

Thanksgiving, Joy, And Exalting Christ

Philippians 1:1-26

Opening Address: 1:1-2

The introductions to Paul's letters follow much of the same pattern found in most ancient letters, except Paul makes them uniquely Christian. Although not always the case, it was not unusual for Paul to include Timothy in his introduction (Colossians, Philemon). Being with Paul when he first preached the gospel in Philippi, it is understandable why Timothy is mentioned in the introduction.

The reason Paul did not include his traditional statement of apostolic authority in this letter is probably due to the special relationship he had with Philippi. It was important for Paul to state his authority in letters like Galatians and 1 Corinthians because the disciples there were challenging Paul's authority.

Paul did describe himself and Timothy as "slaves of Christ." The popular translation of "servant" does not convey to modern readers what Paul's audience would have understood. The more accurate translation is "slave," one who chooses to unconditionally put him/herself under the lordship of Jesus. There is a connection between Paul's description of himself as slave and his later description of Jesus in 2:7. Jesus took the form of a slave (2:7). It is Jesus who stands as the example of kingdom living. As will be seen in other parts of this letter, "slave" also makes a statement about a disciple's relationship to Rome in contrast to their relationship to Jesus. It is Jesus, not Caesar, who is truly Lord (2:11). This would have been important to disciples in Philippi, who saw themselves as privileged citizens of Rome, and who were seen by the empire as people expected to honor Caesar as lord. Using the term slave is also an exhortation for the Philippians to not think too highly of themselves (2:1-4).

Disciples are "saints" or holy ones. This is not because there is something within disciples that makes them something special. This is a statement of a disciple's status or relationship with the holy God. This status is only made possible by his/her relationship with Jesus ("in Christ Jesus").

This is Paul's only letter that mentions bishops and deacons in the introduction. Any answer as to why they are mentioned in this letter is only speculative. Maybe the bishops and deacons took the lead in putting the gift together that was sent to Paul, and Paul was showing appreciation. Being mentioned after Paul spoke of the faith community at large could have been intended to humble the bishops and deacons. Having their roles mentioned after referring to Paul and Timothy as servants, could have been a reminder of what a leadership role in the kingdom of God looks like. Maybe their mention was intended to be an encouragement because they were recipients of the grumbling and murmuring (2:14), which is an allusion to the grumbling and murmuring Moses experienced in the wilderness. These two groups are seen as being a part of the community of faith and not some aloof hierarchy.

The designations "bishop" and "deacon" are functions rather than titles. The verb from which we get the noun bishop means "to visit" or "to care for." This gives us a good understanding of the function of bishops. It is not about power, prestige, or status. It is more like that of a shepherd, which can be seen in Acts 20:28 where the function of "overseers" or "bishops" is to "shepherd the church of God." "Deacon" speaks of

someone who serves or is involved in ministry. Again, this is not an office but a designated function. Some suggest this might better be translated, “overseers who are also ministers,” which would indicate Paul was identifying the function of the overseers.

The standard Hellenistic greeting in a letter would be “*chaire!*” (greetings). Paul makes his greeting distinctively Christian by changing it to “*charis*” or “grace.” It is a divine blessing. “Peace” is a traditional Jewish greeting that is as well a blessing from God. Grace and peace come from God and are found in the Lord Jesus. Roman citizens would have believed these blessings came from Caesar.

Thanksgiving and Prayer: 1:3-11

This section is a great expression of Paul’s relationship with the Philippians. He often thought of them, which brought him joy, which in turn made prayer for the Philippians a natural response. The reason for Paul’s Joy and prayerfulness toward the Philippians was found in their “sharing.” A form of this word is found five more times in this letter. Here it is sharing in the gospel, in 1:7 it is sharing in God’s grace, in 2:1 it is sharing in the Spirit, in 3:10 it is sharing in the sufferings of Christ, in 4:14 it is sharing in Paul’s distress, and in 4:15 it is sharing in the matter of giving and receiving. The disciples in Philippi shared in the gospel through the consistent gifts they sent Paul to make his missionary travels possible, and they shared in the gospel through their own mission in Philippi, a mission begun by Paul. Their fellowship with Paul in the gospel is described as “good work” in verse 6. It is so because it is God’s work they share with Paul. Paul believed their gift to his ministry would produce fruit (“bring it to completion”) that would be evident when Christ returns (“the day of Jesus Christ”). The reason for Paul’s confidence is the faithfulness of God. The work God starts will be completed. “Joy” is a constant theme in Philippians that readers should notice. A form of joy is found 14 times in the letter.

When Paul wrote, “think this way” (v. 7), he meant more than a cerebral process. The word “think” in the Greek/Roman world involved heart and head. It is the same word used in 2:5 translated “same mind” that is in Christ Jesus. It is a mindset that forms one’s behavior.

The next phrase can be translated either “you hold me in your heart” (NRSV) or “I have you in my heart” (NIV). Either is true because it is their mutual relationship that is being discussed. “Sharing in God’s grace” can refer to the gift the Philippians gave to Paul. God graced them with the means to give and Paul received God’s grace through their gift. It could also speak of the grace God gave Paul during his imprisonment and defense of the gospel, and the same grace God gave the Philippians during their struggles that will later be discussed. Whether giving, receiving, or experiencing struggles, those participating in God’s work are mutual recipients of God’s grace.

Paul expressed the genuineness of his love for the Philippians by calling upon God to be his witness. The word translated “compassion” is literally “bowels.” To Hebrews this was the seat of one’s emotions. Paul’s point was that his affection for the Philippians was not based on some mere human emotion. His feelings for the Philippians were rooted in the compassion of Christ. As Paul wrote to the Galatians (2:19b), “it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me.”

The disciple’s life is a life transformed into the image of Christ. It is a life of love that instinctively comes to know how to respond to life’s situations. The knowledge and

insight Paul prayed for was spiritual knowledge and insight based on the nature of Christ. It will result in a life that is “pure and blameless.” These two words in English do not represent Paul’s meaning here. These words would better be translated “sincere” (as it is in 2 Cor. 2:17) and “without offense” (as seen in 1 Cor. 10:32). It might better be understood to say, “so that in the day of Christ you will not have offended others by an insincere life.” These are not the word’s Paul normally used for “pure” and “blameless.”

“Righteousness” is traditionally understood as referring to one’s moral and ethical behavior. Although the word can be defined in this way, a Jew like Paul might have had a different understanding. A Jew would have understood this word as primarily referring to God’s covenant faithfulness and the corresponding covenant relationship that humans have through the action of Jesus. A relationship with God through Jesus does change lives. If this is Paul’s intent here, it refers to the fruit that is made possible by one’s covenant relationship with God that comes through Jesus. Instead of an insincere life that offends others, the fruit of righteousness is one that brings glory and praise to God.

Paul’s Imprisonment: 1:12-26

Paul’s Joy Over the Proclamation of the Gospel: 1:12-18a

Experiences with the people of God are not as they appear to the world. Paul’s opponents saw his imprisonment as something that would stop or hinder the gospel. But with God, this was not the situation. What was important is that Paul’s imprisonment was known as being “in Christ” (not “for Christ” although that was true as well). The way this is written may have been intended to communicate that Paul viewed his imprisonment as a participation in the sufferings of Christ. Paul’s imprisonment in and of itself proclaimed the message that Christ suffered for the world. This was not just the result of proclaiming the gospel but the means by which Paul could proclaim the gospel. The imperial guard came to have this understanding as well. Understanding what was happening to Paul gave other disciples confidence in the Lord. Others were encouraged to proclaim the gospel with more boldness and without fear because they too could share in Christ’s suffering.

Surprisingly, not everyone who preached more boldly had Christ-like motives. Some did so because they were envious rivals of Paul and were selfishly ambitious. There is nothing in the text besides what is said here that helps us specifically identify these people. These are most likely not the opponents spoken of in the rest of the letter. They were not the pagan enemies or those who taught Gentiles had to adhere to Jewish rituals such as circumcision. Paul could not speak so positively of the things these groups would say. Paul did not object to the message these people preached. He objected to their attitude of heart. They were people who wanted a more prominent place in the faith community and who thought they could achieve that if Paul was suffering in prison.

There were those who preached from “goodwill” and “out of love.” The word “goodwill” probably does not speak of their attitude toward Paul, but rather of their attitude toward the divine will of God. This is the way this same word is understood in 2:13 (“his good pleasure”). Those who preach from the motivation of doing God’s will, do so out of love. Those who do not have the will of God at heart are motivated by

selfish ambition and a desire to do harm (“increase my suffering”). The incredible thing about Paul was that he did not care as much about the motive as he did about the result. People heard the gospel.

The phrase, “I have been put here” in verse 16 may be saying more than our English translations show. The word “here” is not in the text. Instead, a word that includes in its definition “to be appointed” is used. Paul’s imprisonment was part of God’s mission for him. Paul had been divinely “appointed” for the defense of the gospel.

Paul’s Joy In Anticipating His Deliverance: 1:18b-26

Earlier, Paul spoke of the joy that came from his relationship with the Philippians (1:4). In 18b-26, Paul wrote of another reason to rejoice, his deliverance. What kind of deliverance did Paul mean? Does it mean Paul expected to avoid trial all together? This would contradict his desire to speak boldly, presumably at trial. Did Paul believe a human court at trial would vindicate him? This would contradict his doubts about the outcome (20-24). The phrase “this will turn out for my deliverance is an exact quote from the LXX version of Job 13:16. There, Job expressed confidence that the heavenly court would vindicate him. The word translated “deliverance” is used everywhere else in Paul’s writings to speak of “salvation” at God’s final act. Paul believed the prayers of the Philippians and the empowerment of the Spirit (“*paraclete*” or legal advisor: John 14:16, 26) would deliver him by giving him the ability to conduct himself in a way that would not bring shame, but would give him the boldness he needed to speak at his trial in such a way that Christ would be exalted. The phrase “in my body” speaks of Paul’s whole being. It would not matter whether the resulting verdict from the Roman court would be life or death as long as Christ was exalted by Paul’s speech and behavior.

Verse 21 calls to mind Galatians 2:20 except that Paul here adds, “dying is gain.” To a reader of the Greek similar sounds in verses 21-22 is a rhetorical device intended to emphasize Paul’s statement. There is the similarity of *Christos* (Christ) and *kerdos* (gain) and that of *kerdos* (gain) and *karpos* (fruit). The fundamental desire of Paul was to complete experience the life of Christ. This will be discussed again in chapter three. In living, Christ is experienced and fruit is born. In dying, there is gain in being with Christ (v. 23). The only thing that mattered to Paul was to so fully experience the life of Christ that Christ would be exalted by Paul’s life. This would occur in either life and/or in death.

Because both life and death fit under the umbrella of Paul’s desire, he was in a dilemma. The NIV’s “choose” in verse 22 is a correct translation of the Greek word but the NRSV’s “prefer,” which is also a proper translation, is the preferred translation. Paul did not have a choice in the matter. From a worldly perspective Paul was at the mercy of Rome, and from a spiritual perspective he was subject to the will of God.

The needs of others and the progress of the gospel are significant themes in Philippians. Because both of these can be fulfilled by Paul’s life continuing, he was convinced this would be the outcome of his current circumstances. Paul was convinced God would act for the good of the Philippians (“necessary for you”: 1:24). This would bring joy to the Philippians. Both the word “progress” (as seen in 1:12) and the phrase “in the faith” refer to the gospel. The Philippians’ joy would come as a result of the

progress of the gospel just as the progress of the gospel gave joy to Paul. This is not about personal joy that has no attachment to the progress of the gospel. Joy found in the progress of the gospel also results in “boasting in Christ Jesus” (v. 26). The NIV’s “joy” in verse 26 is an incorrect translation. The Philippians won’t boast in their Roman citizenship or any other worldly position or possession. Upon Paul’s release and arrival at Philippi, the Philippians would boast in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion

This letter is what some scholars call a friendship letter, based on Paul’s special relationship with the Philippian faith community. Through the gifts the Philippians sent to Paul and their own efforts toward the progress of the gospel in Philippi, the Philippians participated or shared in the gospel with Paul. The depth of Paul’s devotion to the Philippians grew out of his own relationship with Jesus. Paul’s compassion was the same as that of Christ.

Paul’s imprisonment could have had a negative impact on small Christian communities anywhere in the Roman Empire. This might have been even more troubling to a community of faith in a city that had been given full Roman citizenship. Paul used his own understanding of his imprisonment to encourage the Philippians. Imprisonment was an opportunity for Paul to proclaim the gospel, and it gave others the boldness to proclaim the gospel as well. It did not matter to Paul what the motives of others might be. All that mattered to Paul was the progress of the gospel.

Because Paul was so passionate about the progress of the gospel and for Christ to be exalted, his main concern was his own conduct during his imprisonment. The last thing Paul wanted to do was to speak and act in such a way that he would be shamed. This was not due to concern for himself but concern over whether or not Christ would be exalted by his actions and speech. Paul wanted his conduct during his own suffering, trials, and possible execution to reflect the faithfulness of Christ during his sufferings, trial, and execution. “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.” This would exalt Christ and give reason for the Philippians to boast in Christ Jesus.

Points to Be Made

1. The Christian community experiences a mutual partnership in the gospel through gifts, actions, and speech.
2. Neither circumstances of life nor enemies hinder a disciple’s ability to participate in the progression of the gospel.
3. A disciple’s only concern should be that of conducting his/her life in a way that exalts Christ and encourages others to boast in Christ. Christ can be exalted in one’s life or death.
4. Death is gain for a disciple, while living is gain for others.