

SESSION 7: Philippians

Four main points

1. Background
2. Theme
3. Issues
4. Application

1. Background

Reading: Philippians 1:1-30

2. Theme

Reading: Philippians 2:1-30

3. Issues

Reading: Philippians 3:1-21

4. Application

Reading: Philippians 4:1-23

Discussion questions:

What could we do to have a more general sense of joy in our Christian life and meetings?

What does it mean to you 'to know Christ in his sufferings'?

1. Background

Philippi was a Roman colony in Macedonia about ten miles inland from the Aegean Sea. The original settlement was called Krenides (meaning 'springs', appropriate because the city had a good water supply), but in 356 BC the name was changed by Philip II, king of Macedonia (359–336 BC), when he enlarged the city with many new inhabitants and considerable construction. In 42 BC it was the site of a famous battle at which Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius. It became a military colony. After Octavian defeated Antony in 27 BC, Philippi was given an even more important status in the province and its citizens had many privileges.

Paul founded the church at Philippi on his second missionary journey (Acts 16). While the apostle was in Troas, he was instructed in a vision to proceed into Macedonia, and Philippi became the first European city in which he preached. Apparently the Jewish population in Philippi was small; at least there was no synagogue. Consequently, Paul met first with some women at a Jewish place of prayer by the riverbank outside the city. The first convert was Lydia, a 'God-fearer' (a term denoting a Gentile who had become a partial adherent to Judaism) who responded to Paul by receiving Christian baptism and opening her home to the missionary party. Other significant incidents were the exorcism of the demon from a slave girl and the conversion of the jailer and his family. These early converts were a most diverse and unlikely group with which to found a local church but the grace of God overcame their differences.

Not surprisingly, Paul had a special affection for the church and rejoiced over its progress. The church sent gifts to Paul on several occasions and Paul wrote to them with gratitude (Philippians 4:15-16). Epaphroditus had brought the gift from Philippi. He had instructions to minister to Paul's needs through personal service (2:25) but during his trip he had fallen ill and almost died. For some reason, Epaphroditus was embarrassed at falling ill. Perhaps, he felt that he had let Paul and the church down. When Epaphroditus recovered he wanted to return to Philippi and took Paul's letter with him. Paul points out to the Philippians that Epaphroditus had been a real fellow soldier in the Lord's work (2:25), that his illness had been extremely serious (2:27-30) and that he was worthy of a hero's welcome (2:29).

Paul was certainly in prison at the time of writing but it is not clear to which time of imprisonment Paul refers. Paul hopes that he will be released quickly (1:25, 2:24) and hopes to send Timothy soon. Luke records in Acts (19:22) that Paul sent Erastus and Timothy from Ephesus. The sending of Timothy points to a possible Ephesian imprisonment but why does Paul not mention Erastus in his letter to the Philippians? Luke accompanied Paul to Rome but although Paul mentions Luke in Colossians (4:14) he does not mention him in Philippians. The journeys between Rome and Philippi were also much longer than the journeys between Ephesus and Philippi. On the other hand, there is much to be said for the view that Paul wrote the letter towards the end of his Roman imprisonment perhaps when Luke had already moved on. In Philippians, Paul does not mention the collection for Jerusalem, which was much in his mind while at Ephesus. Acts does not say that Paul was even imprisoned at Ephesus. The palace guard (1:13) and Caesar's household (4:22) point to the letter's possible Roman origin. If this is the case then the letter can be dated about AD 59-61.

The letter's informal style makes it difficult to outline. Paul seems to have started writing to renew his thanks to the Philippians for their gift and to reassure them of the well-being of their messenger, Epaphroditus, as he returns home. Timothy's approaching visit (2:19), Paul's own hope of visiting the church (2:24), and the problem of a disagreement between two women at Philippi (4:2) could also have influenced his decision to write.

2. Theme

If written from Rome, Philippians is probably the last New Testament letter of Paul to the churches. The first reason for writing the letter seems to be related to Paul's sending Epaphroditus back to his home city. The Philippians were naturally worried about Epaphroditus but Paul's request that the church should receive him with all joy and that they should hold him in high regard (2:29) implies that some misunderstanding had occurred.

On several occasions (1:3, 5; 4:10, 14ff.), Paul pays warm tribute to the repeated generosity of the church not least in the material help which it had sent to him. Paul clearly appreciated the support of a congregation that was not rich itself. Paul valued these gifts not only as a service rendered to him personally but also as a contribution to the work of God and the gospel.

A significant theme of the letter is Christian joy (1:4, 25-26; 2:2, 29; 4:1). The word 'joy' in its verbal and noun forms is found sixteen times in the four chapters of the letter. Paul reminds the Philippians that the Christian rejoices in prayer, in the fruit of labours, in the preaching of the gospel and even in suffering. This was something that Paul had to prove in his own experience not least through the trying circumstances of his captivity.

Paul's life was filled with joy and his regular exhortations to 'rejoice in the Lord' were not written by someone whose life was easy. In fact, Paul knew that he might even face the death penalty for preaching the gospel (1:20, 22-23; 2:17; 3:10-11). As the letter draws to a close, Paul writes, 'Do not be anxious about anything' (4:6). This is both an exhortation to others and a testimony from personal experience. Through prayer and petition Paul knew the peace of God in his heart and the joy of the Lord as his constant and everlasting strength. This came from his fellowship with Christ, something that enabled him to write, 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain' (1:21).

Another important theme is fellowship. The New Testament word (*koinonia*) basically means 'participation in something with someone' (e.g. 'the gospel', 1:5, or 'the Spirit', 2:1). This understanding of fellowship is much more important than simply a friendly atmosphere. There were undoubtedly differences of opinion and internal disturbances within the congregation (2:2-4, 14; 4:2). Pride, selfishness and factions must not be allowed to spoil the fellowship of Christians in the gospel. Instead, Christians must share in the proclamation of the gospel in word and deed. This gospel is the very basis of joy and fellowship. In his comments, Paul frequently used the word 'all' (1:1, 4, 7, 8, 25; 2:26; 4:21) to remind the Philippians of the wrongness of their divisions and quarrels. Instead, they must have the attitude of their Lord and the humility that he showed despite his eternal divinity and glory (2:5-11).

As far as Paul is concerned a correct understanding of the gospel is very important. He uses the term seven times (1:5, 7, 12, 27; 2:22; 4:3, 15). Christians have a partnership in the gospel. Going to the very heart of the gospel can often solve practical and doctrinal problems. It must not be modified in any way or it is no longer the gospel of Jesus Christ and his cross. Philippians constantly brings the reader's attention back to Paul's great ambition. It is that Christ should be magnified.

Paul longs to know Christ in a personal and intimate way, one in which he might enter in the experience of his resurrection and his sufferings. While Paul's tribulations do not add anything to the work of Christ at Calvary, which was complete and final, his experience of suffering in this world in the hope of the life that is to come is parallel with that of his Lord.

3. Issues

For Paul, a pressing issue concerned his fate. In prison he did not know what judgment awaited him. It was his great desire that whatever the circumstances, whether in release or in death, he would magnify Christ. In practical terms this meant showing courage and not being ashamed of his Lord. Paul concludes that whatever happens he can rejoice. He looks to the unfolding of his Christian life and his ultimate hope of standing unashamed both before human judges and before his Lord for, regardless of the outcome of his immediate physical circumstances, he has every reason to expect spiritual victory to be his. His own faith is unshaken. Paul adds an exhortation against faintheartedness in time of trial. Paul rallies his beloved Philippians to share steadfastly with him in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings (3:10-11).

Paul takes the example of Jesus Christ as the greatest example of humility and in doing so provides a concise statement of the truth about his Lord. This passage is often thought to be a quotation from an early Christian hymn (1 Timothy 3:16 could be another example), but this need not be someone else's work. Paul could clearly write highly poetic passages (e.g. Romans 8:35-39 and 1 Corinthians 13). In any event, this passage is a magnificent summary of the person and work of Christ, pre-existent ('being in very nature God', literally 'existing in the form of God'), incarnate ('being made in human likeness', 'found in appearance as a man'), crucified ('death on a cross'), exalted ('God exalted him to the highest place', literally 'super-exalted') and glorified ('gave him the name that is above every name'). Controversy centres on what the phrase 'emptied himself' means. A modified form of the kenosis theory (Gk: *kenosis*, empty) states that in the incarnation the Lord was stripped of his glory but not of his essential deity (*HP* 101, 216). The best interpretation of this passage is that the pre-incarnate Christ already possessed equality with the Father and resolved not to cling to it. The name given appears not simply to be 'Jesus', the name given before his birth and confirmed by Joseph (Matthew 1:25; Luke 2:21), but 'Lord' (i.e. God). The universal acknowledgment that 'Jesus is Lord' will include angels and departed saints in heaven, people still living on earth, and the satanic hosts and lost humanity in hell.

Preachers who use 'finally' half way through the sermon are in good company for Paul uses 'finally' (3:1) when there are two chapters to follow. 'Finally' carries the sense of furthermore rather than 'lastly'. The Judaizers, who insisted that Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the law, followed Paul everywhere. Their 'gospel' was in effect no gospel at all for they altered the very basis of faith, which is salvation by the grace of God through faith alone. Paul is a worthy opponent of these Judaizers for his credentials are second to none, though he deems them irrelevant to salvation and the gospel. The change of style and subject-matter is very noticeable. Assuming that what follows in chapter 3 is a digression as Paul receives news of the operation of the Judaizers, it is clear that the Philippian church was succumbing to wrong-headed ideas about which Paul must warn them. Paul, with his impeccable Jewish background (3:4-6), still calls circumcision 'mutilation' (3:2). He calls the Judaizers 'dogs' (3:2), the very term with which Jews would label the despised Gentiles. If the Judaizers were looking for salvation by good works, Paul calls them 'evil-workers' (3:2). In effect the Judaizers oppose the work of Christ on the cross by requiring works of the law.

The letter closes with various exhortations. Paul includes a plea for unity between two women in the church. Exhortations to joy, patience, trust, prayer, thanksgiving, and nobility of thought follow, with promises of divine presence and peace and the return of Jesus. This advice is all the more powerful as it comes from a man in an ancient prison with the possibility of death looming over him. The secret of his joy seems to be emptying his mind of the negative things and filling them with the positive, not in abstract terms alone - for the personification of every virtue Paul extols is seen in the Lord Jesus Christ.

4. Application

The church at Philippi was founded because God had commissioned Paul to preach in Macedonia. While we are inclined to think that every area in which the Apostles preached was somehow easier than our context it is more likely to be the case that every area in which the Apostles preached was more difficult.

The relationship between Paul and the church at Philippi is a good example of the relationship between pastor and people. The church supported Paul practically, something for which Paul was very grateful. Paul wanted to encourage the church but was not afraid to say challenging words about the dangers of doctrinal error. He also takes the time to plead with two members of the church not to fall out about things that do not really matter.

While generosity, joy, thanksgiving, fellowship and unity in 'the gospel' are all important to Paul and are important themes and issues in his letter to the Philippians, they are not always hallmarks of the church today. While historic buildings and other factors can be a great burden on the church, it is important not to give the world at large the impression that what Christian people do is to ask others for money. Instead, it is important that Christians are seen to be generous. This might include a generosity of spirit, a willingness to share resources, generous hospitality, as well as being generous with money.

The old joke, 'people go to church looking as if they are going to the dentists and come out looking as if they have been,' would not have any humour about it if it were not, at least in part, true. There is clearly a difference between being solemn (not always such a bad thing) and being miserable, just as there is a difference between being joyful and just having a laugh or being happy – but Christian worship and the Christian community should be characterised by joy. This does not mean a false levity in every possible situation but a real delight in Christ and what it means to be a Christian and to live the Christian life, a joy that sustains the believer through a variety of circumstance and events, welcome and unwelcome, good and bad.

'Fellowship' has been a much discussed topic in the life of the church in recent years. Unfortunately, 'fellowship' is a word that has been greatly devalued and has come to mean little more than 'friendship', not a bad thing in itself but not the same as 'partnership in the gospel'. Glossing over practical and doctrinal differences is not fellowship. Sometimes, in a true spirit of Christian grace and charity, believers have to agree to disagree – though not about the fundamentals of the faith that Paul lists, including that Jesus Christ was pre-existent, incarnate, crucified, exalted, and glorified and that the universal acknowledgment 'Jesus is Lord' will include angels and departed saints in heaven, people still living on earth, the satanic hosts and all who have died.

It is no exaggeration to say that this epistle is 'full of Christ' – the divine names are used with remarkable frequency in the opening verses and in the closing prayer. In this spirit, Charles Wesley wrote:

My heart is full of Christ, and longs
Its glorious matter to declare!

It is a reminder that to be a Christian is to seek to be full of Christ and to witness to him. Generosity, joy, thanksgiving, fellowship and unity in 'the gospel' should be hallmarks of individual Christians and therefore of the church today.