

Five Weeks in Philippi

Session Two - Philippians Chapter 1

Servants, Bishops and Deacons

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

The Greek words for Servants, Overseers and Deacons are “douloi,” (slaves or servants); “episkopoi” (bishops or overseers); “diakonos” (deacons or ministers).

- Douloi appears 120 times in the New Testament, and is consistently translated by the NIV as “servant” and by the NRSV most often as “slave.” There is a cultural reason for this: the NIV is an American translation, where “slave” immediately provokes a negative reaction; NRSV is international, and “slave” can be more broadly used. Slavery in the Roman context was sort of a mid-point between the American understanding of something akin to human livestock, and the concept of an indentured servant. Paul describes himself as a “doulos” of Christ some 13 times – someone completely committed to the service of God.
- Episkopos is literally “overseer” (epi - over; skopos – see) and is a term borrowed by the New Testament writers (from the construction industry!) to designate a person with oversight of a congregation, or of a number of congregations (think “house churches”) in an area. “Episkopos” became latinized, and then in English became the word “bishop.” A “bishop” in today’s context is a regional overseer. In the Presbyterian church, the Presbytery functions as a “multiperson bishop” made up of ministers and an equal number of elders.
- Diakonos, literally “deacon,” is variously translated in the NT as “deacon,” “minister” or “servant.” This could refer to a “minister” as in the modern understanding, but could also refer to someone with a “social ministry” task, such as administering (there’s the word “minister” again) the distribution of charity. The NT lists both men and women deacons (see Romans 16)

What this demonstrates is that Paul is writing to a community of faith, most likely comprised of numerous house churches (hence the plural of “overseers” and “deacons”) which has grown considerably since its founding some 15 years or so earlier. The Gospel has taken firm hold in Philippi!

The Blessing of Grace and Peace

2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- This is Paul's standard greeting, but one which bridges and joins Greek and Jewish cultures. Grace – "charis" – is a clever change from the standard Greek greeting of "charein" – literally, "greetings." "Peace" is how a Jew would open a letter, or would greet a friend – "Shalom!"
- Paul also establishes his formula of "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The New Testament uses the word "Father" for God over 300 times – Paul uses it 60 times, 37 times together with the word "God." While we are sensitive to inclusive language today, the word "Father" in the New Testament context expresses both God's authority as well as the intimate relationship of parental love and care. This is even clearer in Jesus' use of the intimate term "abba," which is less formal than "father" and far less generic than "parent."
- "Lord" (kurios) refers to Jesus' authority over humanity, and the relationship of all Christians to Jesus – we are the doulos, he is the kurios – we are the servants, he is the Master. Paul uses this term for Jesus around 250 times, over 150 times on its own as a title for Jesus, and 100 times together with Jesus.
- "Christ" is a title for Jesus – it is the Greek form of the Hebrew word "Messiah," which means "Anointed One." Paul uses the title "Christ" for Jesus over 350 times, sometimes with the name Jesus, sometimes on its own.
- Lord, Jesus and Christ appear together 84 times in Paul's writing.

God's Workmanship

3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

- Note that Paul prays for his fellow Christians – a good reminder for us to do the same. We often limit our prayers to immediate family, and those in need. Paul, however, prays for his fellow Christians in thanksgiving, and for the sustenance of their faith.
- Paul also makes the point that it is God who began our Christian life, and God who will complete it – it is not up to us alone!

Paul In Chains

7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. 8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

- Paul is in chains, imprisoned for the Gospel. This dates the writing of the letter to as late as Paul's imprisonment in Rome, around 62 AD. While Paul had suffered numerous imprisonments, the later mention of "palace guard" seems to strongly indicate Rome.
- Others argue for an earlier imprisonment in Ephesus, around 53 AD, and the issues Paul addresses in the central portion of the letter seem similar to the issues in Ephesus, but in my opinion (warning! "opinion!") Rome and 62 AD is more likely, as the 15 year gap between Paul's establishment of the faith in Philippi allows for the growth necessary for a church to have overseers and deacons, as well as enough financial support to send money and personal assistance to Paul.

Knowledge and Depth of Insight

9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Love for God and for others grows with "*knowledge and depth of insight.*" The more we know about God, and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, the more we will love God and others. This growth in faith and love is the primary reason behind Bible Study!

A Witness in Hard Times

12 Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. 13 As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. 14 And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

- Paul has continued to powerfully share his Christian faith while undergoing the hardships of imprisonment – reminiscent of the episode in Philippi when Paul and Silas were singing hymns while imprisoned! The Philippian jailer was converted, and the same impact was happening among the Palace guards. That Paul has not abandoned his faith as a result of these hardships has inspired others to run the very real risks associated with sharing the Gospel.
- It is humbling for us, who are reluctant to share the Gospel with others, despite very very minor risks.

Motives Matter

15 It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. 16 The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. 18 But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

- There were factions in the Early Church, just as there are denominations today. Some are using Paul’s imprisonment to promote their own faction’s advance, against that of Paul – a shameful act.
- We must be very careful to not use another denomination’s difficulties (or another congregation’s difficulties) for our own advantage, but to focus on “preaching Christ.”

The Provision of the Spirit

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

- The phrase “Spirit of Jesus Christ” is unique to this verse. Paul uses the word “Spirit” 148 times, “Holy Spirit” 16 times, and “Spirit of Christ” just once.
- Paul is confident that the prayers of the Philippians, and the Holy Spirit working through those prayers in Paul’s life, will see him through.

Which is better? Life or death?

20 I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

- Paul is anticipating that his imprisonment will result in his death – the typical end to a Roman imprisonment. In Paul’s day, a Roman was imprisoned not as a punishment in and of itself, nor as a rehabilitative process, but to await trial – a trial which would result either in freedom or judgement. Particularly under Nero’s rule (in the early 60s AD), this judgement would result in death, as ultimately it did for both Paul and Peter. Paul is torn; death would be a welcome release from the trials of this life, and a joyful entrance into the presence of Christ.
- However, there is work yet to be done, to continue to strengthen the faith (and joy!) of the churches Paul has established. Paul’s fervent hope is that he will remain faithful even in the face of his continued deprivations and, ultimately, his end.

Conduct Worthy of the Gospel

27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel 28 without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.

- Whether Paul lives or dies, whether he ever sees the Philippians again, his prayer for them is for their continued faith, their unity, and their determination to remain faithful and united in the face of opposition. Their continued faith and unity is a sign that their salvation is indeed secure.

- “*Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel*” is a lifestyle challenge for us all, that our personal conduct would not be in conflict with our faith. What we do and how we live our personal lives matters. (One of the few charges for which a Presbyterian minister can be removed from a congregation is “conduct unbecoming the Gospel.” These days, however, that’s a moving target!)

Christians are not immune from hardship

29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, 30 since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

- Christians are not immune from hardship or struggle. It is a modern concept, borne of our comfortable standard of living, that if you have faith, you will never be ill, or have personal crises, or financial challenges, or suffer actual persecution. The early Christians suffered all of these things – and to a far, far greater degree than we.
- The mark of a Christian is not that they never suffer, or experience hardships or struggle, but that they maintain their faith in the midst of it, that they do not lose hope, and that even in the worst struggle, they would find their source of peace in Christ.
- The concept that physical and financial well-being is a sign of faith, and that illness and struggle is a sign of lack of faith, is a dangerous modern heresy, entirely unsupported by Scripture, and by the example of Christ.