

May 23 Philippians

Intro

Philippi was the Gettysburg of ancient Greece. A major battle of the civil war fought to avenge the assassination of Julius Caesar (Mark Antony and Octavian vs. Brutus, et, al assassins) was fought here in 42 BC. As a result of the nostalgia Rome had for Philippi and its battle, Philippi was declared a Roman Colony (even though it was in Macedonia, Greece), affording it all the privileges of Rome. Numerous veterans (especially of high rank, and from the Praetorian Guard) retired to Philippi.

Paul arrived in Philippi between 50-51CE and founded the first Christian church on European soil, for this reason Philippi is known as “the birthplace of Western Christianity.”

Philippi was one of the first places Paul visited when he arrived in Macedonia (where he met Lydia). Paul wrote this letter from prison, but which prison is not certain. He could have written from Corinth (50 CE), Ephesus (54-57 CE), Caesarea (58-60 CE), or Rome (early 60s CE). Paul spent a lot of time in prison!

The main themes this letter addresses are external intimidation and internal strife. Paul asserts that the church will not be intimidated by outsiders if it behaves as if they are already enjoying the prestige associated with the day of the Lord. True honor is conformity with Christ's glory, which is an emptying of oneself.

Chapter 1

Paul's tone is loving and friendly. He remembers the church with joy. “the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” The day of Jesus Christ is the day of the Lord, our work as Christians has its origins in God, and does not end until Jesus comes again. What do we have to help us complete our work? Overflowing love and knowledge and full insight (seeing all sides of the situation) to make the best possible choices.

Paul speaks about his imprisonment as an opportunity for the spreading of the gospel. Some of his guards have come to believe in Jesus Christ because of what they've heard and seen in him, and others outside of prison have used his imprisonment as a catalyst for speaking boldly for the gospel (some for their own gain, and others out of genuine concern). Paul says that regardless of the motives, Christ is being proclaimed!

Next, Paul strikes a somber tone, vulnerably letting the Philippians in on his internal wrestling. He longs to die, to be with Christ face to face, because that is better than life itself, but he knows God still has work in store for him to accomplish, he knows he's still needed by the churches he ministers to. Vs. 27, Unity in the gospel is evidence of the church's salvation, and evidence of the opponents' failure.

Chapter 2

Paul continues sharing what Christian unity looks like (be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind, doing nothing from selfish ambition). This doesn't mean that we are all identical people, but rather in Christian love that we come to a place of consensus when important decisions about our life together need to be made. Consensus means that we wrestle with all angles of an issue, coming eventually through the work of the Holy Spirit to all agree on one course of action (even if it wasn't our original preferred course of action). Paul then shifts gears to remind the Church of what true honor looks like (Jesus Christ). He shares with them vs. 5-11, known as "the Christ Hymn" because it is one of the most ancient hymns of the Christian church that we have recorded thanks to this letter to the Philippians. This would have been a well known hymn at the time. It forms a chiasm (abccba), where the central point of the chiasm is the most important point. In the case of this hymn, the central point is "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." True honor is achieved through our following in Christ's footsteps of obedience to God, humility, and sacrificial love. When Paul says that "every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" this is a political statement, because in the ancient world everyone was to refer to Caesar as Lord. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then Caesar is not Lord.

"Work out your salvation" means "demonstrate, live out your salvation." Paul says that the church shines like stars in the midst of a perverse generation. The Church's flourishing is proof that all of Paul's sacrifices have not been in vain, therefore he rejoices even through his suffering because he knows his suffering has served a greater purpose.

Paul's relationship with Timothy is like that of a father and son laboring together in the "family business" of spreading the gospel and growing the Church. Epaphroditus risked his life for the sake of spreading the gospel and came near to death through illness, therefore, Paul is sending him on

as his messenger so that seeing him healthy and well can bring joy to the Philippian Church.

Chapter 3

Paul now shifts gears, warning the Philippians about the dangers of those who boast in circumcision (mutilate the flesh) rather than in Jesus Christ. Paul shares with them that he has numerous reasons to be proud and boastful according to the law of Israel: “circumcised on the 8th day, member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews (super great Hebrew), a Pharisee to the point of being a persecutor of the Church, blameless under the law.” Yet, every accolade is counted as failure when compared to the surpassing joy and honor of knowing and suffering for Christ MY Lord. Paul’s core identity is found through his relationship with Jesus. Paul’s righteousness comes from Christ’s righteousness that covers him through his faith. Paul’s goal that he strives toward (like an Olympic athlete) is the resurrection of the dead. I make Christ’s goal my goal, because Christ has made me his own. The finish line of the life of faith is our heavenly home with Christ. This is not just a spiritual reality, but a physical reality, as Christ will conform our broken bodies to his body of glory.

Finally, if Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not, then our citizenship is in heaven, not in Rome. This was highly controversial, as the Philippians would have been extremely proud of being a Roman colony. This was an honor, not afforded to many places. Yet, as Christians our pride is in our heavenly citizenship, not in our earthly citizenship, for in Christ all cultures and ethnicities and citizens are gathered together as one family of faith.

Chapter 4

Paul begins the final chapter urging two specific coworkers of the gospel to get along and get on the same page (Euodia and Syntyche, two women). In spite of the present reality of suffering that the Church was experiencing, and that Paul himself was experiencing through prison, Paul urges the Church to rejoice and to continue to persevere in gentleness in spite of the hardness of the world around them. Why? The Lord is near. Instead of wasting our energy on worrying, Paul urges the Church to put their energy into prayer. The result we can always depend on from prayer is peace. We may not get what we want (Paul may have never personally seen the Philippians again), but through prayer we receive Christ’s peace, which is far greater than we can imagine. Christ’s peace will be our guard in times of suffering and uncertainty.

We are to set our minds on things that are: true, honorable (Christ like), just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, worthy of praise. This is how to overcome the trap of despair when times get tough, set our minds on the places in the world where we see God's goodness at work.

Paul's secret to a peaceful, joyful life, is learning to be content in all circumstances. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" is not just a motivational poster, but for people who are truly suffering, like Paul in prison.

Paul reminisces about how generous the Philippians were in providing for his needs while he was still with them, and even when he was in Thessalonica (100 miles away). Paul is speaking not only of the physical gifts of financial resources to continue his ministry, but also of the spiritual gifts of kinship in the Lord.