

# THE BEGINNING OF THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

## CONFIDENCE AND JOY IN ALL THINGS

I. The introduction proceeds largely along the standard lines for St. Paul, with some variations.

A. Despite the fact that St. Paul is the author, St. Timothy is introduced here almost as an equal.

- The letters to the Corinthians, Colossians, and Philemon also include Timothy, but in a seemingly subordinate role. It is possibly that St. Timothy was better known to the Philippians, or that his status in the Church was rising at the time of this letter. The latter view would imply that the letter was written later, when St. Paul was in Rome.

- The letter refers to them as “servants of Christ Jesus.” The letter to the Romans has used this terminology and the letter to Titus would do so. In the Old Testament, great figures such as Moses, Joshua and David were called servants of God. See Ex. 14:31; Josh. 24:29; 2 Sam. 3:18. The idea is that they are governed by God directly and not through a subordinate power, or earthly ruler. Their authority comes from loyalty and service to God.

B. The letter is, as common with St. Paul, addressed to the “holy ones” or the “saints.” There is again an emphasis on the call to holiness. Here the letter adds a specific reference to *episcopois* and *diaconois*. The general Greek meaning of these words was overseers and ministers, or servants. However, later the First Letter to Timothy, the Letter to Titus, and the First Letter of Peter will use these terms, along with the term *presbytoi* would come to mean specific offices in the church, namely, bishops, deacons and priests. See 1 Tim. 3:1-13, 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-5; see also Acts 20:17, 28. Here, the meaning may be in between; these terms may refer to offices, but the roles are not yet clear. In particular, given that the passage refers to more than one *episcopos*, and it is unlikely that there was more than one bishop in the city, that term probably means something more like a modern day priest.

C. St. Paul then gives a lengthy thanksgiving and prayers, as he also does in the letters to the Romans, Corinthians,

## Ephesians, Colossians, and Thessalonians.

1. St. Paul launches right into the themes of prayerfulness, thanksgiving and joy. The passage is meant to set an optimistic tone.
2. St. Paul identifies himself with the Philippians, referring to the partnership, or common community, in the gospel from the beginning until now (and presumably on into the future.) Verse 7 refers to their partaking with him in all grace, whether from suffering in prison or from success in defending the gospel. The combination of imprisonment and proclamation of the gospel sets up the theme that all things will work for the faith, whether seemingly good or ill.
3. Verse 6 expresses a great confidence that all work comes from God and will be completed by Him. We work for the faith, but it is the work of God above all else, as the letter will later emphasize. See Phil. 2:11-12. Grace and good works are intermingled. The Church has thus rejected both Pelagianism, the view that salvation is about works and not grace, and also semi-Pelagianism, the view that we come to God and then grace is at work. Grace is at work even before we act upon it.
4. The passage does emphasize that the process is not complete. Love must expand more and more and good works brought to completion.
  - Here St. Paul prays first for love, that being the more important virtue, but also for knowledge and discernment, for the latter two are needed to make decisions and build the community. This prayer then is that these virtues lead to three results: (1) the intellectual ability to discern what is good; (2) the avoidance of evil that one may be pure and blameless; and (3) the positive abundance of the fruits of righteousness, presumably good works and a holy church. These aspects, the intellectual advancement, moral purity, and active works are intertwined.
  - Verses 6 and 11 refer to the completion at the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. The day of the Lord was a

common theme in the Old Testament, referring to a time of colossal destruction and renewal. See, e.g., Is. 2:9-12; Joel 2:28-30; Amos 2:14-3:2, 5:18-20, 7:9-14; Zech. 14; Mal. 3:1-5. Jesus likewise spoke of a final colossal day of destruction and renewal that would come at the end of all things on earth, of which such calamities and the destruction of Jerusalem are images. See Matt. 24:29-51; Mark 13:24-36; Luke 21:25-36. St. Paul, in the midst of optimism, speaks of that day, for to the just that day will be one of vindication.

## II. St. Paul then turns to an autobiographical note.

A. He first says that his imprisonment has been the occasion for the spread of the Gospel, even to the imperial government, represented by the praetorian guard, which were the elite among the Roman soldiers.

- The success of the Gospel has encouraged other Christians, for it indicates that nothing can stop the faith.

- The fact that it is the praetorian guard who is around St. Paul indicates that he has obtained some degree of prominence.

B. St. Paul also recognizes that some preach the gospel for good, others for ill, motives, but that God works through them all.

- It does not seem that the criticism of some of the preachers is for the content of their message, for St. Paul refers simply to them proclaiming the gospel. Rather, their motives are wrong.

- It is not clear what this envy or rivalry is based upon. It is possible that, seeing St. Paul's prominence, they are seeking to outdo him, gaining glory through the gospel, as Simon the magician tried to do. See Acts 8:9-24. It is possible that they thought that they were taking an office away from St. Paul, or that their preaching would make the Romans more likely to punish St. Paul, seeing that the Gospel was spreading all the more.

- It is paradoxical that such rival preachers are proclaiming the true faith, but not proclaiming it “in truth,” but rather “in pretense.” The meaning seems to be that their preaching is false, not because of the content, but because of the way they live; the falsehood comes from their inconstancy. Cf. Matt. 23:2-12.

C. With the Gospel being proclaimed, the danger to St. Paul’s own life is seen in the midst of a great joy.

1. St. Paul is joined to the Philippians through their prayers and knows that they are valuable. It is not simply a matter of St. Paul giving the Philippians instructions as their guide. He also knows that he needs their prayers, and is confident of them.

2. St. Paul knows he will be “delivered” one way or another, either delivered from imprisonment and the danger of death, or delivered through death from any other danger on earth. Prayers will be answered one way or another.

- Likewise, as St. Paul emphasized over and over again, especially in the First Letter to the Corinthians, the body is meant to glorify God, and will do so in the faithful one way or another. Either his preaching, made especially credible by his imprisonment, will glorify God. Or his death will be a glorious witness to the faith.

- There is the ability to see the glory of God in all ways, and see how all things work toward salvation. Cf. Rom. 8:28. Thus Jesus can say, both that His followers will be persecuted and killed, and yet they will not be harmed. See, e.g., Matt. 5:25-33, 16:24-28; Mark 13:9-13; John 16:1-6, 33.

3. St. Paul acts almost as though he can choose between life and death. Although such is not literally the case, it demonstrates his power above his persecutors.

- He already longs with a desire for heaven that makes execution a small price to pay. But there is a deep love for his communities such that he wants to be with them. The love of life, but willingness to die for Christ, is a hallmark of the Christian life.

4. In verses 25 and 26, St. Paul does seem to express confidence that he will again be with the Philippians, although he could mean he will be with them, whether he lives or dies. The seeming confidence that he will live is based upon the judgment that his life would, at the present, seem more, valuable than his death, and thus he believes that God will grant it.