

Philippians – Part 2

Phil 1:27-2:18

- Paul now turns to pastoral advice that is offered to a community facing opposition and persecution.
- Preachers who exhort their congregations to take a particular course of action are *not* necessarily rebuking them for their failures. These preachers *may* be emphasizing something because they know of certain problems within the communities they are addressing, but they are also just as *likely* to be sharing insights into the gospel that have been shaped by their own experiences and meditations. Paul was well aware of the dangers and temptations facing a young Christian community subject to persecution and pressure. (In general, Philippians is a positive letter to a church with few “issues.”)
- The readers are “to live in a manner worthy of the gospel” (1:27); to look to the “interests of others” (2:4); to be “blameless” (2:15). Paul is anxious to instill an attitude – that of Christ himself - as set out in 2:5 – 11.
- The behavior that Paul exhorts in 1:27 uses a *political* Greek word that is associated with citizenship or commonwealth. Paul realizes that Philippi is a colony and that citizens enjoy certain rights and obligations. Paul then wants to encourage this church to have a life that is worthy of the gospel of Christ, worthy of the new citizenship they have as children of God – or being “in Christ.”
- If they are able to do this, then the question of whether Paul is able to come and see them at some future date would be irrelevant.
- A life worthy of the gospel involves “standing firm in one spirit, striving together side-by-side with one mind,” v27b. The word for “spirit” is *pneuma* and for “soul” all is *psyche*, which the NRSV translates as “mind.” The community should act as “one person” (NIV). It is the Holy Spirit that unites them and enables them to stand firmly and resist opposition. The “one mind” that they share comes from the fact that they are all “in Christ.”
- We do not know who the opponents mentioned in verse 28 were. They seem to be real opponents and not just potential ones.
- Regardless, the Philippians are sharing in the same struggle as Paul himself is enduring and this suggests that the problems may be with the civil authorities.
- Verse 28 is a little confusing and are translational differences between verbs and nouns: NIV & NRSV.
- Paul talks about suffering *for* Christ and goes further to talk about suffering *with* Christ. (See also Rom 6:3-10; 8:17.) What is clear is that the *partnership* Paul has with the Philippians includes the sharing in the suffering for/with Christ. Paul understands that their sufferings can be used by God. (See also **2 Cor 1:3-7**; 4:7-12; 6:4-10; Col 1:24.)
- In Philippians 2:1 the beginning word is “if”; this should be understood positively as “if – as is, of course, the case!” (The NRSV is better than the NIV here.) Being “in Christ” there is both encouragement and strength. As in 1:27, our union with Christ forms the basis of Paul’s appeal to an appropriate way of life.

- The Philippians have already brought Paul joy – 1:4; and now he wants it to become more full/complete. They are to be of the same mind, to have the same love – as Christ.
- The theme in those few verses lead in to “the mind of Christ” in the hymn of Philippians 2:5 – 11.
- ***This hymn is one of the best-known and most influential passages in all of Paul’s writings.***
- And whether it *was* a hymn is uncertain. The style is solemn and rhythmical and thus has a certain poetic quality. However, its structures do not conform to the rules of Greek poetry. Its regular pattern stresses the use of parallelism within Hebrew poetry, like in the Psalms, and some have suggested it was originally composed in Aramaic. The lines can be arranged in various ways and that very fact shows that we should not impose our own ideas of poetic structure onto the material!
- It is quite possible that Paul was quoting from an earlier composition, possibly a creedal statement.
- Even if Paul did not write the hymn, by using it here he has made these words his own.
- In the first part of the hymn there is an emphasis on Christ’s *voluntary humiliation, or self-giving*, and later in the second part we see his *exaltation* -the latter being a work of God.
- This is the earliest passage in Pauline literature to raise in our minds the serious questions about the “pre-existence” of Jesus Christ. See also 2 Cor 8:9: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that *though he was rich*, yet for your sakes *he became poor*, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” This is the language of *incarnation*.
- See also Colossians 1:15 – 20, another famous early (creedal) hymn.
- This thinking moves a step beyond the statements that say “God sent his son” to an emphatic declaration that Christ’s incarnation was a deliberate act of self-emptying – Greek, *kenosis*.
- (See *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* page 506 for a credible suggestion of the parallelism of “adamic” language.) In other words, comparing and contrasting the first Adam with Christ, the last Adam. Jesus is the *true* image of God – (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15), whereas Adam was created “after” God’s image and became subject to sin and death because of his disobedience – Rom 5:12-21 - and so is now only a distorted copy of what he was meant to be. Those who have borne the image of the first Adam can, in turn, bear the image of the last Adam (1 Cor 15:42-49) - because he represents the eschatological goal of humanity, God’s original purpose for creation.
-
- Paul is *not* urging the Philippians to *imitate* Christ, but to be what they *already are* “in him.”
- There may also be a contrast with what Jesus did *not* do with what Lucifer did!
- What exactly did Jesus empty himself of?! Many of suggests that he emptied himself of the attributes of divinity, but Paul has no interest in specifying such matters.
- **The Greek reads better like this: “Who, being in the form of God, did not consider as *something-to-be-exploited* equality with God, but made himself *nothing*, taking the form of a slave!”**
- Going from “Lord” to “slave” is shocking!
- Yet in his self-emptying and his humiliation he reveals what God is like.
- **The Greek translation continues: “having become in human likeness, and being found in human appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross!”**
- **It continues: “Therefore God has highly exalted him, and given him the name that is above all names, that that the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the father!”**
- This certainly an exercise of superlatives!

- It is the one who came in the likeness of men – Jesus – who is now proclaimed as “Lord.”
- In the city of Philippi, a Roman colony where the cult to the Emperor was important, the proclamation of Jesus as Lord would’ve been a challenge to political loyalties.
-
- In Philippians 2:12 – 18 we have our necessary response. Paul picks up the theme discussed in 1:27 – 2:4. The word “therefore” is a link.
- Paul encourages them to work out their own salvation with “fear and trembling” – not simply when he is with them, but even more when he is absent. The “fear and trembling” are not caused by *uncertainty* regarding their salvation, but are the appropriate attitude in the presence of God – “in awe” might be a better translation. The fact that the Philippians are urged to “work out” their own salvation does not conflict with Paul’s insistence that salvation is a work of God alone. The Philippians are to complete what God has done by living it out in their own lives. This is not simply an individual matter but collective.
- It is God who is at work in them.
-
- It appears as if Paul is saying that Christians have become God’s children and so they must therefore live without blame in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.
- In verse 17 he talks about “even if” the outcome of his situation is death; he will nevertheless rejoice.
- There is a mention of “sacrifice” and “offering your faith,” which at could again points to the financial gift the Philippians had earlier sent to Paul.
-
- This whole section demonstrates the way in which theology and ethics are inseparably joined together.
- What does it mean to live as Christians acknowledging that *this* Jesus is our Lord?
- This passage upsets our normal assumptions about what God is like, and has a radical effect on our understandings of what God expects from us. Those who confessed Jesus as *Lord* should not be looking for status or power; nor should they be acting from selfish ambition or conceit – 2:3. Rather, they should humbly be considering others better than themselves.
- How many of us really take the self-giving of Christ as a model for Christian behavior? How many of us are prepared to take on the role of a “slave”?
- In Paul’s letters we are told to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ and sometimes we wish for would’ve been more precise! We cannot always find such ready-made answers to the modern-day questions in the Bible! It’s as if Paul is saying: “This is the gospel. This is what God is like. This is what God has done for you, and this is what God expects *you* to be like. Work out what that means for yourselves!”
- And to do that we need to go back to first principles. The answers to these questions are not easy!
- Christian obedience must be understood as a response to God’s grace, rather than to a set of rules. The response that we make has to be characterized by the one Christ himself made, because we are “in him.” And this also must be carried out as a community, and when that happens, we will be a powerful witness in the world.