

THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS - PART II - JOY, STRUGGLE, FAITH AND GLORY

I. Chapter 1 ends and chapter 2 begins with a call for unity and humble sacrifice in imitation of Christ as the road to glory, a call centered around the Philippians hymn.

A. Having described his own experience, St. Paul then turns to his instructions for living out a life in imitation of Christ.

1. St. Paul calls for the faithful to live in a fashion worthy of being a citizen (*politeuma*), the implication being that they have been made citizens of a greater kingdom.

- Many, probably most free Philippians were Roman citizens and enjoyed certain privileges as a result of this fact. St. Paul is reminding them they are more importantly citizens of the gospel, that is the good news of the rising of the King of glory and His defeat of sin and death. In chapter 3, he will later reflect on this kingdom we have in heaven.

2. There is then a reference to enemies of this kingdom, an indication that some rumblings of a persecution have begun, although there does not seem to be any official persecution yet.

- St. Paul presents the ability to suffer for this kingdom as a privilege that will with certainty lead to victory and the destruction of enemies.

- Here again he emphasizes a unity with the Philippians and all unified in Christ, saying that their suffering joins them together. Christ had said earlier that being persecuted is a sign of salvation. See, e.g., Matt. 5:10-11; Mark 8:34, 10:30; Luke 21:12-13. In addition, the Philippians themselves had seen Paul and his associates beaten and temporarily imprisoned because the pagan merchants felt threatened. See Acts 16:19-40.

- The Philippians' unity and steadfastness (and by extension that of all Christians) in the face of persecutions is a sign of final salvation and of God overcoming the world. In addition, St. Paul may be indicating that the persecutors know deep in their hearts that the Christians are right about the moral law and judgment, and that is why they are persecuting them

3. In standing up for the faith, St. Paul emphasizes here as elsewhere, very strongly the importance of unity in the Church.

- This call to unity is a consistent theme of St. Paul. See, e.g., Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12-14; Eph. 4. Part of the idea is that we cannot overcome the world alone, but rather the united Church is a glorious and powerful witness to the Gospel. See John 17:20-23.

- There is a very personal call to bring him, St. Paul, greater joy. Obviously, the central motive should always be to please God, but sometimes a more human effect is persuasive because it is more visible.

4. Central to this unity is the other-centeredness of humility, the ability to see the goodness of others at least as much as one's own.

- St. Paul goes further and calls for seeing others as better than oneself. While, strictly speaking, humility requires only honesty and objective recognition of the goodness of others, it is often a necessary practice to try to do more and forget oneself altogether in order to defeat pride, as fasting even from legitimate things can be necessary to overcome the desire for pleasure.

- Here as elsewhere, see, e.g., 1 Cor. 10:24-33, 12:1-31; Eph. 4:1-16, St. Paul emphasizes that the unity and accomplishments of the Church are vastly more important than individual glory.

B. To make the point, St. Paul then writes out the Philippians hymn, which may have been part of a pre-existing hymn or creed, or perhaps a composition of St. Paul himself or his adaptation of a previous writing.

1. The hymn: (1) begins by describing the primordial glory of the Son as being in the form of God; (2) then describes His humility in taking on the form of man and a slave unto death itself; (3) proceeds onto the glorification of the Son especially in the name Jesus; and (4) concludes with the glory of the name of Jesus as being given the homage due to God.

- The passage does not state the same words that we usually use to describe the hypostatic union, i.e. that the Divine Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, has divine nature from all eternity and took on human nature, suffering death and receiving glory in that nature, and from that point on has the two natures unmixed but united in the same person. For that language had not yet been developed. However, in Greek philosophy the form (morphe) of something is the appearance by which its nature can be known, and thus St. Paul is describing the divine and then

human nature of the Son. The name Jesus is given with the humanity, but receives the homage that Isaiah describes as due to God. See Is. 43:22-23.

- Other passages in the New Testament have different ways of expressing this principle. See, e.g., John 1:1-18; Col. 2:9-10; Heb. 1:1-4.

2. Verse 6 contrasts the Son with Adam and Eve who did grasp for divinity in taking the forbidden fruit in Eden. See also Ez. 28:1-19 (condemning the king of Tyre as like Adam pretending to be a god, and thus becoming subject to utter destruction.)

3. Verse 7 presents the dramatic contrast of Jesus' voluntary and complete self-emptying, as He took on the form of a servant or slave (doulos.) St. Paul uses the same term for a slave as the Septuagint (the most common Greek translation of Hebrew Scripture of the time) used for the suffering servant prophecy of Isaiah 52 and 53. In that prophecy, Isaiah describes the innocent servant of God who suffers and dies for the sake of the people and so saves them and is given a kingdom. See Is. 52:13-53:12.

4. Verse 8 then describes the humility and obedience of Christ, unto the most shameful death. The idea is that, if He was willing to undergo such humiliation and suffering, all Christians should think it an honor to do so.

- It can accurately be said that Christ was born to die for our sins. See Fulton Sheen, Life of Christ, 20 (1977.)

- The word "cross" stands at almost exactly the center of the passage.

5. Verse 9 then describes the exaltation of the son especially in the context of the name Jesus, which in Hebrew means "God saves."

- In ancient Hebrew, the name would be considered as expressing the essence of a person, which is why names (E.g., that of Abram, Jacob, and Simon) are often changed when they are called by God. See also Rev. 3:17.

- In one sense, this name is more powerful for us than God's names as given to the Jews (e.g., Yahweh, Adonai), for in the name of Jesus we are brought in union with God.

- The name of God is a very powerful concept in the Old Testament and the name of Jesus has great power in Christian times. See, e.g., Duet. 5:11; Ps. 8:1, 9:2, 33:21 86:9, 11, 12, 118;10-12, 124:8, 129:8; Joel 2:32 (or 3:5); Matt. 18:5, 20; Mark 9:38-41; Luke 10:17; John 3:18, 14;13-14; Acts 2:38, 3:6, 5:28, 40, 15:26, 16:18; 1 John 3;23, 5:13; see also Matt. 6:9; John 5:43. By giving us His name, God gives us an ability to enter into a personal relationship with Him and live in His love and His power.

6. In verses 10 and 11, the hymn then describes the universal honor throughout all of reality that will be given to the name of Jesus Christ. St. Paul seems to be referring among other things to the fulfillment of Daniel's Son of Man prophesy, according to which four beasts would wreck destruction over the earth, but then one like a Son of Man would come in their place and receive "dominion, glory and kingship" with every nation serving Him. See Dan. 7. There is also the fulfillment of the psalms and prophets who predicted a king who would rule over the nations. See Psalms. 2, 72, 110; Is. 8:23-9:6, 11:1-9; Jer. 23:1-6; Micah 4:1-5, 5:1-4. Here, St. Paul combines those prophesies of glory with the suffering servant image of Isaiah, describing how the glory of Jesus and our salvation came precisely through His suffering.

C. St. Paul then applies the message of the hymn to the Philippians and, but extension, to all Christians.

1. St. Paul begins by commending their past faithfulness, and calling for it all the more when he is absent, for it is then that they show whether they really respect God Himself.

2. In this context, St. Paul gives his classic statement of the interaction of grace and human cooperation: (1) telling the people to "work out their salvation with fear and trembling"; and (2) pointing out that it is God who works within us.

- The phrase fear and trembling is most likely a reference to Psalm 2, which calls for the nations to serve God's appointed king. Here, however, the king is one who is also serving us with great humility to give us an example and encourage us.

3. St. Paul then calls for the people to avoid the grumbling that the Chosen People often showed on their way to the Promised Land. See, e.g., Ex. 14:11, 15:24-25, 16:2-3, 17:2-7; Num. 14:1-4. Such the behavior of a "perverse and wicked generation" that does not trust in God. See Duet. 32:5; Matt. 16:14, 17:17; Luke 9:41

- The calling is to be dramatically different from the world, and from the tendency of humanity to lose confidence quickly. The faithful should instead shine like the permanent stars in the heavens. Cf. Mk. 8:38

4. Once again, St. Paul asks the Philippians to care about him and his efforts, that they may not be in vain. Helping St. Paul be successful may not be the highest reason to serve God, but it may be a compelling one to people who care deeply for him.

- In poignant terms, St. Paul describes himself as a libation poured out for his people. A libation cup was, in both Jewish and pagan rituals, poured over a sacrifice in order to sanctify it. See, e.g., Ex. 29:40, Nu. 15:5-7, 28:14-15. St. Paul thinks of himself as being emptied for their sake, and joyfully so. There is also perhaps an image of their lives being joined together inseparable, as the wine or oil was poured out over the animal to be sacrificed cannot be separated. In addition, St. Paul may be giving a message that the faithful will be a sacrifice along with St. Paul in his sufferings, but that this union should cause great joy. In the second Letter to Timothy, St. Paul will use this image more clearly as referring to his impending death. See 2 Tim. 4:6.

II. St. Paul then concludes the first part of his letter with a commendation for his assistants Timothy and Epaphroditus.

A. First, St. Paul says that he intends to send St. Timothy, who has been a regular companion of St. Paul.

1. St. Timothy was apparently from Lystra in Lyconia in the eastern part of Asia Minor. It appears that his father was a Gentile, but his mother Eunice was born Jewish. Both Eunice and Timothy became Christian before St. Paul came to Lystra in his second missionary journey, and Timothy was in fact widely admired. See Acts 16:1-4. (It may be that Timothy's father was deceased by this time.) St. Paul then took him along for the second and third missionary journeys, and St. Timothy became a regular messenger for St. Paul. See Acts 16:4, 17:14-15, 18:5, 19:22; 1 Cor. 4:17, 16:10; 1 Thess. 3:2. In this letter, as with the letters to the Colossians, Thessalonians, and Philemon, St. Paul identifies St. Timothy as a co-writer, although St. Timothy's role in the letters was probably small.

- At one point, probably when St. Paul was in Rome in the early 60s, he appointed St. Timothy as the episcopos (what would now be called bishop) in the city of Ephesus, and would write two letters to him, which are now among the Pastoral Letters of the Bible. It appears from 1 Timothy 4:12 that St. Timothy was young as bishops go,

so at the time of that letter, which was likely around 63 or 64 A.D., he would probably have been in his early 40s at the latest.

- According to a record called the Acts of Timothy, St. Timothy was martyred in 97 A.D. in that city by being beaten with clubs after he opposed decadent pagan ceremonies called the Katagogia., which celebrated the goddess Diana. See Butler's Lives of the Saints, entry on St. Timothy on Jan. 24; Warren Carroll, The Founding of Christendom 450-51 (1985.)

2. St. Timothy is clearly a valued assistant of St. Paul, at a time when St. Paul does not seem to have many trustworthy ones.

- St. Paul clearly trusts St. Timothy to deliver messages personally and report situations faithfully, and thus is willing to wait to send him, rather than send someone else.

- There is clearly some danger to St. Paul, but he is also hopeful of being released soon and visiting the Ephesians.

B. St. Paul is also sending Epaphroditus, who brought the Philippians' gift to St. Paul.

- We know very little about this figure. But he seems to have been a valued co-worker and friend of St. Paul, who fell very ill.

- St. Paul has no hesitancy in attributing Epaphroditus' recovery from a grave illness to the work of God and mercy upon both Epaphroditus and he, St. Paul. It is not that St. Paul rejects the need for medicine, see 1 Tim. 5:23, but rather that he firmly believes that God is in control of all things.

- The sorrow St. Paul refers to may be his imprisonment. But, given his calm and even joyful acceptance of the imprisonment, it seems more likely that there is another sorrow, perhaps betrayal or at least abandonment by some people whom St. Paul has trusted, leaving the likes of St. Timothy as one of the few who does not pursue his own interests. See Phil 2:21.

C. St. Paul concludes this section on an optimistic note, calling again for a rejoicing in the Lord. The message is again to seek joy in Him, not in the powers of the world that He will subject.

III. Starting near the beginning of chapter 3, the letter then turns to a warning against false teachers, who would either be too strict about keeping Jewish ritual law, or too lax morally, or both.

A. The warning against false teachers begins in dramatic fashion by calling them dogs, evil-workers, and agents of the mutilation.

1. Then as now, "beware of the dogs" would have been a common warning at the entrance of homes of estates. But also dogs is a reference to people who are controlled by desires and serve themselves, and will not comprehend the truth. See, e.g., Is. 56:10-11; Matt. 7:6; Rev. 22:15. The implication here is that even those who seem to be very strict about the Jewish law really are not controlling desires, or living at the heights God wants them to, instead taking refuge in rituals.

2. St. Paul also calls them evil-doers, indicating again that their insistence on the ritual law likely hides evil actions that the rituals will compensate for. Cf. Is. 1:4, 12-17.

3. He then refers to those who would continue insisting on the circumcision as mutilators. The term is meant to shock, but is also perhaps a reference to the prophets of Baal, and likely other pagan priests, who would slash themselves in order to enter into what they considered a prophetic state. See 1 Kings 18:28.

B. St. Paul then condemns the insistence on circumcision and by implication rejects the reliance on Jewish ritual law. The issue had been decided at the Council of Jerusalem. See Acts 15:1-35. But, as the letter to the Galatians indicates, the issue continued on for some time, as people would insist on the Jewish ritual law.

- St. Paul argues that it is now a common life in the Spirit, or worship in the Spirit, that sets Christians apart. Under the Old Law, circumcision would mark a Jew as such, and the ritual law generally, with the dietary codes, the sacrifices, and the rules of ritual purity, would make it clear who was a Jew and who was not. Before the Maccabean revolt in 173 B.C., Gentile leaders tried to make the Jews abandon these practices, and thus merge them into the rest of society. See 1 Macc. 1:41-64.

- By describing the Christian life and worship as the circumcision, St. Paul is indicating that the whole way of life should set Christians apart. See also Rom. 2:28-29; Col. 2:11.

- To rely on rituals is to rely on what is limited and controllable by human actions in the flesh. But we are called instead to an unlimited life in the Spirit.

C. St. Paul describes his own background as a most zealous Jew, who was honored and trusted with persecuting Christians.

- At one level, he may be refuting those who would argue that he is opposing Jewish ritual law in order to have life more easily.

- At a deeper level he is making the point that no one can rely on his accomplishments whatever they may be. It is the relationship with Jesus Christ that leads to salvation. It is not as though good deeds are unimportant; they are important to live out this relationship and faith. But the deeds alone are nothing compared to the salvific power of Christ.

- It is in this context that St. Paul sees the benefit of suffering for the faith, for it joins him to Christ and thus brings him along the path to glory.

D. St. Paul makes it clear that the progress toward this relationship with Christ is a continual one and that one cannot be guaranteed of success based upon past faith. There must be an active advancement of that relationship.

1. Thus, he says in verse 11 that he hopes if possible to attain knowledge of Christ and of the power of the resurrection. There is a sense of a long way to go, for at one level he does know Christ, but there is always a much deeper level to go. See 1 Cor. 13:11-13.

2. In verses 12-14, he develops this theme, saying that he knows that the resurrection is not yet his, but that he must strive toward it more. He realizes that he cannot rest on his accomplishments, even in the Christian witness and faith, but must strive further with no regard to what has gone before.

3. As with 1 Cor. 9:24-27, St. Paul describes this effort as like an athletic contest, in which one must continuously strive for victory. The Christian is like a runner, or perhaps swimmer, but in this case, not going along an earthly road, but on an

upward road to the resurrection. See also Heb. 12:1-1.

4. Thus, while he makes it clear that accomplishments alone cannot give us salvation, he also argues that salvation requires a continual striving and effort.

E. St. Paul also argues that recognizing such principles, and even more having that deep relationship with Jesus in faith, makes one mature.

- He realizes that there are people nearer to the beginning of faith who are not so mature, but says that God will guide them if they continue along the same path. See 1 Cor. 3:1-3; Heb. 5:11-14 (presenting the same principle, but in a more critical light.)

F. St. Paul concludes this section by contrasting citizenship with heaven, which requires living by the values of heaven, with being an enemy of the cross, i.e. living in accordance with earthly desires.

- He does not want anyone to get the implication that the fulfillment of the old Jewish ritual laws means that anyone can simply live as he pleases. As he generally does in his letters, St. Paul warns against behaviors that will prevent salvation.

- St. Paul describes decadence as a type of idolatry, worshiping the belly, i.e. desires. Cf. Col. 3:5. It seems that many people, then as now, are even boastful of such vices. As elsewhere, St. Paul warns that such a life will end with the death of this mortal body. See Rom. 8:13; Gal. 6:7-9.

- The contrast is with a citizenship in heaven, of which the Church on earth is as a training ground, or a first promise. St. Paul presents Christ's resurrection as leading to our own resurrection to receive a glorified body that can live in that greater realm. The image is of setting forth on an adventure to the grand kingdom of which Jesus spoke, where each of the faithful will have an glorious inheritance.