

PHILIPPIANS

PHILIPPIANS — INTRODUCTION

As we saw earlier this is one of the "prison" epistles of Paul, written at Rome where he was awaiting a hearing before Nero because of his witness for Christ (<420> Acts 28). Its occasion is stated in <300> Philippians 4:10-18. Epaphro-ditus had brought him the gifts of the church at Philippi, and now that he was returning to Macedonia he is commissioned with this letter of appreciation and loving instruction. It has sometimes been called the epistle of Christian experience, as it deals with conduct rather than doctrine, and yet there is doctrine in it too, precious and important.

For the history of the church, read again <440> Acts 16. It is probably nine years since the events of that chapter, and Paul has visited the church twice since that time. But how it has grown! Now it has "bishops and deacons," it is full of love and good works; it is affectionately mindful of Paul — and yet it has some trouble too, a tendency to separate into cliques, as we shall see. And there were also emissaries of error there, false professors and pharisaic disciples — all this comes out in the text.

The *Scofield Bible* takes as the key verse 1:21, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain":

QUESTIONS

1. Where, and under what circumstances was this epistle written?
2. What was its occasion?
3. How has it sometimes been designated?
4. Where do we find the history of the church at Philippi?
5. What is called the key verse of this epistle?

PHILIPPIANS 1 — JOY IN SUFFERING

The epistle opens with the customary salutation or greeting (vv. 1-2). Timothy is named with Paul, not that he is a co-writer, but a co-worker in Philippi, and hence known to the church. He is however, Paul's companion in Rome at this time. Note the important expression "in Christ Jesus," which was explained in Ephesians. Note the advanced development of the church — "bishops and deacons" or "overseers and working-helpers."

Then comes the thanksgiving (vv. 3-8). Note the Christian fellowship expressed in verse 5, the Philippian church being particularly active in cooperating with Paul. The thought is carried forward into verse 7, verse 6 being a parenthesis. Their long consistency in Christian services leads Paul to feel convinced that they were planted on the rock which could not be shaken. They would certainly see the glory of Christ (v. 6).

Returning to the thought of his love for them, note his fourfold prayer on their behalf:

- (1) that their love (for one another) might abound;
- (2) that they might approve the excellent things, or rather "try the things that differ" (RV);
- (3) that they might be sincere and not stumbling-blocks to others; and
- (4) that they might be filled with the fruit of righteousness.

A further division begins at verse 12, where the apostle speaks of his position and circumstances in Rome in language justifying the title of the lesson. His sufferings as a prisoner have proven beneficial to the Gospel, in that it is known "in all the palace" and outside, that he has committed no crime but is there because of the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world (v. 13). This knowledge is spreading in two ways (vv. 14-17). The contentious preachers are troubling him personally, but nevertheless the Gospel is spreading through their contention (v. 18) and he rejoices. These will be a blessing to him in the end, through the fulness of the Holy Spirit in answer to their prayers. Of this he will not be disappointed, he feels sure (v. 20).

A fifth division suggests itself at verse 21, where passing from his present experiences to his future hope, he glides naturally into a vein of

exhortation. His consciousness and experiences of living are so full of Christ, and hence so full of blessing, that dying to be with Christ would only increase his blessing (vv. 21, 23). If he lives, however, being acquitted at his trial, he will have more fruit in earthly labor for Christ (v. 22). It is difficult which to choose, but he is confident the Lord's will is for him to remain with them longer (vv. 24-27). However, whether he returned to them or not let their conduct be ordered right. Let them be steadfast, united and courageous (vv. 27-28). To their enemies this will be an evidence of the perdition that awaits them, but to themselves an evidence of their salvation. A great boon has been granted them to suffer for Christ, as he, Paul, had suffered and was now suffering.

QUESTIONS

1. Why is Timothy named with Paul in the salutation?
2. Analyze Paul's prayer.
3. How would you explain verse 21?
4. How would you explain verse 28, last clause?

PHILIPPIANS 2 — JOY IN SERVICE

EXPRESSED UNITY

We here touch the weak point in the spiritual life of this church: a tendency toward dissension and separation. It is sad, as another says, that this tendency "is not least likely to be operative where there is generally diffused life and vigor" in a church, just as a state of lukewarmness may favor an outward tranquility. Paul plies his arguments against it, saying in effect, if there is any such thing as comfort drawn from our common union in Christ, any such thing as fellowship in the Holy Spirit, or human tenderness and compassion, show it toward me, by giving up your pride and self-will and becoming of one mind.

EXPRESSED IN HUMILITY (VV. 5-11)

This leads to a deeper note. Unity presupposes humility, and here the great example of Jesus Christ is used. "Being in the form of God," (v. 6) is translated by Bishop Moule, "in God's manifested Being subsisting"

(compare ~~BIT~~ John 17:5). "Thought it not robbery," he translates, "reckoned it no plunderers prize," i.e. "He viewed His possession of the fulness of the Eternal nature as securely and inalienably His own." And so "made Himself of no reputation," or so made himself void by His own account (v. 7). The idea is, that so sure was His claim of Deity, that with a sublime unanxiety he could empty himself of the manifestation and exercise thereof to take "upon him the form of a servant." We should be careful to note however, that nothing in this passage teaches that the Eternal Word (~~BOOK~~ John 1:1) emptied himself of either his divine nature or His attributes, but only of the outward and visible manifestation of the Godhead. He stripped himself of the insignia of His majesty. Taking "the form of a servant" means assuming our human nature; and then he stooped even lower i.e. unto death, in obedience to His father. And lower yet, "even the death of the cross" (v. 8), unimaginable as to its pain, and so humiliating that to the Jews it was the symbol of the Divine curse, and to the Romans so degrading, that Cicero said it was far from their bodies not only, but their imaginations. But think of the reward of such humility (vv. 9-11). The "name which is above every name" is His not only as He is from all eternity, but as He became also in time, the suffering and risen Savior of sinners. Of this whole passage Bishop Moule well says,

Nothing but the orthodox creed, with its harmonious truths of the proper godhead and proper Sonship of the Lord Christ, can possibly satisfy the apostolic language about His infinite glory on the one hand, and His relation to the Father on the other.

EXPRESSED IN WATCHFULNESS (VV. 12-16)

"Work out your own salvation" means "develop" it. It had been given to them in Christ, and now they were to set themselves to the "business of the spiritual life." But to guard against the thought of personal ability or merit in the premises, they are reminded of the Divine indwelling (v. 13), by whose power it is that progressive as well as immediate sanctification is secured. The "fear and trembling" does not indicate a suspicion lest the salvation will be taken from them, but the solemn watchfulness to be exercised lest they grieve the Spirit of God (~~BOOK~~ Ephesians 4:30).

THREE GREAT HUMAN EXAMPLES

The chapter closes with great human examples following the divine one: Paul himself (vv. 17-18), Timothy (vv. 19-23), Epaphroditus (vv. 24-30).

Paul fears his reference to having "run in vain" (v. 16) may be misunderstood, and he assures them that if his life were poured out on their behalf, it would be well worth while because of their service of faith. He views them in their consecration as a burnt offering to God, upon which his own life blood might be poured out as a drink offering (compare ~~NUMBERS~~ Numbers 15:5). How sad the thought in verses 20-21 ! The other Christians who were by him and whom he might send, were pleading excuses of one kind and another, but they knew Timothy of old, and could trust him (vv. 22-23). It was necessary however, for him to return Epaphroditus to them, who had brought their gifts of love to his prison-house (v. 25), and who had been very sick (v. 27), occasioned in some way by his fidelity to them in his service for Paul. Such men as he were to be held "in reputation."

QUESTIONS

1. What was the weak point in this church?
2. How would you interpret verses 1-2?
3. Who is the great Example of humility?
4. What caution is necessary in the interpretation of verses 6-7?
5. In what sense is verse 9 to be applied to Christ?
6. How are we to understand verse 12?
7. Name three great human examples of unselfish devotion of Jesus Christ.

PHILIPPIANS 3 — JOY IN PRAYERS

This chapter opens with a warning against the Judaizing teachers whom we have met before (vv. 1-3), and who followed Paul everywhere teaching that the keeping of the ceremonial law of Moses was necessary to salvation. The "dogs," the "evil workers" and the "concision" of verse 2 all refer to them, the last word being a parody of what circumcision meant in

the Old Testament. These false teachers were not the true circumcision, or the true Israelites, who are described in verse 3.

This reference to the true circumcision leads Paul to speak of himself (vv. 4-14). If any spiritual value lay in pedigree or outward zeal, he might well claim it (vv. 5-6); but his estimate of these things since his conversion to Christ is expressed in what follows. He counts them not merely worthless but ruinous, being a "loss," "a robbery of the true blessing." "That I may win Christ" (v. 8) might be rendered "that I might win." "He thinks the past over again," says Bishop Moule. "The righteousness which is of God by faith" (v. 9) is expounded in our treatment of ~~1:17~~ Romans 1:17. "That I may know Him" (v. 10), means with an inward spiritual intuition, as the One whose resurrection assures me of justification and coming glory, for whom I daily take up the cross of suffering, being thus brought more and more into harmony ("conformity") with that surrender He made in achieving my salvation. The outcome of this knowledge is an attainment "unto the resurrection out from the dead" (v. 11 RV). The reference is to the first resurrection, that of the saints which takes place at Christ's second coming (~~1:23~~ 1 Corinthians 15:23; ~~4:16~~ 1 Thessalonians 4:16; ~~20:4-6~~ Revelation 20:4-6). This is that for which Christ had laid hold of Paul at his salvation, and toward which he was ever pressing (vv. 12-14).

The reference to himself and his purpose eventuates in an exhortation (vv. 15-21). "Perfect" (v. 15), means not sinlessness which Paul himself had not reached (v. 12) and which no saint reaches in this life, but rather "Christian maturity and entirety of experience," which those in Christ as long as these Philippians were should have known. "Thus-minded," means of the same mind as Paul, who rested immovably on Christ for His acceptance with God, and pressed forward without rest in the path of obedience. Did they not see eye to eye with him on all these matters it would yet be revealed to them (v. 15), but in the meantime let them fully live up to the light they had (v. 16). From the above it will be seen that Paul has in mind another class of false teachers besides the legalists (Judaizers). These were those with false notions of holiness, who so presumed on the atoning merits of Christ as to disclaim any need of seeking conformity to His life. They walked as enemies of Christ, though professing His name, and indulged in gross sins (vv. 18-19) on the ground that it made no difference if their spirits soared in a higher region. This was the teaching of a false philosophy known as "Gnosticism" of which we shall learn more in Colossians. Some of the "Gnostics" were ascetics while others were libertines both practices

springing from the same root of error, viz: a wrong conception of the human body in the scheme of redemption (compare ~~<ref>~~1 Corinthians 6:12-20). To both schools, spirit was good and matter evil; but one sought to wear out the body by beating and abusing it, while the other let it have its own way as that which was soon to perish. These all minded "earthly things," but the true Christian the heavenly things (v. 20). The latter is a citizen of the heavenly city, where he will be forever with the Lord (~~<ref>~~1 Thessalonians 4:17), and is therefore "obliged by his nobility" to live as one who belongs to and represents it. When our Lord comes out of that city for us, He will not destroy or annihilate our present bodies, but wonderfully change them like unto His own "glorious body" (v. 21).

QUESTIONS

1. With what does this chapter open, and why?
2. What does the apostle count "loss"?
3. What does "perfect" mean in verse 15?
4. Define "Gnosticism."
5. Give an interpretation of verse 21.

PHILIPPIANS 4 — JOY IN ANXIETY

The chapter opens with another exhortation to unity, but this time in a specific case (vv. 1-3). Two Christian women, probably deaconesses, like Phoebe (~~<ref>~~Romans 16:1), were at variance. The spirit of self had got in and Paul pleads with them to come together again, and pleads with his "true yokefellow," whoever he may have been, to help them do it.

This leads to a statement of a great truth about self-will (vv. 4-9). In the first place, to "rejoice in the Lord" is an antidote to self-will (v. 4). Second, the absence of mere self-will in a Christian should "be known to all men," i.e., it should be a reality in his life, since the Lord is always "at hand" to help and to calm his spirit. Third, since the occasion of the Christians self-will is likely to be some cause for anxiety about himself, he is to remove this by telling it to the Lord (v. 6). Thus God's peace will garrison his heart, keeping it as with a sentinel from being invaded by disquiet, giving rise to self-will. The Christian who thus draws his strength from God is able to act on the advice of verse 8, and to follow the example of Paul in

verse 9. How wonderful the grace of God in Paul, when he might dare to remind them of himself in these respects, not in egotism, but in sober and blessed fact!

The remainder of the letter is taken up with personal matters. The church at Philippi had contributed to the apostle's physical needs through the ministration of Epaphroditus. They had aided him in his necessity before; but sometime had elapsed since they had done so, because they "lacked opportunity" (v. 10). The apostle was not complaining. He had not wanted anything, not because he had much, but because he had learned to do with little (vv. 11-12). This was not a natural gift of his, but a supernatural endowment (v. 13). Nevertheless the kindnesses of the Philippians were appreciated, and especially because they were the fruit of Paul's ministry among them, which ultimately would bring reward to them — "abound to your account" (vv. 14-17). This would be true because they did it for him in the name of the Lord, Who would supply all their need (vv. 18-19).

Note in the closing salutation, "They that are of Caesar's household" (v. 22), which means Christian believers "gathered from the retainers of the palace." "The household of Caesar" embraced a vast number of persons in Rome and in the provinces, all of whom were either actual or former slaves of the Empire, filling every description of office more or less domestic. It should be added that they were not necessarily of inferior races, but captives taken in war, just as the Hebrews were made to serve at the court of Babylon. Their associations and functions give a noble view of the power of grace to triumph over circumstances, and to transfigure life where it seems most impossible.

QUESTIONS

1. Explain verses 1-3.
2. State in your own words the inspired teaching about self-will.
3. State in your own words Paul's feeling about the ministrations of this church to him.
4. Who are meant by "Caesar's household"?
5. How is the power of grace illustrated in them?