

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 61

Prison Epistles – Part One Philippians

I. BACKGROUND

When we ended our study of Acts, Paul and his friends were in Rome where Paul was under house arrest awaiting his appeal to Caesar. Acts ends with, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:30-31). We can reasonably date this two-year imprisonment around 59 or 60 A.D. Church history teaches that Paul was eventually liberated once his appeal was completed, and Paul went on to preach in the west (Spain) before being arrested again and eventually dying as a martyr around 67/68 A.D.

Paul wrote several letters during this Roman imprisonment including Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. These letters collectively are often referred to as the “prison epistles.”

In Acts chapter 16:12-40, Luke sets out the founding of the church at Philippi. Pertinent information includes that Philippi was a Roman colony. The citizens would have dressed like Romans, used a good bit of Latin, and most likely carried a good bit of pride on being a Roman city. There were not enough Jews to form a synagogue (ten males required!) so a good bit of the church must have been Gentile. This might explain why Paul never quotes the Old Testament in all of Philippians. We should also remember that it was in Philippi where Paul and Silas were imprisoned and failed to escape when an earthquake opened the doors to the cells. This event ultimately led to the salvation of the jailer and his family. No doubt these were some of the people who received Paul’s letter some ten years later.

The Philippians letter itself is basically a “missionary support” letter. Paul writes thanking the Philippians for financially supporting his missionary efforts. He also gives them an update on how the efforts are going.

In looking at the themes of the letter, one cannot miss the word “joy.” Many call this the epistle of joy because Paul uses the word 16 times over the four chapters. Paul will also encourage the Philippians in holiness, in

humility, in worry-free living, and in confidence that Christ enables us to do whatever is needed. We also have in Philippians one of the most profound biblical passages on the mission and work of Christ.

The text can fairly be outlined as:

1. Letter basics and missionary report (1:1 – 1:26).
2. Exhortations (1:27 – 2:18).
3. Plans (2:19-30).
4. Warnings and exhortations (3 – 4:9).
5. Concluding thoughts (4:10 – 4:23).

II. TEXT

A. *Letter Basics and Missionary Report (1:1 – 1:26)*

Paul writes the letter with Timothy addressing it to “all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi,” together with the elders and deacons, announcing God’s grace and peace to them. Paul then tells them how much he prays for them. The prayers are always prayers of joy as Paul realizes the conviction of the Philippians in helping Paul’s missionary efforts. Paul knows that God has not only started working in the lives of the Philippians, but also that God will not quit prematurely. God will finish and bring to a completion the good works he began in their lives.

Paul misses the Philippians but knows that they share in not only his ministry, but also the travails that accompany the work. Through the sharing, they continue to grow. Paul prays that their growth and love will continue to deepen in knowledge and insight appreciating God’s will -- things that are pure and blameless.

Paul alerts the Philippians that his imprisonment has not been a ministry set back. In fact, the opposite was true. Everyone has learned that Paul was a prisoner not because of criminal misdeeds on his part. Paul was a prisoner of faith. Paul’s convictions about Jesus as God and Savior kept him in chains. That was causing the word of God to grow and multiply in the mouths of other believers as well as among the others guarding Paul. No doubt the Philippian jailer had a chuckle over Paul’s reference to those guarding him hearing the gospel. How well the jailer knew the effect of Paul as a prisoner!

Paul was experiencing hearing about others who were preaching about Christ from various motives, some from love and others from conceit. Paul never endorsed selfish motives for preaching, but Paul was able to recognize how God could work in the midst of all circumstances and motives to get his message across. And in that, Paul rejoiced.

Paul was confident that the prayers of the Philippians and others would ultimately lead to his release. Paul's attitude was not one of great concern because Paul knew his owner! Paul belonged to Jesus, whether Paul was in chains or free, whether Paul was alive or dead. Paul in fact knew that death brought him more than living. Death was uniting with Christ; living was serving for Christ. Knowing that service was important and his current calling, Paul was intent on staying his course. Paul would see the joy of the Philippians progressing as they spent time with Paul and his teachings.

B. Exhortations (1:27 – 2:18)

Paul wants the Philippians to live in “a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Paul adds that whether he visits them or just hears of them, he wants to know they are united and standing firm in the faith against suffering and adversaries. Paul pleads with them to focus on their unity in Jesus, their fellowship in the Holy Spirit, their tenderness and compassion, and be “one in spirit.” They are to do “nothing” – NOTHING – out of “selfish ambition or vain conceit” but in “everything” – EVERYTHING – in humility, considering others better than themselves.

To drive home his point, Paul speaks of Christ in a most profound way. Many scholars reference the poetic nature of Paul's illustration and consider it an early Christian hymn. Paul writes that the Philippians should have the same attitude of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every

tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (2:6-11)

This passage rises to equal heights of any in the Bible as it speaks of Jesus. Jesus truly models humility and service on the most supreme level. After such an incredible discourse, how could any reader dare fuss Paul’s exhortation to live in humility?

Paul urges the Philippians to work through their salvation with due respect and regard to the work God is doing within each of them. Their lives are to reflect God’s glory rather than manifest complaining and arguing.

C. Plans (2:19-30)

Paul hoped to send Timothy to the Philippians soon. Timothy, who was like a son to Paul, shared Paul’s care and concern for them. While Timothy’s visit was to be in the future, Paul was apparently sending Epaphroditus back to the Philippians, probably with the letter Paul was writing. Epaphroditus was originally sent by the Philippians to Paul to assist Paul. While working with Paul, Epaphroditus had become very ill and almost died. But God had mercy; Epaphroditus was healed and was now fit to return to Philippi.

D. Warnings and exhortations (3 – 4:9)

In this section, Paul warns the Philippians against religious problems that surfaced from several different fronts. From the Jewish camp often arose a legalism that set one’s position with God as arising from one’s own degree of worthiness. To these folks, Paul sets out his own “reasons to put confidence in the flesh.” Paul had the heritage, the upbringing, the schooling, and the deeds that could not be bested by any of the holy. Yet, all of that was garbage for Paul compared to the relationship and knowledge he had of Jesus Christ. Paul considered everything else “rubbish” compared to the righteousness he had from his faith in Christ. Paul wanted to “know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (3:10).

Even writing this, Paul models the humility he wrote of earlier. Paul explains that he has not yet reached any kind of perfection. But Paul pressed on toward the goal of the upward calling of Jesus Christ.

Paul did not live a life looking behind him at accomplishments or failings. Paul sought to live for the future.

Paul did not just address the legalism facing the church, but the lawlessness as well. Scholars use a term “antinomianism” to reference those who live without regard to law. Paul warns that there are those who live to satisfy earthly appetites that are enemies of the cross. The Philippians should not model those who glory in shameful things. Instead, the Philippians are to glory in the Lord who will transform us in to glorious bodies like that of the Lord himself.

Paul reaches out by name to two ladies who are not getting along in the church. He wants them to live in harmony and love.

Paul ends this section urging the Philippians to rejoice always in God. They are to be known for gentleness. They are not to worry about anything, but prayerfully set concerns before God with thankfulness that God will answer the prayers. And God’s unfathomable peace will uphold them through life’s travails. The Philippians should dwell on things noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable. As they do so, they will find not only peace, but the God of peace as well.

E. Concluding thoughts (4:10 – 4:23)

Paul thanks the Philippians again for remembering him in his ministry with their gifts. Paul has known plenty and known nothing, and Paul has contentment whatever the supply for his need. Having said that, however, he wants the Philippians to know his appreciation for all they have done for him. Paul tells them his contentment comes from his confidence that he can achieve all God wants him to do through Jesus Christ. God supplied all of Paul’s needs, just as he does all his children. For Paul, God had used the Philippians on more than one occasion! They were among the first to support his ministry. It seems Paul couldn’t say thank you enough! Paul wants them to know that just as they met Paul’s needs, God himself would meet the needs of the Philippians.

Paul closes noting not only his personal greetings, but also those of the church in Rome as well.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. God will finish his work in us.
2. Rejoice always.
3. Live in humility.
4. Don't be a complainer.
5. Press on. Jesus is in front of you.
6. Trust in the Lord.