

Philippians 1:12-30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Philippians chapter 1 verses 12 to 30. What then?

Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death.

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard-pressed between the two.

My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you, or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

[1 : 58] This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

In Paul's epistles, the message of what God is doing for and through other Christians in other localities is frequently related as a matter of importance. It doesn't just matter that God is doing things.

The fact that people are spreading the news and talking about it matters too. This is especially true as such reports are transformed into prayers of thanksgiving, as the word of the success of God's word in various persons and locations returns to him in the form of praise.

Paul is often eager to stir up such reports into a godly buzz about what God is accomplishing, so that Christians will become emboldened in their witness, and so that the work of God's word would yield a richer harvest of praise from those whose ears its victories reach.

In the second half of Philippians chapter 1, Paul discusses the way in which the news of his own imprisonment has itself become a means of the gospel's spread. In particular, it had become known throughout the entire imperial guard, and to others of the establishment, that Paul's imprisonment was literally in Christ.

[3 : 22] Paul's imprisonment wasn't just for Christ, but in Christ, not merely something occurring as a result of Paul's witness for Christ, but a way in which Paul himself was manifestly participating in Christ.

By imprisoning this troublesome Jewish teacher, the Romans set up the conditions for the report of his master, Jesus the Messiah, to be spread throughout the palace guard.

The message of Jesus was being spread through the gossip of the soldiers, who presumably saw something different and remarkable about this particular prisoner. And Paul's imprisonment and suffering at their hands was a way in which the fact that his life was lived in his crucified Lord shone with a brightness that could not be ignored.

All of this created wonderful new opportunities for the gospel message, and illustrated Christ's glorious way of achieving his great victories under the mask of defeats. Who would believe that the imprisonment of one of his leading heralds would be one of the ways in which Jesus would cause the message of his lordship and his gracious forgiveness to penetrate so deeply into the establishment that executed him.

But Paul's imprisonment was not only producing fruit among the Roman gods. His example was emboldening other Christians to bear courageous witness, even in the teeth of the threat of similar imprisonment.

[4 : 42] The report of Christ's grace to Paul in his imprisonment robbed the threats of the authorities of the fear that they would typically instill. Ironically, some of the people who had been emboldened to speak were doing so out of bad motives, wanting to cause Paul distress or to build little kingdoms for themselves now that their rival Paul was no longer able to keep them in check.

They weren't preaching a fundamentally false message like the Judaizers, but they were preaching out of bad or mixed motives. However, whatever their intentions, the word of Christ was spreading through them nonetheless.

If Christ could make the word of his kingdom spread in the gossip of Roman gods, he could spread it just as effectively through the words of petty and proud preachers. Just as in the cross itself, the intentions of the enemies of Christ will lead them to become the unwitting ministers of his victory.

Not all of the preachers Paul mentioned, however, were of such a character. Some, rather than viewing Paul's imprisonment as their chance to get ahead in a rivalry that they had with him, recognised that Paul had been appointed to imprisonment by the Lord for the service of the gospel itself.

Christ had put him in prison as a means of advancing his kingdom. Recognising the sovereignty of Christ over the intentions of men and what Christ was accomplishing through the situation, Paul can respond to what would seem to almost any human being as a severe setback, not with despair, but with rejoicing.

[6 : 06] Rejoicing in prison and in suffering is one of the marks of the early church. Paul can also rejoice as he is assured that through the prayers of the Philippians and others and the work of the Spirit, the situation will yield his deliverance or salvation.

The deliverance that he expects is a divine vindication and he alludes to Job chapter 13 verses 15 to 16 here. Though he slay me, I will hope in him, yet I will argue my ways to his face.

This will be my salvation, that the godless shall not come before him. Paul shares this confidence in God, a confidence that will not be shaken by death itself. Paul is looking to his approaching trial, but looking beyond the human court before which he will stand to a greater court, from which he is awaiting a glorious vindication, a vindication achieved through the petitions of the Philippians and others and the advocate of the Holy Spirit.

More than anything, he desires Christ to be honoured in his body, in his current physical existence, whether this takes the form of life or death. While most would look at the trial that Paul would soon face with great concern over whether it would yield a death sentence, because Paul is looking beyond it, he can speak about the alternatives of release or execution with a measure of ambivalence.

Whatever the human court determines in his case, it is the verdict of the heavenly court that he is awaiting, and he can confidently place himself in the hands of its judge, assured of the salvation that he will bring.

[7 : 38] The choice that Paul faces is between life and death. For Paul, living is opportunity to serve and exalt Christ by his labours, to minister to his people, and to extend his kingdom.

We might here recall Galatians chapter 2 verse 20, I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

On the one hand, being at home in the body, as Paul observes in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 6, involves being away from the Lord. Death would not merely mean a release from Paul's troubles, but would bring a new intimacy and closeness with Christ in the intermediate state, while awaiting the final resurrection.

For Paul's purely personal interest, this would be preferable. However, Paul believes that Christ still has a purpose for him to serve in ministering to the Philippians, so that they might grow further in their faith, and have reason to thank and glorify Christ in his release and his visiting of them again.

Whatever happens, Paul knows that the progress of the gospel and the glory of Christ is the ultimate end. The one thing Paul is concerned about is that the Philippians conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel.

[8 : 54] Whether he is released to minister to them again, or is restrained from visiting them by continued imprisonment or death, Paul desires to hear of their united endurance, bound together by a common struggle for the truth of the gospel.

They should be standing firm in the one spirit, God's Holy Spirit, and united in the one mindset of Christ, fearlessly facing their adversaries and opponents.

Such fearless behaviour would actually evidence the truth of the message of judgment and salvation the Philippians proclaimed. The more confidently the Philippians faced persecution, the more that their persecutors would be led to question their own position, suspecting that confidence in the judgment upon the enemies of Christ, of which the Philippian Christians spoke, was the only explanation for such conduct.

The Philippians could draw confidence from the fearlessness of their own number, seeing ordinary men and women displaying a courage in the face of death and persecution that could only be explained by the work of the Spirit, and would, as they had already been by the example of Paul, be emboldened in their own witness and behaviour.

All of this would be evidence to them and their opponents that God was at work. One of the ways that the lives of the saints bear witness, both encouraging and convicting us, is through their remarkable conduct that testifies to their recognition of something with the eyes of faith that exceeds fleshly perception.

[10 : 18] They display virtues and rise to a stature that is astonishing, precisely as they witness something that others don't see. However, even when people don't see what they see, their lives themselves bear witness to the existence of such a reality, as they are clearly living in terms of a greater horizon, one that elicits virtues from them that are both glorious and utterly paradoxical in terms of the immediate horizons that everyone else witnesses.

Paul concludes this chapter with a remarkable statement. For the sake of Christ, it had been granted to the Philippians not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for his sake.

Our very faith is something granted to us by God, who opened our eyes to his truth so that we might respond to him. Apart from God's work of grace towards us in Christ, we would not have any capacity to respond.

In chapter 3 verses 10 to 11, Paul will speak of sharing his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

How many examples can you find of these adversaries and obstacles in this chapter? And how do we see the confidence of Paul in the gospel in the face of them?■■■■■■■■■■

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