



INSTRUCTION ON PHILIPPIANS

EXPOSITORY LECTURES
DICK LUCAS

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INTRODUCTION

'If Galatians is the sternest of the Pauline letters, Philippians is the happiest.' Well, not exactly! Such quotes are common, and very understandable, for no reader of Philippians can fail to notice the repeated call to 'Rejoice in the Lord', nor fail to admire the example Paul sets of joy in life when it is hard, bound by humiliating chains and facing a most uncertain future. And yet it is a superficial judgement all the same. For there are tears in Philippians, with sorrows and troubles aplenty (e.g. 1:17; 2:27; 3:18; 4:14), for all is not well in far off Philippi, or, for that matter, at home in the Christian community in Rome.

What certainly is true is that a very special relationship existed between the Apostle and the Christian people in Philippi, the first fruits of his Macedonian mission. Chapter 4:10-20 is sufficient proof of that, with sacrificial support regularly sent, and Paul, the sensitive 'tent-making' missionary, willing to receive it.

CHAPTERS 1 AND 2

We will try to get to the heart of Philippians, chapters 1 and 2, by means of the following five sections:

1. Two Serious Failings
2. Two Comparable Situations
3. Two God-like Excellencies
4. Two Good Men and True
5. Two Choices for an Apostle

1. Two Serious Failings

1:27-30 is often seen as the 'text' of Philippians since it introduces us to the two main tensions in Philippi.

(a) Dissension in the ranks

Faced with unexpected and alarming persecution, the Philippian believers find themselves lacking unity of spirit and mind with which to face it. Bickering and the blame game is dividing their witness (2:14), of which the public rift between two eminent Christian workers is a festering sore (4:2). We can't be all that surprised, can we? In his brilliant exposition of 2 Samuel, Ralph Davis comments as follows: "More pastors get more than a taste of this point. How often on any given week I used to marvel that a congregation ever survived between petty bickering and flagrant sins, between hurt feelings and asinine stubbornness, between trivial priorities and tragic apathies. Yet it seemed that the fragmenting tendencies of human folly were always overcome by the glue of divine grace. Surely Jesus is building his church or it would have vanished long ago."¹ Well it may not be as bad as that where you work, but I guess the overseers and deacons in Philippi would have said 'Amen' to that description.

(b) Dismay at their experience of suffering

According to Paul's understanding (1:30) what they were enduring in Philippi wasn't all that different from his experience when he first came to Philippi – and similar also to his present detention in Rome. So things were rough for the little Christian community.

What made it worse was that some of the believers saw their plight as a sign of God's displeasure, since it seemed to them that the Lord had withdrawn his protection and presence from them. How astonishingly different is the apostolic viewpoint! 1:29 must be one of the most important verses in the letter. It is a sign of the **grace of God**, not only when he grants us saving faith, but also when he permits us to suffer for his name's sake!

Without a clear grasp of these two big issues in Philippi, closely related, the preacher (and the listener!) will make little sense of Paul's letter.

2. Two Comparable Situations

A striking feature in this letter is that the state of affairs in Philippi seems to have been much the same in Rome. For instance, some Christian preachers in Rome (three times Paul acknowledges that they were truly 'preaching Christ') were antagonistic to the Apostle, not altogether surprisingly being unable to understand that his sufferings were ordained by God, for the advance of the gospel and the stimulus of many brothers to greater fearlessness in ministry (1:12-14). Worse still, they were experiencing just the same miserable envy, rivalry and selfish ambition, that Epaphroditus had reported as being evident in Philippi.

For the preacher this suggests that such faults are likely to be ubiquitous in the churches of Christ, even the best of them, so that the message of Philippians, centred on 2:1-18, is needed at all times. And is it not wise to use the precise words Paul uses to identify these sins? Old Bishop Ryle would tell us not to be content with generalisations about human frailty but to particularise, naming specific evils, one by one, so that we all understand, in practical terms, what it means to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

3. Two God-like Excellencies

Peter O'Brien and Markus Bockmuehl tell, almost with exasperation, of the unending

flood of scholarly publications on 2:6-11. Doubtless, when the kenotic theory captured theological headlines, such defence of the Faith, and so on, were necessary. But they are of little value to the expositor today. What Paul described here is 'the mind of Christ' that takes us to the very heart of the Godhead. In this marvellous section, to our astonished wonder, we learn of two almost inconceivable realities. But realities, please note, to be closely applied by Paul to the situation in Philippi. Attachment to **our own status** in the Christian community and **avoidance**, if possible, of **our own suffering** for the sake of the name of Christ, will be impossible to maintain in the light of the Divine Humility.

(a) The Divine Humility in the Incarnation

The divine humility in the incarnation (2:6-7), by which all refusal to abandon legitimate rights (a sore Philippian weakness) is gladly abandoned, and the Lord of Glory, whom archangels serve, takes a servant's nature, thus making himself nothing!! It is easy to sing of a 'Servant King', but rather harder to translate into life when necessary.

(b) The Divine Humility in the Cross

The divine humility of the cross (2:8), by which the path of undeserved suffering (so perplexing to the Philippians, as to us) is willingly accepted from the hand of God by the only Righteous One, 'for us men and for our salvation'.

Was it a matter of precedence or prestige that led to the split between those two godly women, well known for their loyal service of the Gospel? And was it ill-health that largely contributed to Epaphroditus' return to Philippi, causing the Apostle some concern that the welcome the good man received at his homecoming might be somewhat muted? These are the kind of questions the preacher might well ask himself in the light of 2:6-8, especially in view of the divine verdict of 2:9-11.

4. Two Good Men and True

2:19-30 are important verses, a necessary and relevant ingredient in Paul's case. He sets before his readers two fellow-workers they know well as examples to follow. Both Timothy and Epaphroditus, in their different ways, reflect qualities Paul would commend to his friends in Philippi.

Timothy is unconcerned about his own interests and importance – a true son of his spiritual father. It seems to have been a rare thing then, as it can be now. To have been, for so long, Paul's main trouble-shooter cannot always have been convenient – and the present assignment might well be stressful, with small thanks for all his trouble. Timothy was a prominent figure now with significant responsibilities, certainly too important to get involved in Philippian squabbles! However, for the record, we are reminded that he forfeited his right to present privileges, and went. From the way Paul puts it, you get the impression that Paul saw this as impressive, and wants his readers to know it.

Epaphroditus is a 'fellow-soldier', who for his trouble in travelling to care for an apostle in chains, collected a few scars and wounds, as soldiers on active service do. He was not magically preserved from sickness; at one moment it seemed he might die. The prayer-circle at Philippi had bargained for success and a triumphant end to his journey – not this kind of upset. Would this suffering servant get a warm welcome on his return? Paul seems to have been anxious to see that he should.

Yes, the pattern of service and sacrifice, supremely seen in Jesus Christ, was recognisable also in Timothy and Epaphroditus, and the Apostle is determined that we learn from them. These things are not beyond those who 'work out their salvation with fear and trembling' – that is those in whom God is at work (2:12,13). Paul certainly knows how to make his point.

5. Two Choices for an Apostle

1:18b-26 portrays Paul unable to decide between his longing to be with Christ, and the evident need of the Christian community in Philippi for his continued presence and help. Martyrdom may look more likely than ministry, but the Apostle has no certain knowledge as

to how God will order his future. All he can say is that, for the good of his friends and their spiritual progress he must put his own preferences on one side – another illustration of not grasping what one has the right to enjoy. Thus the conviction strengthens that he will yet be released to visit Philippi again.

All the way through Philippians we are conscious of the influence of certain true believers who, mistakenly, claimed to have arrived at a state of spiritual 'perfection', that is, an experience of full and complete salvation through the person of the risen Christ (3:12-16). Paul, as we know, declares that he himself has not attained this state, nor have his Christian brethren – the prize in question belongs to the world to come. It is against this background that we can understand Paul's steady insistence that there is much more yet to be attained **in this life**. Firm but tactful statement like 1:6, and the prayer of 1:9-11 make his point clearly enough, while the famous exhortation of 2:12-13 is in some ways the centre piece of the apostolic demand that behaviour reminiscent of Israel in the desert (2:14) be left behind so that **they may become** what children of God in this age should be. Then the Apostle will know, and only then, that his labour has not been in vain on their behalf: and rejoicing in one another can begin!

Summary of Chapters 1 and 2

By now the main lines of reasoning in these two chapters (they contain the central message of the letter) have become clearer. The believers in Philippi, faced with unexpectantly severe harassment, are perplexed as to its meaning. Is this perhaps a sign of divine displeasure? Had they been disobedient, or faithless? Paul's answer, utterly surprising to them. Is that the 'struggle' they are going through is a sign of God's **grace!** Hard times, the world's hostility, opposition from a 'crooked and depraved generation', is normal, just part of the predictable experience of the churches of Christ in this age. They are to 'stand firm' (1:27; 4:1). More reassuring still, suffering for Christ 'really serves to advance the gospel' (1:12)! It even makes the coward spirit brave (1:14)! It is certainly no justification

for complaining and quarrelling amongst themselves (2:14).

Just as the rival preachers in Rome mistook the meaning of Paul's chains, so disagreements over the implications of their present plight caused dissensions in Philippi. Alongside this was the distressing conceit of some (2:3), the mutual envy that Paul so resolutely exposes in chapter 2 of his letter. Faithful indeed were the wounds of a friend.

To counter all this, one of the Apostles' main weapons is revealed by the famous request – 'have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus'. I believe Paul uses this concept of a Christian mind or disposition more often in Philippians than elsewhere (1:7; 2:2,3,5; 3:15, 19; 4:2,10). Paul wished to see partnership, not partisanship, in Philippi; as far as he is concerned, all of them (n.b. the repeated 'all of you' in 1:3-8) are in partnership with him in his vital ministry in Rome (9:17), and he is in partnership with them through his prayers, his messengers, and his letter, plus the joyous hope of a future visit (1:26).

CHAPTER 3

These notes are no place for critical questions as to the status of this chapter – ‘interpolated fragment’, ‘separate letter’ etc. etc. Here, as so often, internal evidence is the safest guide, something the expositor is in the best position to judge.

After the great second chapter with its ‘examples to follow’, supremely, of course, that of the Lord Jesus Christ, but also the models set by his lieutenants, Paul, as a wise pastor, specifies **three examples not to follow!** We cannot doubt that at that time these alternatives would have appeared compelling to many Philippian believers, otherwise what Paul describes here would have constituted no threat, nor proved to have any attraction for them.

1. The Persuasive Circumcisers (3:2-11)
2. The Heavenly Men (3:12-16)
3. The Enemy Collaborators (3:17-21)

1. The Persuasive Circumcisers (vv.2-11)

Here are the Judaizers, keen protagonists for circumcision as a sign of submission to the authority and traditions of the mother Church in Jerusalem. Not necessarily an immediate danger, but one to ‘watch out’ for, since, from long experience, Paul expects that the circumcision missionaries will arrive soon enough to ‘complete’ (as they see it) the apostle’s church planting work amongst the Gentiles. Alternatively, and Paul’s exceptionally strong language might support this as more likely (the church in Philippi was some ten years old) these ‘mutilators of the flesh’ – no better in Paul’s eyes now than the body-scarrers of pagan religious communities – had already made their mark in Philippi, a tasteless way of describing a tasteless bunch of fanatical ‘churchmen’.

We may be sure that what was on offer was put forward as a great ‘gain’. For instance:

(a) An established spiritual pedigree

As established spiritual pedigree going back to Abraham (Gen.17:1-12), confirmed by the Jerusalem apostolate.

(b) The time-honoured privilege and traditions of the law

The time-honoured privilege and traditions of the law as perfectly suited to guide and protect a new faith challenged daily, as it must be, by the pressures and impurities of idolatry.

Whereas all the Gentile convert had was the word and ministry of one man, an Apostle whose claim to his office was questioned by many and a man who had openly rejected all the God-give treasures of his Jewish past!

What then? All that was necessary for the Christians in Philippi (whether Jewish or Gentile in background) in order to gain a full confidence in themselves and their spiritual standing was to add ‘belonging’ to ‘believing’, a visible commitment demonstrated and sealed by circumcision at the hands of officially recognised men.

To Paul all such ‘gains’ were ‘loss’, even filthy rubbish, for those are the ‘true circumcision’ – the authentic people of God – who, rejecting a righteousness of their own through the law (= religion), rely on a righteousness **from God**, which is through faith alone in Christ alone. But the evangelical expositor will need no help from these notes in proclaiming the surpassing greatness of ‘knowing Christ’, nor in applying the teaching of this section to present day controversies on Justification, Catholicity, and the like.

3:10 however demands extra attention, since this magnificent summary is quite central to the message of Philippians. The meaning should not be twisted by revising the order of ‘the power of his resurrection and (no article) fellowship of his suffering’! Let no man put asunder what God has joined: authentic experience of the resurrection power of Christ means **sharing his sufferings**. Without the latter no claim can be made for the former. “...the new life in and with Christ puts it subject where Christ was – in that attitude towards the world

which engenders contradiction, reproach, and persecution"². Hitherto, Paul, the religious superman par excellence, had persecuted the church of God with abundant zeal. So it is not likely that the churches of God today, who worship by the Spirit of God, glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh, will avoid discrimination against them, even persecution, from Paul the persecutor's pharisaic successors.

So let our attitude be the same as that of Christ Jesus (2:5-8): or, in the stark language of 3:2, 'watch out for those dogs', the Pharisaic circumcisers!

2. The Heavenly Men (vv.12-16)

In this middle passage, unlike sections 1 and 3, we meet genuine Christian believers (13a). Nevertheless they too are following a false trail, though seemingly a heady and intoxicating one. In the language of the old holiness movements their claim is to have attained, through faith in the Risen Christ, a 'Full Salvation'. Verse 11 is the link verse that appears to have aroused the Apostle to make two such dramatic personal denials with regard to this, as are found in verses 12 and 13. Perfection is emphatically not his present possession, but the ultimate goal to which he presses on. Meanwhile, he stretches forward, straining every nerve, to win the prize which one day will be his in the life of the world to come (1 Jn 3:2). Our English vocabulary has taken up this picture: Paul is on the home stretch, but he has not finished, nor will he finish, his race, until the end.

This then is the pattern which, in his own life, Paul has set before the brethren, and which a mature Christian will come to accept and make his own. Let no-one step back!

But why should these mature believers step back from present attainments? Why, because the claim of these 'heavenly men' is to have reached beyond the Cross.

Through the power of the Resurrection they now share Christ's victory in heaven, safely beyond trial and temptation, weakness and sin (it is possible to envisage how such verses as Eph 2:6 and Col 1:3 might be twisted to support such a claim). They have ceased to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, to watch and pray, to make their

call and election sure. No longer for them 'a holy violence, a conflict, a warfare, a fight, a soldier's life, a wrestling' – characteristics of the Christian life in the New Testament (Ryle). No! For them the battle is over, the prize won.

O foolish perfectionists! O foolish Philippians who listened to them! Disaster must lie along that road, as Paul so often told his Corinthian brethren (eg. 1 Cor 9:24-10:13), a gifted church community suffering from similar delusions of spiritual grandeur (1 Cor 4:84).

What then is now emerging is the theme that that holds this entire chapter together. The case studies may differ, but all have in common the same rejection of the model set out in 2:6-11.

In section 1 the Judaizers took pride in their exalted religious status in this world, just as in section 2 the perfectionists found satisfaction in their superior spiritual status in this life.

Paul, by contrast with the Judaizers, was willing to let go a position of the highest religious prestige, which by inheritance was rightfully his, in order to gain the knowledge of Christ, even when it meant sharing in Christ's disgrace. By contrast with the perfectionists, Paul makes no claim whatsoever to have seized for himself exalted heavenly achievements, but only a desire to take hold of that for which Christ laid hold of him, something he must tell his brothers that he, Paul, has not yet attained!

But we must hasten on to section 3 in order to get the full picture of how things were going wrong.

3. The Enemy Collaborators (vv.17-21)

It is interesting to see how natural is the flow of Paul's thoughts as he writes his words of warning. It was inevitable that verses 10,11 would bring to mind the 'perfectionists', even though their exaggerated claims were 'in house', and far less threatening than those of the passionate 'circumcisers'; for one thing they were doubtless more biddable and submissive toward their respected apostle.

It is very similar here. For one the 'perfectionists' understood themselves to be above the struggle, beyond the diktats and disciplines of the Cross, they were, unknowingly, at enormous risk from world, flesh and devil.

How swift the fall can be from the heights! How discomfoting for the wider Christian community when a church leader, making claims to superior powers and spiritual gifts (perhaps unusually exposed to the public eye through television) falls in open disgrace! It is from this perspective that section 3 (17-21) is seen to follow section 2 (12-16), almost necessarily. Therefore

(a) It makes sense for Paul to recall the wise heads of Philippi, even those who had been drawn away by false standards, to join, or rejoin, the mainstream, following the example he had set them.

(b) It makes sense for Paul to name the collaborators 'enemies of the cross of Christ', even though they lived (and ministered?) within the church's orbit.

(c) It makes sense for Paul to describe his deep personal distress, since such men do harm, not only to the cause of the gospel, but also to themselves, eternally.

(d) It makes sense for Paul to shock his readers by the graphic terms in verse 19 (we modern readers are left to guess as to the precise nature of the self-indulgent behaviour being practiced), so that all understand the divine judgment on such practical apostasy. Sin blinds, even the professing Christian. Compromise corrupts, so that we don't see ourselves as others, let alone God, sees. Worldly desires deceive (as in Eden), as the New Testament repeatedly warns. It remains for today's believers carefully to work out (2:12 again!) what in practice this must mean for them. Time honoured legalism hardly suffice to guide us in complex situations, even is held dear by 'great ones' in a past era.

The only real prevention (and cure!) for collaboration begins with the 'But' that introduces verses 20 and 21. Let us now consider what it is.

The basic thrust off this fine climax to chapter 3 is that our own final and complete salvation lies in the future, at the coming of our Saviour. For this we wait, eagerly, but also patiently, since despite ever new claims to the contrary, this final 'transformation' cannot be realized in this life, nor in our present experience. Meanwhile the body of our

humiliation remains, weak and perishable (1 Cor 15:42-44). Was there the beginnings of a 'health and wealth' gospel among some Philippians so that sickness was despised as revealing a lack of faith and commitment? This would explain Paul's anxiety over the kind of welcome Epaphroditus would receive from some at his homecoming. It would also go a long way to account for the trauma the church at Philippi was apparently going through as a direct result of ill-treatment at the hands of the authorities (again, back to 1:12-18 for Paul's testimony to the divine sovereignty that 'put him' in chains for a purpose, intended to encourage his far-off fellow soldiers in the conflict that his both his and theirs).

The fact is that a superficial 'prosperity' gospel gains no legitimacy from this letter. Does not the great apostle acknowledge, from his own missionary experience, times of want and hunger, despite a generous God, and despite the magnificent personal and financial help his Philippian friends delight to send him when they are able.

So Paul's final message, to those who truly are his dearly beloved brethren, is a repetition of his call at the beginning, to **stand firm** in the conflict, knowing it to be a sure sign that this proves they are on the road to salvation (1:27f). To do this will require like-mindedness, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel – a unity not yet. There is reconciling work to be done (4:2)!

THREE FINAL WORDS (4:4-7)

Here are familiar words, notably of exhortation in verse 4, and promise in verse 7. I take them as summing up the expectations Paul has of his Philippian brethren. Taken out of context they are rich enough: as directions addressed to the church in Philippi they are superbly fitting. 'Directions', please note. Nothing here is discretionary. It seems that some readers have been misled by the omission of the title 'Apostle' in Paul's greetings (1:1). As in 2:12f, and indeed throughout the letter, Paul expects compliance: nothing here is optional.

1. Rejoice in the Lord, always!

A fresh reading of this letter suggests that there is not a great deal to be happy about! In chapter 1 Paul is enduring chains, gospel preachers are out to cause trouble, his future is in the balance, and, in addition, worrying reports have arrived about a church he loves. In chapter 2 Paul is compelled to confront the proud and selfish behaviour of some people (leaders?) in the Philippian church, where petty wrangling is reported, and it seems even murmuring against God's will. In chapter 3 Paul recognizes that he must protect the flock from the threat of Judaizers, and from the spiritual complacency of some good brethren – that must be quickly and wisely checked. Worse, by far, is the breaking out of self-indulgence among a few, that is betraying the integrity of the gospel. In chapter 4 Paul sends a plea for help to be given to the stalwart Christian women who have a fine record of service, but who are at loggerheads. It is heartbreaking and deeply disturbing.

Altogether it seems that, both in Rome and Philippi, the Christian community is being battered and bruised by those old, ever-active enemies, the world, flesh and devil.

Not that there is anything particularly abnormal about any of this. Has not Paul said that daily he faced the pressure of his concern for all the churches (2 Cor 11:28)?

But in the church struggle there is a secret known to every believer. It is the **personal knowledge of Christ** – the grandest theme, for sure, in the letter (e.g. 1:21; 2:1; 3:8-10; 4:13). Always, and in each situation, we

can rejoice in Him. His name fills every part of the letter; it is the name we treasure, the name before which every knee will bow. More, through Christ, and by God's plea, we rejoice in **the Gospel** and its advance, as well as the wonderful **partnership in the gospel** with fellow believers everywhere. All this is the very stuff of the Philippian letter. So, whether in life or death, we can 'rejoice **in the LORD**, always.'

2. Let Forbearance Characterise You With Everyone!

Neither 'gentleness' nor 'moderation' is quite right. 'Reasonableness' is better. Vincent³ suggests 'do not make a rigorous and obstinate stand for what is your just due'. That, in the Philippian context, is exactly to the point. It should, we hope, speak powerfully to those tiresome Roman preachers, at odds with Paul. It is what Paul asks for in 2:1-4, and following. Probably Euodia and Syntyche both need to ponder it.

The fact is that this particular disposition would be likely to dissolve most rivalries in Philippi – and among us.

3. Don't be anxious, about anything!

Directions 1 and 2 seemed improbable enough – and now this! Just as there were reasons aplenty for the young church at Philippi to be fearful, so with us. And **where would they turn**, if and when their great apostle and spiritual father were soon to die, his blood poured out like a libation on the offering of their faith and service to God (2:17)? Paul's answer is that they must learn to turn with their requests, not to man, but to God. He, the God of peace, would be with them (4:9) and the peace of God would garrison their hearts and minds in Christ (4:7).

To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen (4:20).

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, 2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity (Christian Focus Publications, 1999), p. 197.

² Vincent: ICC 1897

³ Ibid.