

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

ADVANCING THE GOSPEL IN THE MIDST OF STRUGGLES!

Read Philippians 1:12-30

Introduction

If only everything went smoothly. If only we didn't have problems. If only ... if only. We tell ourselves that if only this or that weren't in our way, we would have a better Christian life and witness. This passage tells a different story, that in spite of – no, because of – our problems, Christ can be glorified in our lives. What an important mindset for disciples to take hold of! This attitude of mind can be ours. Let's examine this remarkable point of view in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippian church.

Christ Is Preached even to the Palace Guards

“But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” (vv12-14)

In the Roman world Paul's imprisonment was legally not considered a penalty for a crime, but a sort of "holding tank" used to detain those awaiting trial or execution. The soldiers here were members of the "praitōrion", "the praetorium," variously translated, "palace guard" (NIV), "palace" (KJV), and "imperial guard" (NRSV). Can you imagine being a soldier alone with Apostle Paul for a straight six-hour shift? Many soldiers, no doubt, became Christians as a result, and their influence began to spread throughout their entire unit, to their families, and beyond. Whether or not they became Christians, they all knew that Paul's imprisonment was because of his testimony for Christ, not because he was some kind of political prisoner.

No wonder Paul can write: *“I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel.”* We might be tempted to complain about our difficult situation. Not Paul. He knew that it wasn't about him, but about Christ and his kingdom. And so, he sees progress rather than difficulties.

Paul's imprisonment gave the Christians around him – who were not imprisoned – greater confidence and boldness.

- They saw that Paul had joy in the midst of such a trial.
- They saw that God would take care of Paul in such circumstances.
- They saw that God could still use Paul even when he was imprisoned.

Preaching for the Wrong Motives

“Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defence of the gospel. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.” (vv15-18)

Don't be surprised that Paul had enemies among the Christians. Show me any man or woman who is effective in the work of Christ, especially in a visible role, and I'll show you petty enemies who seek to undermine, slander, and distort. When Billy Graham was in his prime, he had a small but determined group of Christian enemies who publicly criticized him for his openness to work with churches that they

considered apostate and for his stand on unsegregated crusade seating in an era when that was considered taboo.

Paul was criticized for his openness to uncircumcised Gentiles, his willingness to eat with them, to baptize them, and to allow them leadership roles in the church (Galatians 2:11-16). He was probably criticized for his lack of oratorical skills (1 Corinthians 2:1) and for his unwillingness to be quiet about his "strange" beliefs about the Gospel to the Gentiles. He had enemies.

They preached out of envy and rivalry rather than out of a love for the lost or out of goodwill towards Paul. From the standpoint of Rome, Paul is on trial to determine whether or not Christianity should be considered a protected religion (*religio licita*) like Judaism. And whether those who claim "Jesus as Lord" can also recognize Caesar as "lord," or be considered guilty of treason. Paul sees his role as "the defence" of the Gospel and he sees this as a divine appointment.

On the one hand you have faith-filled, bold witness. On the other you have "selfish ambition". Perhaps they intend by their preaching to "rub it in" that Paul is incapacitated and unable to preach, and in doing so both make him feel bad and undercut his support within the Roman church. Paul sees through their base motives and rejoices all the more. His goal is to see the Gospel preached fully in Rome, and by their preaching for whatever motive, they are helping to accomplish that. Paul claims his right to rejoice, even in the midst of conflict.

Remember that Paul's concern here was not with the content of the gospel being preached, only with the motives of those who preached. Paul objected if he thought a false or distorted gospel was preached, even if from the best of motives (Galatians 1:6-9).

Paul's attitude went like this: "If you preach the true gospel, I don't care what your motives are. If your motives are bad, God will deal with you – but at least the gospel is preached. But if you preach a false gospel, I don't care how good your motives are. You are dangerous and must stop preaching your false gospel, and good motives don't excuse your false message."

Paul's confidence in his present circumstances

"For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death." (vv19-20)

Paul knew that the Lord was in control of all events, even though his imprisonment and impending trial before Caesar Nero made the situation look pretty dark. He was so confident because he knew that the Philippians prayed for him. His deliverance in the present situation was connected to the prayer of the Philippians.

However, it was not the prayer of the Philippians in and of itself that would meet Paul's need. It was the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ that came to Paul through the prayer of the Philippians. Paul's needs were met by the Spirit of God, but this provision to Paul was brought about by the prayers of the Philippians.

Paul said *"my earnest expectation and hope..."* These are words of faith. Paul mightily trusted God here, and Paul first trusted God that in nothing I shall be ashamed. He believed that God would not cause him to be ashamed or that God would not turn against him in the matter. In the words of Paul in this letter, he mentioned *"whether by life or death"*. This is Paul admitting to the Philippians that he might not be released from this present imprisonment, but it might instead result in his martyrdom.

This must have hit hard on the Philippians who saw God do so many remarkable miracles of deliverance in Paul's life among them in Philippi (Acts 16:11-40). It would have been easy for the Philippians to associate God's glory only with being delivered from one's problems, not in being delivered in the midst of one's problems.

Paul's outlook on ministry

"For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labour; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless, to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again." (vv21-26)

Paul knew that death was not a defeat to the Christian. It is merely a graduation to glory, a net gain for the Christian. Paul's death at the time would be a gain in two senses. First, his death for the cause of Christ would glorify Jesus, and that was gain. Second, to be in the immediate presence of the Lord was gain for Paul.

The idea that Paul could consider death a present gain argues against the idea of "soul sleep." This false teaching says that the believing dead are held in some sort of suspended animation until the resurrection occurs. His understanding that his death might be considered gain also argues against the idea of "purgatory" which says that the believing dead must be purified through suffering before coming into the presence of God.

Knowing that his death could be a gain – both for the gospel and for him personally – Paul was torn between being with the Lord or continuing to minister to the Philippians and others. But his heart was set on "departing". It is strong to say, but one must say that Paul, in some way, wanted to die. In fact, desire describes a strong longing, a thirst, a cry...

However, Paul understood that others still needed him; that his work was not yet done. So, while allowing for the possibility of his martyrdom, he told the Philippians that he expects to be spared at this time (*I know that I shall remain and continue with you*).

A Manner Worthy of the Gospel

"Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me." (vv27-30)

"Whether I come and see you or am absent," indicates that Paul recognizes that he may not see the future as clearly as he thinks, that his continued imprisonment is still a real possibility. And so, he gives them a command: "Let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ." This phrase translates the Greek verb "politeuomai", which has the basic meaning, "to be a citizen, have one's citizenship"... in this case in the gospel of Christ.

Christians' lives must be "worthy of the gospel of Christ," that is, to be lived "worthily, in a manner worthy of, suitably." When people look at our lives, our way of living either brings credit to and adds value to the message of the Gospel or makes people inclined to disregard it. We are books read by all (2 Corinthians 3:2-3).

Paul focuses on three behaviours:

1. Unity of spirit (1:27c)
2. Contending for the faith of the good news of Christ (1:27d)
3. Courage in the face of opponents (1:28a.)

Paul examines unity and humility further in chapter 2. One of his emphases here is "contending" (NIV) or "striving" (KJV, NRSV), Greek *synathleō*, "contend or struggle along with someone." Have we given up struggling to make the gospel clear to our family, our neighbours, and our community? Have we become lazy or complacent, feeling like this is someone else's struggle? If we do, our generation will be lost to Christ.

One of the reasons that we ease off on our witness is fear. In the UK we don't often fear physical reprisal or arrest like the early Christians faced. But Christians certainly face these in some Muslim and Hindu areas. More likely, our fear is of being looked down on. Perhaps it's the fear of being ostracized at our office or work. Paul says that we are to contend for the faith "without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you" (1:28a). The word "frightened" (NIV), "terrified" (KJV), or "intimidated" (NRSV) is the Greek verb *ptyrō*, "let oneself be intimidated, be frightened, terrified."

The Privilege of Suffering

It was granted to the Philippians to believe in Him. In the same way this belief was granted to them, so also was the privilege to suffer for His sake. The Philippians didn't need to fear that their present trial (and Paul's present trial) meant that God abandoned them. Their present difficulty was granted to them, not as a punishment, but as a tool in God's hand.

The ancient Greek word for suffer here is *pasko*. This word is used primarily in the sense of persecution. However, it is also used of physical sufferings not related to persecution (Acts 28:5, and Matthew 17:15), of suffering under temptation (Hebrews 2:18) and hardships in a general sense (1 Corinthians 12:26, and Galatians 3:4).

The Philippians had the same kind of conflict Paul had among them in Philippi and the same kind that Paul faced in Rome. The conflict of the Philippians concerned the difficulty of walking right with the Lord and proclaiming the gospel when persecuted and under attack.

God is pouring courage into us so that we will not be afraid to identify ourselves with Christ among our friends and in public. So that we will be willing to enter that struggle and so count ourselves as true disciples of Jesus, bearing the same suffering he suffered. What a privilege!

