

Philippians – Chapter 1

As was his letter to the Ephesians, this epistle to the Philippians is one of Paul's four prison epistles. Most of his epistles were written as a shepherding Apostle with a focus on correctional or instructional messages to the churches he either founded or was ministering. However, this letter is different. From the book of Acts, Paul started the church at Philippi, which was one of the leading Roman colonies.

Paul, along with his traveling companions: Silas, Timothy, and Luke, was called in a vision to come there and met up with some Jewish women who were praying outside. The fact there were women meeting was evidence that there was not a lot of Jewish men in Philippi. Jewish tradition was if a city or town had at least 10 men in that location, they were obligated to build a synagogue.

Paul preached the gospel to these women, and they believed. The church grew quickly, but Paul being Paul, casted a fortune-telling spirit out of an enslaved girl. Her owners, angry about losing their source of income, had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into the inner prison. However, the magistrates discovered Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, apologize for beating them unlawfully, and asked them to leave. Before departing the city, Paul and Silas visited the believers. Paul maintained a very close relationship with this church.

As I mentioned at the beginning of Ephesians, Paul was arrested on trumped up and false charges back in Jerusalem. He was then sent to the seaside town of Caesaria which is just north of Jerusalem. Paul, again, being a Roman citizen, chose to appeal his arrest to Caesar Nero. He was then transported to Rome and was placed under house arrest with a Roman soldier chained to him 24/7. Paul, being who he was, chose to see the good in what God was doing and used this Roman imprisonment as an opportunity to witness to these soldiers. Church history and today's reading tells us he was quite successful at converting many of these soldiers. The heart of this man, and his complete commitment to Christ was incredible.

As I just said, he was chained to a Roman guard while waiting to meet Nero. However, he wasn't in some dungeon-like jail. He was under house arrest – a place that he was renting, and he was allowed visitors. He could pay for this place with the gifts and offerings from the churches he was ministering. The Philippi church had sent Paul a very generous offering, so this letter is more of a thank you note between friends than it is an apostle teaching and/or correcting his flock. There's a genuine warmth in this letter. I'll remind you throughout these four chapters of the significance of the message of being joyful regardless of his circumstances. Paul repeatedly speaks to the joy he has in his heart over the Philippian people even though he's in prison and chained to a Roman guard.

Finally, regarding Paul's appeal to Cesar, history tells us that Paul was brought before Cesar Nero twice. Nero let him go the first time, but two years later, Paul was arrested, brought to Rome, and was beheaded. When writing this epistle, Paul did not know if he would survive this meeting. This makes his joyous attitude all the more impressive. Most scholars believe that his upcoming appeal to Nero is his first encounter, but we should keep in mind Paul doesn't know this. He is aware that Nero could have him whacked.

¹ Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I covered in our teaching in Ephesians what makes a bondservant. As a quick refresher, a bondservant is someone who surrenders all of his/her rights as an individual and dedicates a lifetime of complete obedience to the instructions of the corresponding master. Clearly in our society that promotes

individuality and unearned entitlement, deciding to be a bondservant to anyone will get you scorned and “cancelled.”

When we hear Jesus’ title, Lord, that title comes with an expectation of complete obedience. Therefore, for the believer who is willing to call Jesus as his/her Lord, they *should be* at the same time declaring himself/herself as a bondservant. For the believer, giving Jesus the title of Savior is typically an easy thing to do. Most altar calls I have heard heavily emphasize the Savior title for the obvious goodness that comes from the free grace of being saved from one’s sins. However, throw Lord or Master in front of Savior, that is far less appealing to our selfish, flesh-driven sin nature.

To arrive at a willingness of complete surrender to Jesus’ Lordship, the only way our hearts and/or minds will consider this is if we arrive at such a confidence in the character and ability for that person to take better care of ourselves than we can. I won’t speak for any of you, but for someone like me who has been independent all his life, that is a BIG ask. Yet, when I see the extent to which God demonstrated His committed undeserved love to me through the cross and the literally countless unearned blessings I’ve received throughout my lifetime – starting with Vickie, I have to ask myself a tough question. *Why won’t I completely surrender to Jesus as my Lord?*

For me, the answer to that question is part of my sanctification process. As a reminder, this word sanctification means being set apart and being made holy. A component of this setting apart process is, effectively, setting me apart from myself. Selfish and independent old Dan needs to be set apart from the new creation that is supposed to think of Jesus and others first and be completely reliant on Him to provide my needs. I would like to tell you that I’m far down this sanctification road, but I would be lying to you if I did. I have my moments when I think I’m getting it, but then my stupid old self rears his ugly head, and I find myself back at the cross asking for forgiveness. I really have no idea what God puts up with me.

Sorry for that confessional detour. Back to the Scripture. You’ll note Paul calls the people saints. Our friends in the Catholic church arrested this title and made it only available to the super-duper believers. The Greek word for saint is *haggios*, which means holy. When we confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior, our sins are spiritually washed away by His holy blood. We are also declared justified, or not guilty, in the eyes of God. Accordingly, Jesus makes the believer holy; so, every believer is a saint. The Bishops were the overseers and supervisors of the church’s activities while the Deacons were the people actually doing the day-to-day work.

Paul concludes his greeting with his very typical grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When it comes to the Christian faith, grace must precede peace. I hope you’ll recall from Ephesians that we are saved by grace through faith – not of works or anything we can do. Saving faith saves us from being at war with God. Again, drawing on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, prior to our salvation, we are described as children of wrath – God’s wrath. Therefore, we cannot have the peace of God until we first receive the grace of God. God’s grace, which springs forth from His love for us, always comes first in the establishment and ongoing life of the believer. Then comes peace.

³ I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, ⁵ for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now,

You can feel the warmth and affection from Paul in these verses. In every remembrance of the Philippian brothers and sisters, he is thanking God for them. He is coming from a place of joy in his fellowship with them when he makes requests to the LORD in his prayers. This fellowship with them he has is rooted in their mutual belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is one of the most beautiful aspects of being a Christian. Regardless of where you are or how different people may be, when you learn someone is a fellow believer in Jesus, there is this instant kinship that develops. I mentioned earlier the word sanctification – being set apart. I believe an important component of the sanctification process is being set apart *together*. There is greater strength in numbers. We may not be able to agree on everything, but we should be able to agree on the incredible love, mercy, and grace of Jesus.

⁶ being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ;

Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, wrote, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” (5:17) Jesus is the initiator, or author, of our new creation. He has begun something new in each believer. As beautiful and marvelous is the truth of being made a new creation in Christ is, a reasonable and wise question to ask oneself as a new creation is, “Now what?” That answer is different for every believer. God takes all of our past – the good and the bad – and puts it to use for the betterment of His kingdom and His glory.

You may be questioning me when I included the bad things we’ve done. Did I really mean that? Yep, I did. You don’t have to believe me, but perhaps you’ll believe Paul in his proclamation in Romans 8:28, “And we know that *all* things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” I added the emphasis on all. God not only has the ability but also the desire to redeem not just our souls but our past. He can take our worst sins or the painful sins committed against us and turn them into something good and beautiful to help others. From the book of Genesis, Joseph, in speaking to his brothers who had left him for dead, spoke to God’s amazing ability to redeem, “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.” (Genesis 50:20)

The writer of the Hebrews wrote in the first two verses of chapter 12, “*Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*” As Paul said in verse seven, Jesus will complete what he has begun in each of us as new creations. This aligns perfectly with what the writer to the Hebrews (whom I believe to be Paul) wrote. The words complete and finish are interchangeable. It’s ok to feel like an incomplete work of the LORD’s. I have good news for you – He’s not done yet!

⁷ just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. ⁸ For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ.

Again, listen to the love Paul has for these people. He has them in his heart despite the fact that he is in chains. He longs for them with the affection of Jesus Christ. That is what I want to hear from my shepherd. Beyond Paul’s obvious love for people, he never let his title as an apostle get to his head. He never lost sight of the fact that he is who he is solely by the grace of God. For someone who was able to perform the miracles that he did and lead only God knows how many to a saving faith in Jesus, I can easily see how you can develop the mindset of “I’m all that.” Pride is a real temptation for the Christian leader. A good friend of mine, who is a pastor, once told me that the most prideful person in the church is often the one standing behind the pulpit!

⁹ And this I pray, that your till more and more in knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, ¹¹ being filled with the fruits of righteousness which *are* by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Paul then provides details to the prayers he's making for them. What's the first on his list of priorities for them? Their works? No. Their giving. No. Paul's has his priorities in good, Biblical order – as we should. What two commandments did Jesus give us? To love God and love others. The common theme? Love. Therefore, Paul's priority in his prayers for the Philippians is first and foremost that their love may abound. How does that happen? Being a Bible teacher, I'll confess my bias, but the best way to love *like* Jesus is to grow in our knowledge *of* Jesus. Back in 1958, a group called The Teddy Bears sang a hit called "*To Know Him is to Love Him.*" This wasn't a Christian song, but it speaks the truth that the more we get to *know* Jesus and His capacity and desire to love, the more likely we will reflect that capacity and desire to love *like* Jesus to those God brings into our lives.

Paul continues his encouragement for his flock that they may approve things that are excellent. That should seem pretty obvious, but if you take a step back and look at today's world – especially in the social media realm, where's all the attention going to? The negative. The condemnation. The criticism. The judgment. None of this is excellent. Paul's encouragement is to approve/support those things that are clearly evidence of the goodness of God – of holy and righteous influences. Furthermore, if we choose to dedicate our hearts, minds, and time on the excellent, we will become more sincere in our faith walks.

Paul adds the words "without offense." In this upside-down world we're living in these days, choosing to live for Christ has become the offending counterculture. We can't let that dissuade us from living righteously. As noted earlier, we are bondservants for Jesus, so our conduct should reflect what He would do. It's not easy, but if faith were easy, everyone would do it. How long are we to live loving like Jesus, knowing Jesus more, approving things that are excellent, and not offending? Until we either die or He takes us home in the rapture. That is what is meant until the day of Christ.

Verse 11 speaks to the fruits of righteousness. What is this fruit? Isaiah, Jesus' half-brother James, and the writer to the Hebrews all link righteousness to peace. I've also heard additional fruits of righteousness is love and joy. If you need a litmus test of where you are in your faith, ask not just yourself but those closest to you if they see love, joy, and peace in your life. However, before you let Satan's favorite Siamese twins named shame and condemnation descend upon you when you hear the answer to the test is you're not always living like this, I have good news. *No one* is living like this *all* the time. There's *always* room for improvement. God knows this – it's a beautiful and much appreciated component of His grace. He's so very patient with us as we work out our salvation and understanding of His love. That being said, a periodic visit to God's produce stand to see how ripe your fruits of righteousness are is good wisdom.

¹² But I want you to know, brethren, that the things *which happened* to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; ¹⁴ and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Verses 12-14 are a furtherance of my comments regarding verse 6. Paul, sounding much like Joseph in Genesis, is opting to look at his circumstances through God's eyes. Human eyes look at Paul being innocent of his charges and, therefore, being wrongfully incarcerated can only see the wrongness and injustice of Paul's situation. Paul, though, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is opting to not devote energy to complaining about his circumstances. He's made the decision that if his good God is in complete control of his life, then God must have a good reason to allow the circumstances to be as they are. This is advanced faith stuff.

A lot of Christian teaching refuses to adopt the idea that faith in Jesus should include suffering and injustice. I don't understand this rejection at all. Just look at the cross! In all of human history, there was no greater injustice and wrongness than God's holy and only begotten Son crucified. Yet, look at all the good that came from that? This is a huge component, and probably the most difficult one, of a complete surrender to Jesus. Our flesh understandably wants relief from pain and for the world to operate under its own twisted sense of justice.

I mentioned in my introduction that despite Paul's imprisonment, God was working. The palace guards who were chained to him were being converted. Verse 13 leads me to imagine Paul saying to these guards something like, "You may have me in chains, but my true chains are in my love and devotion to Jesus Christ." That would be a real head scratcher to the guards and provoke them to ask Paul what he means by that. There's his open door to preach the gospel. Paul's boldness in his in-chains witnessing and preaching was infectious.

This is so true. I've heard the story of a large college class of students, and the professor is spewing denials and attacks on Jesus. He then challenges anyone who believes to stand up. Once the first person stands up, it gets easier for the rest to stand up. The fear goes away when you're not alone. The believer is never alone because he/she has the Holy Spirit and the assurance from God that He will never leave nor forsake you.

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: ¹⁶ The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; ¹⁷ but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁸ What then? Only *that* in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

One of the things I wrestle with at times is examining too closely other teaching and preaching. I find myself saying under my breath things like, "I wouldn't have said it that way" or "You're missing the bigger point!" I'll confess that's a pride issue. I need to adopt Paul's mindset he lays out in these verses. There are people who are preaching Christ for the wrong reasons. They do it out of strife or envy – it's like a competition to whose church is the biggest, offers the coolest programs, or even shows the best movies and serves the best popcorn.

Then there are those preachers who are shepherds – they have a love for Jesus and a love for His sheep. This is the better place to be coming from in preaching Jesus. Paul's point, though, is as long as Christ is being preached – regardless of the purity or impurity of the motivation, it's all good. The name of the game for all of us is that God/Jesus are glorified and magnified above all else.

¹⁹ For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, ²⁰ according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

As I mentioned earlier, Paul is waiting for his appointment with Nero. He's fully aware that the outcome of this appointment could mean he will be released or he will be killed. The key word in these verses is "deliverance." Paul saw either being released from prison or his death as the same definition of deliverance. This is the mature and right mindset for the Christian regarding death. With the assurance of our last breath in this life being followed by our next breath in heaven, death is nothing to be afraid of. This is what is meant when Paul asked out loud in his first letter to the Corinthians, "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" (15:55) In the next verses, Paul goes deeper into this

concept of what deliverance means as he is sharing with the Philippians, and thankfully with us as well, his dilemma of mature spiritual thinking.

²¹ For to me, to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain. ²² But if *I* live on in the flesh, this *will mean* fruit from *my* labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, *which is* far better. ²⁴ Nevertheless to remain in the flesh *is* more needful for you.

To live *is* Christ. What does Paul mean by that? Once again, invoking the concept of being a bondservant, a completely surrendered and committed existence to serve Christ is living like Christ. Such a commitment is a total abandonment of your own needs and wants. You can only do this when you are so sure that Jesus will provide no less than what you can provide for yourself on your own. Jesus, in John 10:10 affirms His ability to not only provide no less than what we can, but also more, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”

To die *is* gain. This is the assurance for every believer. Paul said in his second letter to the Corinthians, “...to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.” (5:8) Paul didn’t buy into the doctrine of soul sleep. There are some people who believe when we die, our souls go to sleep until Jesus returns. For Paul, to die meant to be immediately present with Jesus. He saw this as much better than this life. Disregarding everyone else, the choice of life in this sin drenched world with dilapidating bodies or being fully healed, all tears wiped away, being in a new body, and in the presence of Jesus is not a tough sell.

But that’s not reality, is it? We all have people in our lives that we love, enjoy spending time with and taking care of. This is what Paul is struggling with in verses 22-24. He realizes that there is fruit to his labor – his efforts are saving souls and helping people to mature in Christ. As I get older, I find myself thinking of things like this. As long as Vickie is here, I want to do my best to love her and take care of her. Please don’t think that I’m leaving out my children or grandchildren – I deeply love each of them. However, they are all grown, they all know Jesus, and they have their own lives to live. My role in their lives is diminishing, and while that saddens me at times, I’m, *mostly*, at peace with it. I get where Paul is coming from in this dilemma.

²⁵ And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, ²⁶ that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again.

I interpret these two verses that Paul appears to believe that Nero will release him. From this beautiful bond that he has with the Philippian believers, he’s planning to continue ministering to them to see them progress and build their joy of faith. He’s acknowledging this wonderful relationship he has with these people that he knows they will rejoice even more in Christ by surviving Nero’s judgment and seeing them at least one more time.

²⁷ Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. ²⁹ For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, ³⁰ having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear *is* in me.

Paul concludes this component of his letter with an exhortation to the Philippians to let their conduct – how they live their life – to be worthy of the gospel of Christ – regardless of if he comes again

or not. Again, this is the heart of a shepherd. He so identifies himself with his flock. He's trying to reflect Jesus in how he ministers to the Philippian believers, so he wants them to emulate both him and Jesus. He enforces this truth of him identifying himself with the people that they stand fast in one spirit and one mind striving for the faith of the gospel. In other words, they are to be united in their efforts to serve and mirror the heart of the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We covered earlier a component of what it means to be walking worthy of the gospel of Christ. This was living righteously producing fruit such as love, joy, and peace. Paul points out another component of walking worthy of the gospel of Christ, "not in any way be terrified by your adversaries." I've spent quite a bit of time speaking to Satan's weapons against the believer. They almost always start with lies and deceptions. The objective is clear – to place doubt. The inevitable but rotten fruit of doubt allows the pride to swell up until it realizes it can't handle life either. What's the progression from doubt and pride? Fear. I spoke last week about the truth that perfect love casts out fear.

If we're living in fear, we are effectively denying the sufficiency of God's love. Living in fear is hard enough on ourselves, but the bigger problem is people can see we're living in fear. This is not the testimony we want to give the world. This is Paul's point in verse 28. If we're not trusting in Jesus' love to cast out our fears, then our adversaries will see this as proof of their successful attempts to destruct or discredit the fullness and completion of God's delivering powers. If we're living out our salvation in victory over fear, then our adversaries will realize their destructive efforts are useless. The power of God is greater than their attacks.

Now we get to verse 29, "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." Conveniently, those professing the prosperity doctrine, which pushes the more faith you have the more perfect your life will be, omit verses like this one. In my opinion, there are not many more evil, dangerous, and unbiblical teachings than the prosperity doctrine. What is the first response when that promised perfect life doesn't materialize? "You must not have enough faith." This is mean-spirited condemnation, which has no place in those who are in Christ Jesus.

I've already spent some time with you on the reality of suffering for Christ. In a world that is growing more and more opposed to anything Jesus, suffering for His sake is a testimony that we're doing something right. Paul reminds the Philippians of this truth that what he is experiencing now is an example. Yet, what is his testimony so far in this letter? One of joy and love. Only Jesus Christ can give us this righteous fruit that propels us above our afflictions for His sake.

Remember when Jesus said to Saul, the old Paul, regarding Saul's attacks on the early church, "Why are you persecuting *Me*?" As our Good Shepherd, He so closely identifies with us as His children – He sees attacks on His account as attacks against Him. From a place of love, He provides what we need to rise above the pain and suffering and become, as Brandon Lake says in his great song, Miracle Child, "Living, breathing testimonies." Amen?

Questions:

1. What good work do you think God has started in you that you look forward to Him finishing?
2. Is there a difference between joy and happiness? If so, please describe.
3. Do you agree that to live is Christ and to die is gain?