

Servants and Saints

Philippians 1:1-2
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As we have opportunity in coming weeks and months, we are going to study the book of "Philippians" together. The city of Philippi was located on the western shore of the Aegean Sea in ancient Macedonia, today a province of modern Greece. There is nothing there now but an assortment of ruins. The only remaining structure of any size is an Ancient temple to the Roman God Silvanus. The glory and honor have faded, but at one time Philippi was a very strong and powerful Roman colony. It was named for Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. Originally it was called "Colonia August Julia Philippensis," so you can see why they shortened it to Philippi!

It was the practice of the emperors to establish colonies in strategic places throughout the Roman empire, primarily along traveled routes. In order to preserve the Pax Romana, the Roman peace, they would populate these cities with soldiers. It has been estimated that at the time this book was written the population of Philippi was three-fourths military - retired soldiers who had been given Roman citizenship and a government stipend, and also active soldiers there on garrison duty. Also, there were silver and gold mines nearby and so the citizens enjoyed a high degree of affluence. So you can imagine the type of city Philippi was.

There were a number of other very large and imposing cities in that part of the Roman empire which are remembered for various things -- Athens for its cultural splendor, Corinth for its architectural glory. But Philippi has lived on in history and in the memories of men primarily because in A.D. 62 a prisoner in Rome wrote a letter to a group of his friends in Philippi, and this letter we now have in our New Testament, The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians.

Paul was under house arrest in Rome. He had been arrested and tried in Jerusalem, had appealed to Caesar, and had been sent to Rome because as a Roman citizen he had the right to appeal to the Emperor. For two years he was held there under house arrest. People were free to visit him but he was not free to come and go. He was chained to a Roman soldier throughout this period.

Evidently at the time he wrote this letter his trial had already taken place and he was awaiting the Emperor's decision, a decision from which there would be no appeal -- and Paul knew this. If our dating is correct, the Emperor at this time was Nero, who was not particularly known for his leniency, mercy, or inclination to grant clemency to prisoners, particularly prisoners of Paul's type. And so from a human standpoint his life hung from a very slender thread.

And yet, throughout the book there is a great note of joy, excitement, triumph, and confidence. For Paul's confidence was not in the whim of Nero, nor even in any hope of his justice. His confidence was in the Lord's ability to sustain him. You can see this in chapter 1, verse 19: "For I know that this [my imprisonment] shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ," and in verse 29: "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me." Paul sees that even his imprisonment is a part of the Lord's gracious gift to him. One writer said that "joy ripples and leaps through this book like a stream," It is an epistle of joy. If I could state the theme in two sentences, it would be; "I'm rejoicing in my circumstances. Are you?"

The church in Philippi was founded about A.D. 52, some ten years before this letter was written. It was founded by Paul, and Silas, Paul's companion on his second missionary journey, and Luke, the Greek physician who

accompanied Paul on at least portions of his second and third journeys. Paul and Silas had gone to Troas, had met Luke there and, because Paul experienced a vision of a man calling them over into Macedonia to help, they sailed across the Aegean and landed at Samothrace, went up to Neapolis, and on to Philippi where they met with a group of Jewish women who gathered near the river on the Sabbath to pray.

Philippi was largely a Gentile city and evidently the Jewish community there was very small. Jewish law required that there be at least ten men in a locale who were heads of families before a synagogue could be built. Since there was no synagogue in Philippi there must have been less than ten such men in town who considered themselves to be Jews. But these women were meeting and worshipping together. As was Paul's custom whenever he went into a new area to pioneer a ministry he met first with the Jewish community.

In Acts 16 Luke tells us something of the beginning of this church and describes the incidents by which three of the early members became Christians. One was a woman named Lydia, the second was a Greek slave girl, and the third was a Roman soldier. Lydia was the first to respond to the Lord. She was a Gentile from Thyatira in Asia Minor and was a very wealthy woman. She dealt in purple fabric, and this particular type of cloth was a very expensive commodity, perhaps the most luxurious that could be purchased in that day. Through her endeavor she had become very prosperous. Evidently she had a large house and it was in her home that the early church gathered. Luke says that the Lord opened her heart as Paul preached. And in response she opened her home to the church.

The second person to respond to the gospel was a Greek slave girl who was a fortune-teller. She was possessed by a demon. Paul exorcised the demon and the girl became a follower of Jesus Christ. The third person was a Roman jailer. I'm sure you remember the account. Paul and Silas had been imprisoned for preaching the good news. After their feet were placed in stocks, they sang the night away. In the middle of the night an earthquake occurred, the doors of the jail fell open, and they were free to go. The Roman jailer, fearful for his own life, rushed into the jail and asked what he could do to be saved. Seizing the opportunity, Paul said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you'll be saved." And this Roman jailer did so. Then he took them into his home, bathed their wounds, fed them, and provided for their needs.

It is interesting to me that Luke should go into so much detail about the founding of this church, even to the extent of giving us the names and the precise circumstances surrounding the salvation of these three individuals. I think that it shows us something of the capacity of the gospel to transcend all cultural and national boundaries. Here you have an upper-class Asian mercantile lady, a middle-class Roman soldier, and a lower-class Greek slave. And yet they are all made one in Jesus Christ. All are free to meet in the same home. All live with love and concern and compassion for each other. All of the natural distinctions and lines of relationships which ordinarily exist in the world are torn down, and new lines are built, new relationships established. The Lord replaces our desire to discriminate and to isolate ourselves from others with a desire to live together in love and harmony.

I was talking to a friend of mine who recently graduated from college and is working on a construction job this summer. He was telling me how discouraged he has become because, when they eat lunch on the construction site, the white workmen gather over in one corner of the yard, the black workmen in another part, and the Chicanos someplace else. He has tried repeatedly to move into these groups, but the men are not particularly responsive, and none of the other white workmen appear to care. This is perhaps the first time he has seen this kind of situation. But those of you who live out there in the cold, cruel world know that that's life, that's the way things are in secular society.

And yet these barriers which men build are precisely the kind of thing which Jesus Christ came to destroy. When the Lord moved into Philippi -- in the persons of Paul, Silas, Luke, and other evangelists, and they began to proclaim the gospel -- he began to change hearts. He changed that tendency to isolate oneself into a desire to serve and to give. This was happening in Philippi, and a number of times in this book Paul speaks of the unity that we have in Christ.

One other introductory matter before we look at the book: why did Paul write this letter? On the surface it might

appear that his reasons were almost trivial, although, as you soon learn when you study them, nothing about the Scriptures is ever trivial. But as you read through it, you discover that this book is primarily a thank-you note. The church in Philippi on numerous occasions had supported the apostle Paul as he traveled, providing money when he had need. So Paul wrote to express his appreciation and gratitude for their willingness to participate in the gospel in this way.

I wonder how many of you have ever considered a ministry of writing thank-you notes? If Paul had not felt the inclination to write this note we perhaps would not have this book. Maybe we would have another one, because one of the early church fathers indicates that Paul wrote several letters to Philippi. But this is the one the Holy Spirit chose to preserve for us, and it grew out of Paul's desire to say, "Thanks!" I wonder if we recognize our responsibility as members of the body to express gratitude and appreciation and thanksgiving to one another? I grew up with a friend who has a ministry of writing thank-you notes. It is part of the exercise of his spiritual gifts of encouragement and mercy. He encourages people by dropping them a note just to let them know that he is praying for them or that he appreciates something they have done. It is a great ministry. And one of the reasons Paul penned this letter was to express appreciation for what these people in Philippi meant to him.

The second reason he wrote the book was to give a health report on Epaphroditus, who was the emissary sent to Paul in Rome from the church at Philippi to bring some money and to minister to Paul. They sent not only some money; they sent someone who would care for his needs. But while he was in Rome Epaphroditus fell ill and, as you read between the lines, you also can deduce that he was homesick. He missed the folks back in Philippi. And so Paul explained in this letter why he was sending him back, and shared something of Epaphroditus' concern and love for the people in Philippi.

Now, there is a third reason why Paul wrote this letter. It was to rebuke two ladies in the church. We don't know anything about these ladies except their names. They have gone down in history. These are given to us in chapter 4: Euodia and Syntyche. Someone has renamed them Odious and Soon-touchy. It seems that they couldn't get along. They were quarreling and fighting and bickering and disrupting the unity of the church. So Paul wrote this letter to enjoin them to cease and desist and to live together in love and harmony. And he called upon the church to encourage them in this direction. Imagine the effect on this early church when one of the elders read before them these words of introduction, and the very profound theological sections which follow, and then he got to chapter 4 and said, "I beseech Euodia and Syntyche that they cut it out," It must have caused quite a stir! We'll look at that later on.

This week and the next two we'll try to cover chapter 1. I'll chart the course a little bit for you so you will know what we will be studying. The first two verses are basically an introduction. Then note verse 3. Paul says, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." Verses 3 through 11 recount his memories of the church in Philippi, and they evoke two responses in him: gratitude for what has taken place in the past, and a prayer for their future. In verse 12 Paul says, "I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel." Verses 12 through 26 bring them up to date on what had been happening in his life. And he assures them that, far from being an adverse turn of events, his imprisonment was very productive in the furtherance of the gospel. Then in verse 27 he says, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Here he turns from his remembrances and his circumstances to their conduct. And the rest of the book is essentially an unfolding of what their conduct should be. He is concerned for them and their performance of the gospel.

Now let's look at the introduction, verses 1 and 2;

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers [elders] and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a typical introduction to a first-century piece of correspondence. If you were to pick up any secular correspondence from this time, this type of introduction is what you'd find; "Sender to recipients . . . then a word

of greeting." It has always seemed to me that this is the way we ought to construct letters -- it saves you from having to turn all the way to the back to find out who wrote to you!

But Paul speaks of himself as a servant of Jesus Christ, and he refers to these people in Philippi as saints. If you are new to the Scriptures this might strike you as strange. You might expect "Saint Paul to the slaves," not "Slave Paul to the saints." But Paul means precisely what he says, and that is precisely the attitude we ought to have about ourselves and about others. As far as we are concerned, we are slaves of Jesus Christ; and as far as we are concerned about others, they are saints. But it is equally true that others are slaves and we are saints, because we all share in common the same relationship: we are slaves of Jesus Christ, and we are saints - slaves in regard to the position that we take before Jesus Christ our Lord, saints in regard to the process that God is working out in our life.

There are two terms in the Greek New Testament which are translated "servant" or "slave," and they are never confused. There is a term for "servant" which is roughly the counterpart of a member of the labor force today, someone who sells his time and talents, an employee. He was utterly free to come and go, and he had all the rights of a citizen. But there were also bond-servants. They had no rights. Most of them had been taken captive when Rome conquered surrounding nations, and they were bound to their masters for life. They could exercise none of the privileges of citizens; they were nobodies. Masters held the right of life and death over them. And it is this term, *doulos*, that Paul applies to himself to describe his relationship to Jesus Christ.

This is where Paul starts, and this is where we must start. Unless Jesus Christ is Lord in our lives, unless we are his servants, his slaves in this sense, we really have no right to call ourselves Christians, because that is the way the New Testament defines Christianity - in terms of servanthood. Jesus said, "You call me teacher and Lord, and that's what I am."

He is Teacher in the sense that he tells us the truth, Lord in the sense that he demands obedience to what is taught. That is the relationship that we have to him. We are slaves. And unless we understand that we are slaves we don't really understand what it means to be a Christian.

Some years ago I was talking to a friend of mine and trying to explain the gospel to him. I was finding it very difficult. I drew pictures and diagrams and showed him passages of Scripture. But he just couldn't get it. I prayed for wisdom, and the Lord gave me an idea. I said, "Mark, suppose the Lord were to walk into this room right now and say, 'Mark, follow me.' What would you say?" I saw the light dawn in Mark's eyes, and he said, "I'd say, 'Lord, anywhere; anywhere!' " That is what it means to be a Christian. Jesus is Lord and Master, and he says, "Follow me." And I must say, "Lord, anywhere. I'll go anywhere you want me to go, do anything you want me to do, be whatever you want me to be." Those are the terms of discipleship.

Now, when we become a slave in that sense (and remember, Jesus says that his burden is easy, and his yoke is light) then we become a saint. Again, that is the sort of term which is difficult for us to grasp. What does it mean to be a saint? I usually conjure up a vision of some emaciated woebegone individual who looks as if he had been weaned on a dill pickle, and who, as someone has said, would make a good frontispiece for the book of Lamentations. But that is not the biblical concept of a saint. The word means, essentially, "holy one," and "holy" is the term which, above all other terms, is used to describe God the Father.

In this regard there is a classic passage in Isaiah 6. Isaiah sees a throne, and he sees the occupant of the throne and realizes that it is Jehovah. This was in the year that king Uzziah died. And perhaps, in contrast to the powerlessness and the death of the old king, Isaiah needed to realize that the King was still on the throne. God was still there, and Isaiah saw him high and lifted up, saw that he is the Eternal One, and all-powerful. Then he saw seraphim on each side of the throne, and these heavenly creatures were calling to one another, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts!" Above anything else that we might say or think or infer about the Lord, the one thing which stands out is the fact that he is holy.

And that is the characteristic which is ascribed to us as believers; we are holy! We are holy because God's

righteousness is given to us in Jesus Christ, and God sees us just as he sees his Son. And we are holy because he is working out in our life a process designed to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. And that process is so certain that God sees us as having already arrived. When we become a slave and acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, at that point God begins to work out in our life a process which will conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. And that process is guaranteed. God has, so to speak, a contract which he cannot break, and he is going to work in our lives to produce through our lives the character, the loveliness, the beauty of Jesus Christ himself. You may be questioning that right now. You may be going through a time in your life when you are discouraged and defeated, and perhaps things don't seem to be working out too well. But the promise is that God is in the process of making you a saint.

I was in San Francisco last week with my wife, Carolyn, and we were looking at one of those clocks under a glass dome. You can see all the works -- there are big wheels and little wheels, and some of the wheels turn clockwise and some turn counter clockwise, some don't appear to move at all while others move very rapidly. It occurred to me that this is very much like what goes on in our lives. Someone designed that clock to show the time, and there is a process going on in it which contributes to that end. Everything happening in that little clock is to the end that it will show the time.

The same thing is true of us. There is a process going on in our life, and everything that God does in our life is to the end that we will display the character of Jesus Christ. Some are big things, big wheels in our life which are obviously connected with the process of maturity. We can see them work. And some are little wheels for which it is difficult to see the connection. Some things move rapidly, while others don't seem to move at all, or, as a matter of fact, sometimes seem to move backward. But yet by faith we can believe that the process is being worked out, and that our destiny is secure. We are going to display the character and the beauty of Jesus Christ.

Paul notes that this sainthood is not to be exercised in isolation from the world, because he writes, "to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi," and Philippi was a pretty sordid place. Therefore we cannot say that it doesn't work in my shop or in my neighborhood or in my office; it will work anywhere. You can be Godlike in any situation God puts you in. Secondly Paul points out that this Godlikeness which the Lord is working out in our lives is not to be exercised in isolation from the other saints, because he writes, "to the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the elders and the deacons." It doesn't matter whether you are a leader or one who is led; God is working out that process. There is no hierarchy in the church. There is only one Lord. We are all brothers. There is no pecking order, no distinction. We are all one. We are all recipients of God's grace. We are all slaves. We are all saints.

And then a final word; all of this comes to us not through dedicated effort, not through trying harder, not through clenching our teeth and moving ahead on our own power. Rather, grace and peace come to us "from God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ." He is the author of the work that he is doing in our life. When we make him Lord, and rest on his ability, then he is going to produce in us the end that he has in view -- conformity to Jesus Christ.

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