

PAUL'S LETTERS TO THE PHILIPPIANS & GALATIANS INTRODUCTION

Without a doubt, the apostle Paul is the premier theologian of the early church. Through the writing of letters, Paul addresses specific pastoral concerns, but also develops a framework of understanding of what God has been doing, is doing, and is yet to complete through the coming of Jesus Christ into the world.

Paul's conversion takes place around 30-31 AD, his first missionary journey at 46-48 AD and his death in Rome around 62-65 AD. His letter writing spanned the years 48-58 AD, with Galatians being an early letter and Philippians a late one.

Even though it is the same Paul who writes both letters, they are very different in tone and concerns. In all of his letters Paul begins with an expression of thanksgiving, except for Galatians. Philippians is a warm letter in which Paul indicates his kinship with the people to whom he is writing. In Galatians, on the other hand, Paul is frustrated and angry, feeling a sense of betrayal as well as pessimism about the future of that congregation as remaining true to his guiding understanding of the gospel.

Paul's letters, like other letters written by apostles and missionaries, would be read publicly in the congregation. A typical congregation in those days would be no larger than 50-70 people and usually meeting in peoples' homes.

Paul's letters are referred to as 'occasional' letters by which is meant that there are usually very practical and concrete "occasions" or reasons they are written. They address pastoral concerns specific to the congregation, theological questions, fears or mistaken ideas, moral and ethical issues, as well as the challenges of co-existing as mixed groups of people under the lordship of the one Christ.

Finally, throughout his letters, Paul functions within an overall narrative of faith: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self. In Jesus God has begun a new period of history, where salvation is uniquely close and time is running out for the evil in the world. This does not mean the world is any better. What it means is that the end is already known. God's will, will triumph and it has already begun to take shape in the hearts and minds of those who welcome Christ's Spirit among them and live out of that Spirit in their relationships and lives. Life can be difficult and full of conflict and stress, but it is all liveable when the grace and peace of God have found their way into peoples' lives, blessing them past the curses and misfortunes. Much of Paul's letter writing is about reminding them of this and encouraging them to go deeper into their relationship with God and their fellowship with each other through Christ and his Spirit flowing in and through them.

PHILIPPIANS 1: 1-11

1 - Even though Paul is the writer, he includes Timothy (a younger associate) as a fellow communicator of his message. Both of them are 'servants' (or slaves) of Christ Jesus, and this will be a key theme in this letter, for this is the pattern of obedience that Jesus himself took on in relation to his Father God. Paul's language is very deliberate. To be a servant/slave of the Lord Jesus Christ is in contrast to being a servant/slave of the Lord Caesar. What's the difference? This letter is about that.

'Saints' are not super-righteous people, but those who have been called by Christ to be his. They are both 'in Christ' (their spiritual home) and 'in Philippi' (their geographic home). Philippi was an important Roman outpost and therefore, an obvious connection to the Roman establishment. 'Bishops and deacons' in this early stage of the church's life were less about a spiritual office and more about the practical day to day running of the church's affairs (like a board of managers of sorts). A bishop or a presbyter would be interchangeable terms, reflecting those identified as "overseers" of the congregation. A bishop or presbyter could also be an elder. A deacon would have more of a practical role of serving within the community.

2- 'Grace' is about favour. The 'saints' who are 'in Christ Jesus' have been favoured (loved deeply as a gift) by God and feel so favoured. To have faith is not only about doing something but receiving and experiencing something and knowing something as well. To feel and know that you are favoured by God does affect the way you live life. 'Peace' that comes from God would be in direct competition to the 'peace' that came from Roman might and authority. The conflict between faith in God and faith in the rule of Rome was a constant reality for believers, and it is not incidental that Paul is writing this letter from prison.

3ff- Paul's emotion is that of thanksgiving, and thanksgiving based on the witness and spirit he knows and continues to hear about coming from the Philippian believers. He feels deep kinship and love for them and his joy overflows. They are fellow partners with him in the spreading and living out of the gospel.

6- God has begun something in them that will be completed when the end (and new beginning) comes, the 'day of Christ Jesus.' Life is not just a disconnected set of events, but all woven together as part of a journey whose Lord is God and whose destination is Godward. What encouragement to know that every detail of life is in God's hands and there is a direction to our lives, even when we cannot see it or feel terribly good about it with its down times as much as its up times.

7ff - Paul's prayer is that the love of God may continue to grow and flourish in them, because the more such love is in them, the more they will develop clarity and strength to live out the gospel and discern right from wrong through every circumstance or situation that comes upon them. They are not to live by rules, but out of a spirit through which they develop criteria for conduct as situations arise. The key is to move in the right spirit and the rest will come.

The Philippians must have been shaken to hear about Paul's imprisonment and possible execution. How is God's plan working out when such discouraging events take place? Where is God's will and way in all this? Paul assures them that whether it is in his imprisonment or in his struggle to defend the gospel, God's will and way will not be thwarted, indeed, God's spirit of confident compassion will shine that much more brightly when adversity is thrown at it. How is this? This is one of the deeper themes of this letter.