

PHILIPPIANS 1:12 - 2:18

Some memorable verses in this section are: 1: 21, 2: 3-11, 12-13.

1: 12-26

Paul speaks about his imprisonment not as something negative but positive. Even though the authorities which have put him in prison are serving their own interests in contradiction to the gospel of God's compassionate love in Christ Jesus, Paul sees how his suffering, and any suffering, can become an occasion for grace, mercy and the courageous witness of love to abound that much more powerfully to the glory of God.

Obviously, some people have taken advantage of Paul's absence and imprisonment to set themselves up as leaders, preachers and teachers in his stead. While some of the leaders are there to serve the people in all humility, and with an openness to learn from apostles and teachers like Paul, others are there to take over and focus attention and importance upon themselves. Amazingly, Paul is not terribly alarmed about this, knowing that he is on the winning side, namely, on Christ's side. How does he know this? He is not only serving Christ in his ministry as apostolic preacher and teacher, but in his suffering, after the pattern of Christ himself. Those who are prepared to suffer for their faith are those whose sincerity and passion for the gospel are proven. In his suffering, Paul feels closer to Christ than ever, and therefore, strong in spirit, even if he is compromised in bodily health.

Also, Paul reflects on the benefits of living or dying. He is tired and worn out by deprivation and mistreatment. Thus, the thought of dying in order to rise and be with Christ in comfort and peace is very alluring a prospect. At the same time, however, he knows there is much work to be done and that he has a special vocation to fulfil in this regard. He anticipates that he will be released and that he will be free to continue his work.

1: 27 - 2: 11

The Philippians face difficulty from two sides. In vs 27-30, Paul is speaking about opposition from without. Phillipi was an important Roman outpost, and therefore, had close affinities with the capital of the empire. To be an alternative community based on alternative values (serving rather than ruling, compassion for the weak rather than claiming the privileges of the strong in an upwardly mobile way, humility and attentiveness to the interests of others rather than clamouring to fulfil one's needs and wants above any other consideration, etc), was not easy in such a context, and was bound to expose members of the church to humiliation, ridicule, and mistreatment.

Paul reminds them that they are privileged not only to have been opened to the gospel of Christ, but to suffer with him (after his pattern and for the same reasons) as well. This bonding with Christ brings about a strength and hope that no number of earthly privileges can provide.

In 2: 1-11, Paul also exposes a second difficulty the community faces, and perhaps one that is more insidious than external opposition, namely, infighting and disrespect of one member toward another. Here is where Paul appeals to them to imitate the way of Christ, and he does this by rehearsing for them the way of Christ put in verse (this was probably a hymn sung in the churches of the day). The Christ Hymn speaks of Christ's way as having come from the heights of oneness with God to the humbling and humiliating realities of being treated as a marginal criminal with no rights whatsoever. And the amazing thing in all this is not so much his final exaltation back to his recognized divinity, but how his divinity shone most brightly in his humiliation. How is this?

For many people, including Philippian believers, Christ's humiliating death on a cross would have been an aberration, and therefore, his resurrection and exaltation would have been interpreted as a cancelling out of what happened on the cross. Paul's point, however, is that it is **because** of Jesus' voluntary acceptance of humiliation, that he is exalted as Lord and Saviour, representing God's will in the most powerful way ever. Compassion and love are never so powerful and true as when tested and measured against their opposite. God's love is about finding its way to the most wretched and broken places of heart, soul and body. Jesus' effective compassion would be less than it would be had he not 'humbled' himself to these very depths.

What this means for the Philippians (and for all believers), is that genuine compassion requires humility, which is open and attentive to others' concerns and interests. Genuine compassion, in turn, fosters mutual understanding and co-operation rather than conflicts over competing interests and ambitions.

2: 12-18

Now does all this mean that the church must never know conflict, that there must never be struggle in our walk with Christ and one another? Nothing of the sort. Paul says so directly: 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...' but lest we think salvation is simply up to us, he also adds: 'for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and work for his good pleasure.' In other words, God is endeavouring to work upon us and grow us from within. But we must work at getting rid of the blocks, the walls, the facades, the reluctance to face the ambiguous and difficult places within us, and also the self-destructive attachments which we must work to let go. And so, even though it will bring great spiritual benefit to us to move through with God, it does involve fear and trembling when we consider the relationships and circumstances we must face and work through. Where is there need for repentance, forgiveness, tolerance, patience, reconciliation, and truth-telling?

Finally, along with humility, another important word is obedience. The question for Paul is not obedience versus non-obedience. Our modern culture hates 'obeying' anyone or anything not determined by ourselves. 'I obey no-one but myself.' According to Paul and the biblical perspective, however, obeying 'ourselves' is really obeying the darker side of ourselves. The real question is really this: who and what are we obeying? Is it God or ourselves and our own destructive path? Is it the right way or the wrong way? The irony is that obedience to God leads to greater freedom from the world: freedom from requirements and attachments such as making money, having status and position, being anxious about reputation or friends or associations, etc. Being rooted in God and obedient to the higher law of love frees us from the importance we attach to worldly values which keep us forever unsatisfied and anxious - for we never gain enough to be satisfied or are never satisfied sufficiently by the appreciation or acceptance of others. We also have a hard time accepting ourselves fully as we are, broken and all.

Lots here to reflect on for our own personal spiritual journey, no?