

“

I thank my God
every time I
remember you.
In all my prayers
for all of you, I
always pray with
joy

-PAUL

PHILLIPIANS 1:3-4



Philippians Bible Study

By Rob Taylor

Paul writes to the believers in Philippi from prison in Rome, so it is a letter from a situation of lockdown, but with none of the comforts most of us enjoy in our time of lockdown in our homes.

Not only was Paul confined in prison, but his future was totally out of his hands and very uncertain from a human point of view. Those he was writing to were similarly in a context of hardship and uncertainty. Here again, there is a point of connection with us in the uncertainties of how severely this COVID-19 pandemic

will impact our country and how severe and protracted the economic consequences will be.

Thirdly, we cannot read this epistle without being aware of the strong brotherly love that Paul has for the believers in Philippi and his great desire for them to be united and enriched by their participation in the love of the Lord. Paul may be in confinement but his heart is not imprisoned and his sense of loving fellowship with the Philippians shines through strongly.

So, in all sorts of ways, this letter has a lot to say to us as we ponder on what engaged Paul's heart and mind in his context of confinement, surrounded by multiple threats and uncertainties.

Chapter 1.

We barely begin the letter before we hear Paul saying, *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy.* Philippians is the most joyful of all Paul's letters, which is amazing given its context. The words "joy" and "rejoice" occur repeatedly in Philippians, and the whole epistle has about it a fragrance of delight, gratitude and worship.

1. Let's begin with the opening greeting. Think about what the salutation, *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* offer to you in this context of the Coronavirus?
2. As you read chapter 1, verses 3-11, ponder on the things which bring Paul joy in his prison cell and how they, in turn, give content and desire to his praying. What things bring you joy and fill your prayers at this time?
3. Paul cannot be accused of being a blind optimist, there are portions of his writings where he acknowledges his despair, yet here he maintains a remarkably positive perspective despite all the trials surrounding him. What are the things that bring him such encouragement and how might they have the potential to change our perspective on our current crisis?
4. How do you think Paul came to such assurance in the face of the possibility of death (verses 20-24) and how can we stand on the same firm ground?
5. The first chapter ends with a fervent encouragement to be united as "comrades in arms" striving for the cause of the gospel. The NLT translates vs. 30, *We are in this struggle together.* How can we be there for one another in these weeks?

Chapter 2.

Hardship, persecution and imprisonment pose an intense examination of our hearts and the degree to which we exhibit the character of Christ. It is hard to escape the premium Paul and the other New Testament writers place on character. In times of ease and prosperity we may give more attention to personality and performance, but this current season under the shadow of the Coronavirus is going to call us back to the prime value of Christian character.

1. The opening verses of chapter 2 take us to the wellspring and heart motivation of Christian character. Consider how times of adversity serve to open our hearts to Christ's loving presence. What is your experience of the qualities outlined in verse 1 at this time?
2. Look at verses 2-5. What do they teach us about the primary ways Christian character expresses itself? As the world is united in facing a common threat and grappling with a shared source of suffering and death, how does that call forth qualities of togetherness and mutual service? What examples are you aware of in our current crisis and how do they inspire you? How does reading this passage in a time of COVID-19 serve to give greater clarity to who we are and how we live as the community of Jesus in the world?
3. What do Jesus' incarnation and crucifixion teach us about suffering? What do his resurrection and ascension teach us about hope?
4. Paul counsels the Philippians, *...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.* (Verses 12-13. There is a right "fear and trembling" and a wrong "fear and trembling". How do they differ? In the face of the Coronavirus threat, what is this passage saying to you, and to us as a whole church?
5. What qualities do you recognise in Timothy and Epaphroditus? What is the "cost" to Paul in sending the two of them to Philippi and why was he willing to do so? What might that example mean for us in the uncertain days that lie ahead?

Chapter 3.

Throughout his letters Paul emphasises that there are two sources from which people live. One he calls "the flesh", sometimes translated "the old nature", and

the other he calls “the Spirit” by which he means the new nature which is regenerate in Christ by the operation of the Holy Spirit. These two sources of life are also the two sources from which we take our sense of identity, significance and security. In this section of his letter Paul contrasts these two principles and the way they are given expression in our lives.

1. Here in verse 1 and again in chapter 4 verse 4 Paul gives a firm exhortation, one might say, a command, to rejoice. Why was this something of so much importance to him?
2. Certain people who were wanting to influence the Philippian Christians were basing their authority on their declared credentials. Paul is condemning of this and he has a good understanding of its source because he had once done the same. Paul uses an extremely dismissive term for all this human aggrandisement (“garbage” is a very polite translation). What are the credentials these people were appealing to? Why were they false credentials? What might be the modern day equivalents that form the basis of people’s authority and social standing?
3. In what ways might the current world crisis be a means of revealing the emptiness of many human pretensions and false securities in our day?
4. Verses 10 and 11 are some of the most radical and challenging in Paul’s writing. Do you understand his motivation in making this statement? Can you identify with it? What does it say to us in a time when fear and uncertainty are overwhelming many people?
5. What is the supreme hope that gives shape to Paul’s life and towards which he urges us to “press on”? Paul knew he hadn’t fully attained it, but he strained forward to take hold of it, how can we do likewise?

Chapter 4.

Philippians ends, as do many of Paul’s letters, with personal exhortations. Paul may have been an apostle and an evangelist and church planter, but he was also a deeply caring pastor. His longing was to see each of the churches in his care showing forth the character of Christ and standing firmly on the gospel of salvation in Christ.

1. Make a list of all the characteristics and behaviours that Paul calls the Philippians to embrace in this chapter. Consider what each of them means for you, for your group and for us as a church, particularly in the current season.
2. Have you known occasions in your life, or seen in someone known to you, clear evidence of the peace of God lifting anxiety from heart and mind? What were the circumstances in which that occurred? How do we step into that space in this time of global anxiety?
3. How do verses 8 and 9 offer us an antidote to Coronavirus information overload?
4. The Philippians concern for Paul's wellbeing and their generosity in offering practical provision, sets us a relevant example as we face the economic impact of the Coronavirus, very possibly on people whom we know personally and certainly on members of our church, let alone those in the very poor sectors of our city. How can we best bear witness to the compassionate generosity of Jesus in response to this?
5. If the fallout of the disruption of COVID-19 hits your own economic situation hard, to what extent and in what ways do the words of Paul in verses 11-13 offer hope to you?