

30. A Letter to Philippi

Philippians 1:1-30, 2:1-3:1, and 4:4-7, with slight omissions

Paul had been preaching at Ephesus, and as had happened at other places, his message provoked the Jews, and led to a disturbance. He was imprisoned. His flock at Philippi had sent one of their members, Epaphroditus, to see to Paul's needs in prison. Then Epaphroditus himself fell ill, and his life was despaired of. On his recovery, Paul sent him back with this message, which amounts to a sermon in letter form. This prison letter was combined with the rest of the Philippi correspondence by Paul's editors, to make a single letter. The original of this letter must be extracted from that combination. Here it is.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus that are at Philippi, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God upon all my remembrance of you, always in every supplication of mine on behalf of you all making my supplication with joy, for your fellowship in furtherance of the gospel from the first day until now; being confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ: even as it is right for me to be thus minded on behalf of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as, both in my bonds and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers with me of grace. For God is my witness, how I long after you all in the tender mercies of Christ Jesus. And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment; so that ye may approve the things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and void of offence unto the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

Now I would have you know, brethren, that the things [which happened] unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel; so that my bonds became manifest in Christ throughout the whole praetorian guard, and to all the rest; and that most of the brethren in the Lord, being confident through my bonds, are more abundantly bold to speak the word of God without fear. Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: the one [do it] of love, knowing that I am set for the defense of the gospel; but the other proclaim Christ of faction, not sincerely, thinking to raise up affliction for me in my bonds. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and therein I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice. For I know that this shall turn out to my salvation, through your supplication and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that in nothing shall I be put to shame, but [that] with all boldness, as always, [so] now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether by life, or by death.

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if to live in the flesh, – [if] this shall bring fruit from my work, then what I shall choose I know not. But I am in a strait betwixt the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ; for it is very far better: yet to abide in the flesh is more needful for your sake.

And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide, yea, and abide with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith; that your glorying may abound in Christ Jesus in me through my presence with you again. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ: that, whether I come and see you or be absent, I may hear of your state, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel; and in nothing affrighted by the adversaries: which is for them an evident token of perdition, but of your salvation, and that from God; because to you it hath been granted in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer in his behalf, having the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

If there is therefore any exhortation in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any tender mercies and compassions, make full my joy, that ye be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind; [doing] nothing through faction or through vainglory, but in lowliness of mind each counting other better than himself; not looking each of you to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others.

Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

who, existing in the form of God,
 counted not the being on an equality with God
 a thing to be grasped,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a servant,
 being made in the likeness of men;
 and being found in fashion as a man,
 he humbled himself,
 becoming obedient [even] unto death,
 [yea, the death of the cross!]

Wherefore also God highly exalted him,
 and gave unto him the name
 which is above every name;

that in the name of Jesus
 every knee should bow,
 of [things] in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and that every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.

So then, my beloved, even as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure.

Do all things without murmurings and questionings: that ye may become blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom ye are seen as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life; that I may have whereof to glory in the day of Christ, that I did not run in vain neither labor in vain. Yea, and if I am offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all: and in the same manner do ye also joy, and rejoice with me. But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy shortly unto you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your state.

But I counted it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow-worker and fellow-soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need; since he longed after you all, and was sore troubled, because ye had heard that he was sick: for indeed he was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, that I might not have sorrow upon sorrow. I have sent him therefore the more diligently, that, when ye see him again, ye may rejoice, and that I may be the less sorrowful. Receive him therefore in the Lord with all joy; because for the work of Christ he came nigh unto death, hazarding his life to supply that which was lacking in your service toward me.

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not irksome, but for you it is safe. Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, Rejoice. Let your forbearance be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. In nothing be anxious; but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.

Reflections

It is interesting that the original circular letter of Jacob, which was widely known in the churches, and which Paul probably also knew, is about the same length as this letter by Paul, which Paul probably saw as a letter of instruction. It is his earliest known letter of that type. Did he learn the type from Jacob?

The hymn quoted by Paul, which brings in Christ as a model for obedience, was considered in the previous chapter. Its existence at Philippi before Paul came along means that when Paul did come, there were already Jesus followers in Philippi. And from the hymn, we can see that those Jesus followers did not have any interest in the crucifixion of Christ (Paul has to add a half line, spoiling the meter, to get that idea in). The Philippians were therefore what we call Alpha Christians. They were Alpha Christians who, by the late Forties, had arrived at a remarkably advanced concept of Jesus as not a mere man, but as a being who had existed in Heaven prior to his life on earth as a man. This represents an extension beyond the ideas of Alpha proper. It shows how ideas of Jesus were to extend themselves in various directions, in different parts of the Roman world.

Not only does Paul intrude the Cross into the Philippi Hymn, he consistently intrudes Christ into his theology. Phrases like “in Christ” which pepper this letter may often be eliminated without harm to the sense. Paul preaches Jesus, but a Jesus who increasingly takes the place of God, being himself not only the guarantee, but (in the Atonement Doctrine) the agent, of individual salvation. It is just this substitution that characterizes much of later Christianity, which ceases to be the religion *of* Jesus, and becomes instead a religion *about* Jesus.

The other person very much in the picture is Paul himself. If we go through the letter and cross out every line which is not about Paul, his feelings, his aspirations, his concerns, and his sufferings on behalf of Philippi, what is left?

This is an exercise not lightly to be undertaken.