Notice also that even in the early church Paul acknowledges that not all leaders are other-centered (see Ch. 2 and *koinonia*). Some, Paul contends, look after only their own welfare (directly conflicting with Paul's statement in 2:4).

2:25-30 Epaphroditus was the messenger who delivered this letter. Paul chose him as messenger because of his deep ties to the Philippian community and because he knew they longed to see him after news of his grave illness had reached them.

### **Nothing in the Law can save us (3:1-11)**

3:1-3 Paul vividly cautions the Philippians to beware of those who would seek to place inappropriate constraints on their common faith; those who insist on the physical circumcision rather than a spiritual one. Paul does not call them nice names. He views their intentions in the lowest light referring to them as *evil-workers*.

3:4-6 Here Paul makes a powerful argument, basically saying that if anyone could have confidence in practices such as circumcision, it would be him. He catalogues his past and his clear superiority to others in his zealotry for keeping even the most minute part of Torah.

3:7-11 Paul concludes his case by saying that all his achievements listed in vs. 4-6 are basically a waste, because none made him righteous before God. Only faith in the work of Christ can make anyone righteous before God. This isn't bragging. It's an invitation from God to follow Christ in his sufferings; in his downward mobility (as Paul showed in 2:4-11).

### **Pressing towards the Goal, which is Christ (3:12-4:1)**

3:12-16 Paul really wants to drive home the point about Christ's humility as the model for all Christian community. It isn't something we can *make as our own*, it's a gift. Yet, we still must strive to receive this gift. It takes effort on our part to live into such humility as a community. Paul recognizes the paradoxical quality of this (i.e., striving for a gift) so he ends this

section by saying it takes a certain level of maturity to comprehend this and then to make it be the heart of one's faith and practice.

- 3:17 Paul encourages the Philippians to imitate him as he imitates Christ. Remember, the example Paul gives of Christ (2:5-11) and how Paul himself followed the same path (3:4-11). So, Paul isn't being egotistical. Rather he is merely encouraging faithful living.
- 3:18-19 Paul now gives an example not to follow. He refers to those whose god is their belly. This reference is to people's selfishness that focuses them on only what pleasures them in the present. In Greek philosophy, the belly was the location of the baser passions.
- 3:20-21 Contrasting instant gratification that's self-focused, Paul reminds them that they have a *commonwealth* (politeuma πολιτευμα) that is other-focused; a *politics* that's not the same as the politics of this world.
- 4:1 *Therefore*, harks back to his entire point in this section, that is, because we have a *commonwealth* (a political reality) that comes from heaven we not only have *joy*, we also have a ground on which to *stand firm*.

### **Closing Exhortations (4:2-9)**

- 4:2-3 There was a rift between two leaders of the congregation (fortunately, this *never* happens in today's church). We don't know anything about the nature of the rift between these two women, but it's important to note Paul sees the entire congregation as responsible for the healing of the rift. Remember, Paul understands the congregation to be an organism, a body. Paul establishes this corporate responsibility in 2:1-18.
- 4:4 Even when Paul is dealing with a problem in the church he never strays long from the essential nature of the letter, i.e., rejoicing.
- 4:5 Paul now begins a series of virtuous admonitions related to rejoicing in the Lord. The first is *forbearance*. It means a gracious willingness to yield one's own demands or rights in order to meet another's needs.
- 4:6 Next, he addresses *anxiety*. Now by anxiety, Paul doesn't mean the worry or concern we have for one another (e.g., the concern that they had for Epaphroditus). No, this kind of anxiety is a self-centered failure to trust in God's grace as sufficient. Paul's antidote is prayer for others, which begins to break us away from anxiety that's self-centered.

4:7 Thirdly, is the *peace of God*. The movement away from self and toward God brings peace.

4:8-9 Thinking on worthy things can lead one to do worthy things (ideas/ thoughts have consequences in actions). For Paul, joy isn't a passing emotion. It is bodily (individually and corporately) experience of contentment that comes when one responds to God's grace. Thus, the state of being joyous produces both contentment and obedience.

### **Acknowledgment of the Philippians' Gift (4:10-20)**

4:10-11 This revival of concern refers back to the gift that the Philippians had sent by the hands of Epaphroditus.

4:12-13 Regardless of one's personal circumstances, Paul claims our contentment comes from the joy given in the grace of God. Any physical challenge, even imprisonment is overcome by this joy.

4:14 *my trouble* = his imprisonment

4:15-16 The gifts sent by the Philippians, not only the most recent one, is a sign for Paul that they share in the partnership (*koinonia*) of his ministry.

4:17-20 Paul sees their support of his ministry not only making them partners, but also a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. Paul also borrows from the language of the marketplace. In a sense, Paul is saying to them, "you are accruing interest on your account."

### **Benediction (4:21-23)**

4:21-22 Paul ends his letter with several greetings from those around him in his imprisonment. Those of Caesar's household probably doesn't refer to those in the Emperor's (Nero's) biological family. It probably refers to those in government service (civil servants). This is an important window into the people who comprised the early church.

4:23 *with your spirit* = the *your* here is 2nd person plural (y'all's), meaning commonality of spirit, referring back to the single spirit of unity and service demonstrated by Jesus and explained in 2:5-11.