

Introduction to the book of Philippians

Over 2000 years ago an itinerant tentmaker was tossed into prison for creating a public disturbance. The emperor of the day was Nero, who was a prolific writer, yet nothing of his work remains. On the other hand, the Apostle Paul's writings and name are recognised by millions around the world.

If Paul were to visit a church of our day in any western democracy, he might well ask how his letter written from prison to a small group of persecuted believers could be understood by people so different from him and from the Philippians. How was the Gospel advanced through the Apostles imprisonment and the Philippians persecution?

We can begin with caution and with the Holy Spirit's guidance to enter Paul's world and the world of the Philippians. Then we can carry Paul's perspective on the issues that he and the Philippians faced into our own world. This letter also gives us a unique window into the heart and mind of Paul. We get to see Paul the pastor alongside Paul the theologian.

The story of Paul and the church at Philippi begins in Acts chapter sixteen verse nine, "*Come over to Macedonia and help us*". Paul went to this area with his companions, Silas, Timothy, and Luke. Paul had other plans but was redirected by the Holy Spirit. Paul's stay at Philippi, although only a few days, was eventful, but it was also painful. Jews were not welcome in the city and he was thrown in prison and badly beaten. This persecution continued until he left the city

However, he left behind a diverse group of believers. A wealthy merchant Lydia and her household believed (Acts 16:13-15), a jailer and his family (Acts 16: 28-34), and perhaps a slave girl (Acts 16:16-18). It appears that by the time Paul and his companions left they were meeting in Lydia's house (Acts 16:15). This was the largest residence among them.

They certainly were different sorts of people and the church struggled from the start. Despite these struggles the church at Philippi appears to have been Paul's favourite church. They were willing to support Paul from the beginning, even when other churches were unable or unwilling too. Paul's relationship with other churches was often strained and he must have valued this tangible and sacrificial support of his efforts to proclaim the gospel.

The city of Philippi was a Roman colony and full of ex-soldiers who were very loyal to Caesar and Rome. It was also a city full of idols and on a major travel route. This meant the city was influenced by many different cultures who visited often and some would go on to settle there. Philippi was a city of status

conscious people. In the Greco-Roman world honour was the most prized possession together with social standing and recognition.

The church commissioned Epaphroditus to carry monetary gifts (2:25, 4: 14-18) to Paul and aid him with his imprisonment (2:30). However, Epaphroditus became so ill that he nearly died (2:27 30b). Somehow the church found out about his illness and began to worry (2:26), so Paul felt it prudent to send Epaphroditus back to them.

So, Paul's letter is in part a thank-you-note to the church for their generous support (4: 14, 18). Paul commends Epaphroditus to the church and although he had not been able to stay as long as the church had wanted, Paul still told them that he deserved a hero's welcome when he got home (2:29). Probably before Epaphroditus left he gave Paul a thorough report on the church. I can imagine Paul, was very keen to hear from Epaphroditus. The news appears to have been a pretty good report and Paul's letter has generally, a positive tone.

Although one point was difficult to miss- they were struggling in unity. A quarrel between two women had affected the whole church (4:2). This resulted in the church's ability to witness (2: 14-16). Without this unity they would struggle to withstand the trials of persecution that they continued to experience from their unbelieving neighbours.

This letter is a series of reflective essays that all revolve around this amazing poem in (2: 6-11). Some suggest that it may have been put to music and sung as a worship song in the early church. It covers the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul draws on this poem to speak into the life of the church at Philippi. He points out that Christian living means that our lives are a lived expression of the story of Christ.

He warns them of the errors that other churches have slipped into and encourages them strongly to stand firm against pagan opposition. Philippians also contains more memorable statements than most of Paul's letters, for instance;

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain"

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus"

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus".

"I can do everything through him who gives me strength"

"My God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus".

We can know these verses well but if we don't understand why Paul wrote them in his letter to the church at Philippi, they can take on a life of their own totally adrift from their historical context. Firstly, we need to ask, what did it mean to the recipients of the day? Then, secondly, build a bridge to what it means to us today.

Philippians has at least two main theological themes. First and most importantly Philippians is about unity and suffering. Unity was needed to resist persecution. Further, it was needed to present a credible witness to an unbelieving world and thirdly to be found blameless and pure on the day of Christ.

However, unity is not to be found by changing the essence of the Gospel. In 3:1-11 Paul has harsh words for those who claim to follow Christ but want to add legal requirements (like circumcision) to be a follower of Jesus. In 3:18-19 he chastises those who take offense at the cross believing that they have already achieved spiritual perfection. Unity is through Christ and Christ alone.

He goes on to mention examples of conduct that will help with unity. So, we read "*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit*" and "*Do everything without complaining and arguing*" (2:14). We also find Paul suggesting a gentle approach toward other Christians that we disagree with (1:17 -18a, 3:15-16) and a willingness to put the interests of others first. We discover that Christ's willingness to humble himself provides a model for us to follow. This theme of humility will permeate the letter.

The second theological theme in Philippians deals with the problem of suffering. Paul was suffering when he wrote Philippians. He was in prison awaiting a trial that could result in his execution (1:13-14, 17, and 20). Paul knew first-hand what it was like to suffer.

2 Corinthians 11:23-28,²³ *Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.* ²⁴ *Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,* ²⁶ *I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.* ²⁷ *I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.* ²⁸ *Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.*

When it comes to suffering, Paul is talking from experience. The Philippians were also suffering from hostile unbelievers in the city. Despite all of this, Paul is filled with joy and expects the Philippians to be joyful also. However, Paul does not minimize pain. He acknowledges his own pain and situation and is grieved by it (2:28). His response is grounded in the fact that he knows that God is at work through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He admits that his suffering has allowed the good news of Jesus to be advanced.

Paul's attitude and theology of suffering offers no simplistic answers. He always brings us back to the message of Christ crucified and the hope that we can have because of the cross (3:12-14, 20-21). Paul reminds the Philippians that they have not yet received all that God has in store for them. However, in the meantime, God often works through weakness and suffering to further the gospel.

The fact that Jesus came to earth where he suffered and died does not remove pain from our lives. It does show that God did not sit idly by and watch us suffer in isolation. He became one of us. Thus, in Jesus, God gives us an up-close and personal look at his response to human suffering. How did God on earth respond to pain?

When he met a person in pain, he was deeply moved with compassion. Not once did he say endure your hunger, swallow your grief. When Jesus' friend Lazarus died, he wept. Very often when he was asked, he healed pain and sometimes he broke deep rooted customs to do it. The pattern of Jesus response should convince us that God is not a God who enjoys seeing us suffer. I doubt that Jesus followers ever asked "Does God care?" They had visible evidence of his concern every day. When Jesus himself faced suffering, he reacted like much of us would. He recoiled from it, asking three times if there was any other way.

In reading the bible about Jesus' last night on earth I detect a fierce struggle with fear, helplessness and hope- the same frontiers all of us confront in our suffering. The record of the life of Jesus on earth is what answers our questions. God did not give us words or theories on the problem of pain. He gave us himself and for Paul everything is about furthering the gospel no matter what we face.