

“At the Day of Jesus Christ”

The Second in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians

Texts: Philippians 1:1-11; Psalm 57:1-11

The Apostle Paul is in prison. He’s facing a possible death sentence. He is writing to a church which he helped to found a decade earlier, offering them words of encouragement while also exhorting them to regard themselves as citizens of heaven. Despite the difficulties Paul is facing while imprisoned, even the casual reader of Philippians cannot help but notice the constant refrain of joy throughout this letter—in fact, Paul uses the word for joy as a noun or a verb sixteen times in the epistle’s four chapters. The Philippian Christians reading this letter are enduring well despite the persecution they are facing. One of their number—a man named Epaphroditus (who perhaps a pastor or an elder)—has learned of Paul’s imprisonment, and has come with an offer of help for Paul from the Philippians, who regard Paul as their father in the faith. This reflects their sincere desire to help the Apostle. Paul hopes to send Timothy to Philippi to encourage them, but in the meantime he composes this short letter encouraging the members of this church to progress in joy and in the faith, and he sends it back with Epaphroditus. Philippians is truly a wonderful letter, and I am sure our time spent studying it will be a blessing to us all.

Whenever we begin a new series on a book of the Bible, it is important to know who wrote the particular document, when it was written, and under what historical circumstances. Such information is vital so that we understand the context in which the book was written, and so that we interpret the book correctly. This is also a great aid in preventing the all-too common tendency among American Christians to turn every book in the Bible into “my story,” and focus on tips for Christian living or timeless truths or principles for success, rather than understand that as we go through the various books of the Bible (tied to real history), God is including us in that redemptive-history. He is actually rewriting our own self-understanding by including us in the on-going story of how it is that God redeems sinful people—like the Philippians and like us. For this to happen, we need to know and understand the context of these books.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is one of the few books of the Bible virtually unchallenged by critical scholars. It is accepted by most everyone that this letter was written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Philippi founded about AD 50. The letter to the Philippians was composed by Paul between the mid-fifties of the first century, and perhaps as late as 60-62 AD. The only debate among scholars is what were Paul’s exact circumstances when this letter was written. We do know that when Paul writes this letter, he is a prisoner—he mentions this fact three times in the first chapter alone (1:7, 13, 17).

Paul does not say where he is imprisoned, and those who argue for an earlier date for the composition of this letter contend that Paul’s imprisonment is in the city of Ephesus or even Caesarea. But Paul’s Roman imprisonment is much more likely given his reference to the *Praetorium* in verse 13 of the opening chapter (the *Praetorium* is the “imperial guard” in Rome). We know from the closing chapters of the Book of Acts that while appealing his arrest to Caesar (Acts 28; 16, 30-31), Paul lived in a rented house in Rome, Timothy was present with him (1:1; 2:19-23), and that a Roman soldier was assigned to guard him while Paul remained under house arrest. A Roman imprisonment also fits with Paul’s directive in Philippians 4:22 to extend greetings from Christians in Caesar’s household to their Christian

brothers and sisters in Philippi.¹ A date of 60-62 is most likely, about 10-12 years after Paul had first preached the gospel in Philippi and founded a church as we discussed last time when we considered Acts 16 and the gospel's arrival on the European mainland.

The circumstances which led to Paul composing this letter are that the Philippians had heard of Paul's arrest and confinement in Rome and sent one of their number, a man named Epaphroditus, with a gift for the Apostle (4:18). Epaphroditus took ill while in Rome (2:26), delaying his trip before Paul sent him back to Philippi with this letter.² While Paul expresses joy in the midst of his own serious personal trial, Paul is also aware of an internal threat within the Philippian church. Philippi was a Roman city with little if any Jewish population, yet, as we will see in chapter 3, it appears as though a group of Judaizers has recently arrived in the city from Asia Minor, insisting that these Gentile believers in Jesus become cultural Jews—that they accept circumcision and keep Jewish feasts and dietary laws.³

Paul turns the tables on these false teachers, calling them “dogs” (which is the derogatory term Jews used of Gentiles). Paul speaks of their misuse of circumcision in graphic terms. Properly understood, circumcision is a sign and seal of the old covenant. But as distorted by the Judaizers, Paul speaks of circumcision as a mutilation of the flesh—which was the case, *if* circumcision was, as the Judaizers understood it, a ceremony which, in addition to believing that Jesus was Israel's Messiah, was required for someone to be justified before God. In the opening chapter of Galatians, Paul had spoken of this addition of circumcision to the finished work of Christ as “another gospel” which was no gospel at all. In verse 2 of chapter 3, Paul warns the Philippians, “*look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.*” In verses 3-6 of that same chapter, Paul gives us a catalogue of his own personal qualifications as a Jew—a “Hebrew of Hebrews” as the Apostle puts it. In other words, Paul is more of a Jew than any of the Judaizers, whom he also identifies as “evil doers” because of their willful distortion of the gospel which Paul preaches.

No doubt, the high point of the letter is the *Carmen Christi*, the so-called “Christ hymn” of chapter 2:5-11. Whether Paul personally composed this hymn, we do not know. It may have been sung in the early church, and Paul includes it in his Philippian letter to make a theological point. Or, it may be a composition by Paul, written while sitting in a Roman jail cell. Regardless, it is one of the most important passages in all the New Testament for correctly understanding the person and work of Jesus. Calvin says of this hymn, “that person is utterly blind who does not perceive that Jesus' eternal deity is clearly set forth in these words.”⁴ It is truly a beautiful but theologically-packed hymn and we will spend some time on it in the weeks ahead.

So with that bit of background in mind, we now turn to the opening verses of Philippians (vv. 1-2), Paul's

¹ D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corporation, 1992), 321-322. See also, Peter T. O'Brien, Commentary on Philippians, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, 19-26.

² O'Brien, Commentary on Philippians, 25.

³ O'Brien, Commentary on Philippians, 26-35.

⁴ Cited in Graham Tomlin, ed., Reformation Commentary on Scripture, New Testament XI, Philippians and Colossians (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 44-45.

fond word of greetings to the Christians in Philippi, many of whom Paul knows quite well. “*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” It is all too easy to skip over these greetings with little thought given to them, but it is helpful to consider the way in which Paul opens those letters attributed to him in the New Testament. Paul follows the standard first century epistolary form which begins with a salutation (vv. 1-2) followed by a statement of thanksgiving (vv. 3-12). What makes the epistles of Philippians and Colossians a bit different from other epistles of Paul is that they include lengthy prayers of intercession following the thanksgiving.⁵ This gives these letters a warm and personal tone—unlike, say, Galatians, which Paul writes while angry and contains little if anything by way of personal greeting.

The letter is sent to the Philippian church by Paul and Timothy as co-senders, even though Paul is the epistle’s author. That Timothy is present with Paul is a good reason to believe that this epistle was written while Paul was under house arrest in Rome, since Timothy was known to have been there with Paul in Rome while Paul was imprisoned. Timothy is also named because as we saw last time (and according to Acts 16-18), Timothy was with Paul in Philippi when Paul first preached the gospel there. The Philippians knew Paul—they also knew Timothy.

One of the reasons why Christianity spread so rapidly in the Greco-Roman world and why the gospel made such a profound impact on those who heard it—even Gentiles who were unfamiliar with the Old Testament—is that apostolic preachers were able to take common words and widely-understood images used in everyday life and invest them with Christian meaning. Some of this work was already done for the apostles by those Greek-speaking Jewish biblical scholars in Alexandria who translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek (the LXX) in the third century BC.

One important example of what I mean is Paul’s use of the word “servant,” (*doulos*) or “slave,” often used in the salutation section of his letters. Paul and Timothy identify themselves as bond-servants of Jesus Christ. In the Greco-Roman world, slaves occupied the lowest social-caste, they had few legal rights, and were considered the life-long chattel (property) of their masters. They were also the largest social group in the Roman world. It was not uncommon for slaves to be bought and sold multiple times—hence the language used by the apostles of “redemption,” or the idea that salvation is, in part, being set free from a cruel master or tyrant—“sin” in the biblical metaphor—through the payment of the purchase price, which in the case of the gospel, is the shed blood of Jesus. When Paul and Timothy identify themselves as servants (“slaves”) of Jesus they are indicating that even though they may be poor, weak, and lowly in the sight of the world, they have been called and set apart to their offices by none other than Jesus (their new master) for some important purpose as determined by YHWH.

Throughout the LXX, YHWH’s servant was someone who had been called by God for some special purpose tied to God’s redemption of his people. God often spoke through his “servants.” People like Moses, Joshua, David immediately come to mind.⁶ Those Jews who were familiar with the LXX knew that the word “doulos” referred to those called by God for important purposes. But Gentiles, who had never heard of the LXX, much less would have read it, heard the term in the cultural sense as someone of low rank who belonged to another (as their property). Yet, Paul and Timothy boast in being slaves of a

⁵ Moises Silva, Philippians: Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 37.

⁶ O’Brien, Commentary on Philippians, 45.

wonderful master, Jesus Christ, God's servant, whom YHWH had raised from the dead. Paul and Timothy are the willing servants of one much greater than they, a master who truly loves them, and indeed, gave himself for them. This is a very powerful image to Gentiles. These men gladly claim to belong to someone whom they claim is the Son of God, and who grants them freedom from a cruel master (sin). As one writer points out, a "doulos" "in Christian parlance is not an insult, but the highest commendation possible."⁷ Paul's distinctive use of the term would get a Roman Gentile's attention.

The letter is sent to "*all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi.*" Saints (*hagios*, "holy") are all those who trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and whose guilt has been reckoned to Christ Jesus, whose perfect righteousness (his obedience to the Jewish law) is in turn reckoned to each and every person who trusts in Jesus. Sadly the Roman church has ironically followed the route of the Judaizers by arguing that a "saint" is someone who has earned "extra" merit (more than enough to be justified before God), and that extra merit is available to others as dispensed through the Roman church. On Roman terms, a "saint" is someone who has earned the right to be called "holy." But in his letters, Paul speaks of all Christians as "saints" ("holy") because the merits of Jesus (including his holiness) have been reckoned (or credited) to us through faith. In fact, for Paul, when one thinks of themselves as a saint (someone reckoned righteous) they begin to act like what they are—holy, servants of Jesus, called by God and set apart for his purposes. This is the basis for Paul's understanding of sanctification—the progressive weakening of the sinful nature because of the continual strengthening of the new nature, given us in the new birth (regeneration).

In addition to the saints in Philippi, there are "overseers" (*episcopi*—the root of our word "episcopal," just as we get the term "Presbyterian" from the Greek term, presbyter, or "elder"). There were also "deacons." An "overseer" is but another term for an "elder," one who oversees a congregation of believers in the name and with the authority of Jesus. It is also translated as "bishop." I know that the last chapters in Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* on church government are those chapters people never read, but the fact of the matter is how the church is to govern itself is a very big deal in the pages of the New Testament. Paul does not address this letter to a self-appointed "pastor." Pastors are called by the church. Nor to a "worship leader." There is no such office in the New Testament—ministers lead worship. Nor to some sort of Christian celebrity who speaks to God directly. Paul does not address this letter to a church's "board," or other such titles taken from the business world, not the New Testament. I am amazed at the number of churches which simply make up their manner of governance on the fly without ever consulting what the New Testament actually says about how a church is govern itself.

Neither does Paul send this letter to a bishop (in the Roman sense of the office—someone who serves as a church bureaucrat, and not as a pastor of a local church), or to a high-ranking official such as a Cardinal. The letter of Philippians is addressed to the saints in Philippi (those who believe in Jesus), to the overseers (the pastors and elders) of the congregation, and to the deacons (those responsible for administering mercy and charity in the church). In other words, this letter is addressed to the church of Philippi, which is clearly Presbyterian (Reformed) in its government. In reading and studying this letter we are reading their mail, and in doing so, God is pleased to speak to us, the saints, overseers, and deacons, in Anaheim (i.e., this local church).

Paul extends his famous opening greeting (his benediction—"good word") to the saints in Philippi. *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* This benediction is clearly an

⁷ Silva, *Philippians*, 40.

expression to his readers/hearers as to how God saves sinners. This reflects a passage like Romans 3:23-24. *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* The “good word” from Paul to the Philippians is that God saves sinners by his grace, setting them at peace with himself, by the will of the Father, through the saving work of the Son (Jesus), and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Peace is a major theme in Paul’s writings, occurring some 54 times in his epistles. The term “peace” points believers to their restored relationship with their creator (because God’s anger toward them has been turned aside by the suffering of Jesus, for us, and in our place) as well as to peace with others—even those of different social castes, races, and cultures (specifically Jew and Gentile)—because of Christ’s work on behalf of all.⁸ Jesus is the only mediator between God and humanity, and having reconciled us to God, Jesus also reconciles us to each other. Orphans of the world now become one body/family.

In verse 3, Paul begins to give thanks to God, repeating words and demonstrating great intensity and affection for those to whom he is writing. These are people Paul knows and who look to him as their father in the faith. This is very clearly reflected in what follows. Because of this reciprocal relationship between Paul and his Philippian friends, Paul opens by stating (vv. 3-5), *“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.”* Paul’s thanksgiving is directed to “my God,” not the “great spirit,” the “man upstairs” or any other impersonal power. The Apostle is very thankful for his relationship with the Philippians and makes mention of them whenever he prays. Paul considers this a duty, but also a joyful task. Paul was there from the first day and the Philippians have supported him ever since in his work of taking the gospel to the Gentile world.

Paul reminds the Philippians of God’s faithfulness to all his people—especially to Paul’s brothers and sisters in Philippi. In verse 6, Paul affirms, *“and I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”* Paul was an eyewitness to God’s grace, years before, when God opened Lydia’s heart to believe in Jesus. Paul saw God’s grace in the conversion of the Philippian jailer, as well. No doubt, Paul was a witness to God’s grace in the conversion of many others in the Philippian church who Paul knows well. Their salvation was God’s “good work.” But God does not begin his gracious work of salvation in the lives of such people and then give up on them. God is always faithful. When he begins his work, he will bring it to completion.

God began this good work in the Philippian Christians—he has regenerated them—giving them new life when previously they had been dead in sins and transgressions. Now they are participants in the new creation, ushered in when Jesus rose again from the dead the first Easter. When Paul speaks of God’s “good work,” we think of Genesis 1 and 2 and the creation account when God brings his work of creation to completion and then pronounces all that he has made “good.” The good work of which Paul speaks here—God saving his people from the guilt and power of their sin—once begun, will continue to unfold until the day of Christ Jesus (his second advent) when all dead are raised, the final judgment takes place, and the Lord ushers in a new heaven and earth.

As is typical of Paul’s writings, there are loud echos here from the Psalter—specifically the opening verses of Psalm 57 (our Old Testament lesson), where the Psalmist pleads of YHWH, *“be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,*

⁸ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 51.

till the storms of destruction pass by. I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.” God always fulfills his purposes for his people, and because of this, Paul, like the Psalmist, gives thanks for what God is doing in the lives of the Philippians. God will fulfill his purposes. He who began the good work of new creation will indeed see that work through to the day of resurrection.

Paul continues by pointing out that *“it is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”* The bond between Paul and the Philippians is a strong one. He has stood with them in the persecution they have endured, and now they stand with him upon learning of his imprisonment in Rome. The bond is not mere human affection grounded in common interests or common culture. After all, what would a Jewish Rabbi who now believes Jesus is the Son of God, like the Apostle Paul, have to do with a bunch of Roman pagans living on the Greek mainland?

From a strictly human perspective Paul and the Christians in Philippi had little, if anything, in common. But in Christ Jesus they have a bond which distance and imprisonment cannot sever. The Philippians stand united with Paul as he defends the gospel (while in Rome) and then the Apostle confirms it through his willingness to suffer anything for the cause of Jesus Christ. It is right for Paul to feel this way. It is right for the Philippians to feel about Paul as they do. Only a Christian can understand this bond with Jesus, and then with his people. In fact, Paul invokes God as his witness to this affection. We read in verse 8, *“for God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.”*

Having offered up what amounts to a prayer of thanksgiving in verses 3-8, Paul moves on to offer specific petitions for the Philippian Christians in verses 9-11. He begins by praying that the Philippians may abound in *“love . . . more and more.”* Love is the chief fruit of the Spirit but Paul refuses to do what so many of our contemporaries have done—separate mind from heart as in the old (and unbiblical) distinction between “head knowledge” and “heart knowledge” with heart knowledge usually seen as vastly superior. Paul prays that the Philippians would abound more and more in love, but also *“with knowledge and all discernment.”* The goal for every Christian is to get mind and heart on the same page. The more we know about God and his saving work in Jesus Christ, the greater our capacity to love him and the greater ability we have to serve him as well as love our brothers and sisters more and more. This is Paul’s chief desire for God’s people while they await God’s good work to be completed.

Paul is an eschatological thinker—always keeping an eye on the last day when Jesus returns, even as he addresses an issue facing a first century congregation of people whom he knows and loves. Paul explains to the Philippians that God calls them to love and know for a very specific purpose spelled out in verse 10—*“so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.”* Paul sees one of his primary duties as preparing people for death, or for the return of Jesus, whichever comes first. Approval of things excellent is a sign of faith, but not an end in itself. Loving and knowing are not mere duties producing personal happiness. Rather, these things point us to a goal, to be pure and blameless when Jesus comes back.

If we left the matter here, we might think the Apostle is exhorting us to purify ourselves along the lines of the faith-killing Sunday School ditty, “oh be careful little hands what you do.” Rather, in verse 11, Paul reminds us that the love which abounds and which grows out of knowledge, is *“the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”* The righteousness of which Paul speaks, is the righteousness of Jesus himself which is imputed to all of his people, through faith. The purity and blamelessness of which Paul speaks is not something which we accomplish by loving others enough and knowing enough about God’s grace to pass a purity test. Rather, the very

desire to love and know (as described by Paul) grows out of that “good work” of the new creation which God has begun in us when we came to faith in Jesus. Any love we have for others, as well as any desire we have to know more about God, are the fruit of that good work already begun in us.

Thus our word of application is that this is not only true for the Philippians, it is true for us. If you believe in Jesus, it is only because God has begun his good work within you—a work which he will complete at the day of Christ Jesus. Therefore, as God’s good work in us is being perfected, through that righteousness which comes through faith in Jesus, let us seek to bear the fruit of God’s good work. Let us live in abundant love and in the knowledge of God’s mercy to us in Jesus Christ. Let us approve of those things which are excellent, for along with Paul, and Timothy, and the Philippians, we too are bond servants of Jesus Christ, who will indeed come again at the day of Jesus Christ to bring God’s good work of new creation to completion.