

Paul's Epistle to the Philippians

Chapter One

A Friendly Letter from Prison

Salutation and Thanksgiving: Phil 1:1-11

As we would expect in a letter marked by friendship and written in deep affection the opening verses serve to reinforce the ties between Paul and the congregation.

In the salutation of v. 1 Paul does not refer to himself as an apostle. Perhaps this is because unlike Galatians, our letter gives no indication that his apostolic authority was being challenged. And unlike the situation in Romans he has no need to introduce himself to the Philippians or to remind them of his status among them (compare Gal 1:1, Romans 1:1).

Paul links himself with Timothy, who will appear later in the letter. Paul almost always travels with a retinue and though we have every reason to believe that the letter was written or dictated by him, Timothy joins in the greeting and presumably in the following message. Both of these figures are known as servants, or slaves, of Jesus Christ. The Greek word (*doulos*) would be the same and while for good obvious reasons we find the term “servant” to be more palatable, Paul time and again will claim that he belongs body and soul to Jesus Christ.

The addressees are the “saints.” There is no implication in Paul’s letters that the “saints” are a subgroup of believers. The believers are themselves saints. The word can perhaps best be translated as “holy ones,” and the Christians are holy not because they have achieved full sanctification but because their identity is being shaped by the holiness of God in Jesus Christ.

We are not sure who the “bishops and deacons” or “overseers and deacons” were (1:1). Based on the evidence of 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, we can guess that these early Hellenistic

churches did not have a fixed structure with carefully defined offices and rules for succession (compare the Pastoral Epistles, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus; these were probably written at a somewhat later stage in the churches development.) What we can be sure of is however informally leaders have begun to emerge in the congregation and their offices have received titles, these titles are quite likely borrowed from the titles of offices in the guilds or assemblies of the larger society.

“Grace” and “peace” are the blessings Paul regularly bestows on his readers, and represent a short hand way of talking about the free gift of loving acceptance and the reconciling comfort that believers are given by God in Jesus Christ.

A study of Paul’s letters reveals that usually the salutation is followed by a rather extended thanksgiving, here vv. 2-11. Typically Paul uses his opening prayer to introduce to his audience to some of the main themes of the letter which will follow. It is rather like the pastoral prayer that is directed to God but contains a few useful reminders to the congregation as well. “O God, we remember that in this season of giving, our church, too, asks us to pledge more generously.”

Here the prayer combines explicit thanksgiving with implicit exhortation. Paul is genuinely grateful that in this congregation he has found not only a flock for his shepherding but true partners in the affirmation and spreading of the gospel. His prayer is that their love might grow from more to more, which might indicate as we shall see in the following chapters, that there was still an issue of contentiousness, on the one hand, and of disputatious arguing on the other.

The terms that the NRSV translates as “knowledge” and “full insight” in v. 9 suggest that love is not only an emotion but depends both on clear eyed knowledge of the other and clear-

headed attention to what is morally right and fitting. When Paul suggests that by this love the Philippians will “prove their faith” he means that they will test it out, approve it, and find it approved finally by the gracious God.

The whole context is, as so often for Paul, eschatological. The final proof of faithfulness will come in “the day of Christ.” And the result of that faithfulness will not be only praise for the saints, but glory for God who sanctifies them.

Paul’s circumstances: 1:12-26

Paul reiterates what he has already indicated: that he writes from prison. Contained in his description is a claim that becomes fundamental to Pauline Christianity: faithfulness is sometimes made manifest in suffering, and God’s power is sometimes made perfect in our weakness (compare 2 Cor. 12:9).

In this case, specifically, Paul’s apparently dire circumstances have emboldened other Christians to speak and his plight has touched the lives of unbelievers, even unbelievers in high places. When Paul speaks of those who seem to preach an unworthy Gospel, he may be referring to other Christian preachers who see his imprisonment as a sign of failure rather than an opportunity for evangelism. In any case, he is not here nearly so exercised with these critics as he is with the opponents in 2 Corinthians or in Galatians. However crookedly they proclaim the gospel.

In v. 16 Paul introduces the theme which will be so important again as he brings his letter to the close. He rejoices and calls others to rejoice. Since he writes this from prison, perhaps contemplating his own death, it is quite clear that the joy of which he speaks is not the comfortable happiness of material advantage: it is something deeper, more lasting.

In vv. 18-26 Paul contemplates his own immediate future. In what is probably his earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians, Paul seems entirely confident that he will be among the living when Christ returns in his glory. (See 1 Thess. 4:15) Now, perhaps because Christ has tarried, perhaps because Paul is growing old, perhaps because imprisonment represents a deep threat to his well-being, he begins to ponder the possibility of death before the end of time. In his perhaps rhetorical balance between whether it is better to go or to stay, what is clear is what will be clear in the letter to the Romans, either in death or in life he will belong to God (see Romans 14:8).

Exhortation: 1:27-30

The precise content of the suffering the Philippians are undergoing remains unclear, but in this suffering they are united to Paul and perhaps by implication to Jesus as well. Again we are not clear on who the opponents are, but we are clear that there is a present dimension to Paul's understanding of judgment and salvation. The persecution actually works to the judgment of the opponents and toward the sanctification of the believers. What the enemies intend for evil God uses for good. This of course is already Paul's own story in this epistle, and in the larger framework of his writing, it is Jesus' story, too.

Questions:

1. As is clear in so much of his writing Paul encourages the Philippians to be faithful in part because he believes that Christ will come again soon. Most of us do not live with Paul's confidence that the end of the age is coming, but are there ways in which we can still be instructed by his urgency?
2. Can you think of instances when difficult circumstances actually lead to growth in faith and perhaps even to the furtherance of the gospel?
3. How do we understand the relationship between love and knowledge? What are the ways in which our zeal for doing what is right could be enriched by greater attention to knowledge and moral insight?

Further Reading:

N. Clayton Croy, "'To Die is Gain' (Philippians 1:19-26): Does Paul Contemplate Suicide?" *JBL* 122 (2003) 517-31.

Stanley K. Stowers, "Friends and Enemies in the Politics of Heaven: Reading Theology in Philippians," in Jouette M. Bassler, ed., *Pauline Theology*, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 105-121.