

Philippians – Part 4

Phil 4:1-23

- 4:1 effectively concludes the previous chapter! (It begins with a “therefore.”) Paul endearingly speaks of them as people who he loves and long for, that they are his joy and his honor. He encourages them to stand firm “in the Lord” and fulfilling the practices that he has been outlining in the previous section.
- 4:2–9 is a series of exhortations. This is typical of Paul's letters and is a part of his conclusions.
- We hear a little bit more about the Philippian church. In 2-3 mention is made of two women, Euodia and Syntyche, asking that they agree with each other “in the Lord.” Some have argued that this was a serious problem in the community and it needed addressing. He deals with them briefly and gently. (The fact that he names them is treated as a sign that they are friends and fellow workers, Paul rarely mentions by name those with whom he disagrees.) What is also clear is that women have a *prominent* role in the light of the church. See also Acts 16:11–15; Romans 16:1–15.
- In 4:3 he mentions an unnamed loyal “yokefellow” or “companion.” Why does not Paul name him? Many suggestions as to the identity have been made. (The suggestion that it was Paul's own wife can be ruled out as the adjective is masculine in form!) There is a footnote to the word “Syzygus” in many translations; but there is no evidence that that Greek word – meaning literally “yokefellow” or “companion” - was ever used for a persons’ name. Other suggestions include Silas, Luke, and even Epaphroditus. We just don't know.
- Like Clement and other leaders who are not named, these women have labored side-by-side with Paul “for the sake of the Gospel” and their names are “in the book of life.” That image comes from the Old Testament – Exod 32:32; Ps 69:28; Dan 12:1 - and from the New Testament – Rev 20:12–15. The citizens of Philippi, whose names would be recorded in the civic register, would certainly understand an image called to mind its heavenly counterpart.
- In 4:4–7, Paul repeats an instruction to “rejoice in the Lord” always.
- Christians are to be known for their *gentleness*. These instructions consist of a series of commands that appear to have little connection with each other. Paul’s statement that “the Lord is near” seems equally detached from what immediately precedes it. In what sense is seen near? Is this with reference to space or time? The words are reminiscent of Psalm 145:18 – “the Lord is near all who call upon him” - but they could have a sound similar to the prayer for the Lord's coming in 1 Cor 16:22.
- The affirmation of “the Lord is near” leads naturally to the injunction *not* to be anxious. This is reminiscent of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6:25–34. All prayer and supplication are to be accompanied by *thanksgiving*, something that is characterized the whole of this letter. The result will be “the peace of God that will guard their hearts and minds in Christ – Messiah – Jesus.” The peace that is promised here is far more than the absence of conflict. It is total well-being, and it comes *from* God.

- 4:8–9. Paul's final appeal is to think about various and noble qualities, all of which are appropriate for those whose minds are guarded by Christ. The virtues listed here (v8) are often described as typical of the qualities that were admired in the pagan world, and certainly there is nothing particularly Christian about them. Some have wondered whether Paul has adapted a list of virtues from popular moral philosophy! If so, why? Is Paul making a deliberate attempt to show that Christianity is not incompatible with pagan culture at its best? Almost all the terms he uses can be found in Jewish literature, however, so we cannot be certain about his source.
- 4:10–20 – a personal note of thanks.
- The fact that this “thank you note” comes almost to the end of the letter is a bit of a puzzle. Some commentators believe that Paul’s purpose in writing to the Philippians is to express thanks for their earlier gift to him. If that was the case, he has left it very late in the letter to do so! For sure, there are references to their gift in 1:3,3; 2:25,30, but these are scarcely expressions of thanks. The reasons for this are unclear. Paul was very concerned about *not* accepting financial assistance – see 1 Cor 9:15–18; 2 Cor 11:7–10; 1 Thess 2:9. Nevertheless, for Paul to receive support from the Philippians *when he was in prison* is a very different matter. Paul was at pains to suppress any *perception* that he was “profiting” from the gospel. Nevertheless, the Philippians had long supported his missionary endeavors and could be seen as *partners* in his work, something that Paul had indeed boasted to the Corinthians – 2 Cor 11:7–10. There was no need for Paul then to be embarrassed by their gift, except perhaps by their generosity! (We should not over exaggerate this matter.)
- Paul's gratitude is not due to any real need on his part – 11–13 -since he has learned to be content whatever he has. Paul's state of contentment should *not* be confused with stoicism, because it comes from God. The humbling of Paul's experiences again tie-in with the Christ-hymn, who himself was humbled.
- 17-19 picks up from 11–12. Paul does not need gifts and is not looking for any. Paul's response seems to confirm that the Philippians may be feeling that *they* have not done as much for him as they would have liked. But *he* is *not* looking for another gift; the amount is that they have given stands to their credit and is more than enough. (Paul returns to the financial ledger metaphors again!)
- in verse 19 he says “my God” (see also 1:3) but this does *not* mean that his God is different from that of the Philippians! (In the very next verse, he refers to “our God.”) Paul seems to be wanting to stress that he is relying on God to do for him things that he is unable to do for himself.
- It's not surprising that Paul ends with a doxology.
- The way Paul ends the letter in 21–23 may seem strange to us, but many letters of the time would end with (a) personal information or instruction, (b) a formal benediction or doxology, (c) brief personal counsel greetings, and (d) a simple benediction. This seems to be applied here. The mention of those in “Caesar's household” shows that they are “saints” in the most surprising places!
- Paul’s theme of *joy* continues to echo throughout chapter 4. This is not a superficial cheerfulness. It is the deep joy that arises from what God has done in Christ and is continuing to do through all his followers, all those “in the Lord.” This is not merely an emotional experience, or transient, but is a deep and lasting joy that comes through an ongoing relationship with the Messiah. If Christians lack

such joy today, perhaps this is because we see our faith as an individual matter, rather than as part of a corporate life “in Christ.”

- Paul reminds those who are disunited of their common bond to Christ and his Lordship over all.
- This final chapter is a bit of a hodgepodge! It is a collection of different ideas.
- The declaration that “the Lord is near” in 4:5 can create problems for us today, 2000 years later as we wonder what this may mean. We need to think about both spatial and temporal nearness of the living Christ. To experience and to know God's presence is an appropriate mystical experience and mystery. (Think of the liturgical blessing “The Lord be with you.”)
- We are worriers and therefore find the advice in 4:6 difficult! Remember Paul’s circumstances; he is in prison. The secret of his composure is that he is relying on God, not on his material possessions, for his security.
- When we pray, be mindful of our “shopping lists” that exclude thanksgiving!