

The Letter to the Philippians

Central Focus Leaders' Notes 2012

Introduction

Background

The roots of this letter lie in Acts 16 as we read about the beginnings of the Philippian church. The group who arrive there seem to be Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke himself. (a 'we' passage begins in Acts 16:10 indicating that Luke was present, though the pronoun returns to 'they' at the end of the chapter, leading some commentators to conclude that he may have been left in Philippi and may be the 'true companion' of Philippians 4:3). With seemingly little Jewish presence in the city the first convert is Lydia, a wealthy Gentile God fearer, who believes Paul's message and welcomes him into her home. The hostile pagan forces in the city are soon seen though with the exorcism of a fortune telling slave girl and the subsequent seizure and jailing of Paul and Silas. That suffering continues to produce joy in them though and praise to God as well as providing opportunity to explain the gospel to the jailer, who then becomes a follower of Jesus too. These individuals give a picture of the shape of the Philippian church - something of a mixed bag of believers, though Acts 16:40 makes clear that during the apostolic visit to the city others become believers too. We encountered the Philippians too in our studies in 2 Corinthians last year. Perhaps five or six years after they had first heard the gospel they are one of the Macedonian churches Paul writes so warmly about in chapter 8. There, though in extreme poverty and severe affliction they gave according to their means and beyond, begging to be allowed the privilege of taking part in giving to the suffering Christians in Jerusalem. And that attitude came out of giving themselves first to the Lord and then to Paul, producing in them an abundance of joy despite their suffering. (2 Cor 8:1-5). His relationship with them seems to have been very warm. He'd maintained links with them through Timothy (Acts 19:21-22) and had stayed with them on at least two other occasions (see Acts 20:1-3 and 2 Corinthians 1:16, 2:13). It's not surprising, then, that the letter to the Philippians feels so personal – full of love for and joy in them.

Purpose

This letter to the Philippian church comes after the Corinthian correspondence. Most commentators conclude that it was written towards the end of his two year imprisonment in Rome, but there is the same sense of love and partnership, and of joy in Jesus even in the face of opposition and suffering as there was in Acts and in 2 Corinthians. Unlike the Corinthians, they seem to be a model church – Paul isn't writing to combat any heresy or correct any immorality endangering them. So the question we must consider as we begin studying this letter is why did he actually write?

The occasion of the letter was a practical one – the Philippians had sent one of their number, Epaphroditus, with a gift for Paul and Paul now sends him back with this letter which includes his thanks (see 4:10-20). That provides him with an opportunity to fill the Philippians in about his present circumstances and in due course to hear back from them as he plans to send Timothy to them (2:19). The purpose, however, is very different. 1:27-30, the heart of Paul's appeal to them, spells it out. Even though this is a real and growing church they do face some pressures. There is opposition outside (1:28, 2:15) and there are rivalries and disputes inside (2:3-4, 4:2-3). Added to that there are Judaizing missionaries who are seeking to win these Christians over to a different gospel. **So Paul's purpose for writing was to encourage his dear Christian brothers and sisters to stand firm unitedly in the gospel of Jesus, and live it out just as they have seen him and others do.**

Paul's letter is in many ways a letter to a model church – one we too can learn from as we see afresh what a real and growing church should look like and measure ourselves up against it. It's therefore a call for us too, as we, like them, face pressures from the pagan world outside and its opposition to Jesus, the distortions of the gospel around us and the internal pressures on our relationships within the church family that are often exacerbated when the pressure is on. Paul's call to us, as to them is to stand firm unitedly, contending for the faith of the gospel. (1:27)

Structure of the book

- 1:1-11 Thanksgiving and prayer
- 1:12-26 Paul's circumstances and priorities – progress of the gospel and the Philippians
- 1:27-4:3 The main body of the letter – contend unitedly for the gospel
 - A. 1:27-30 the advance of the gospel despite opposition
 - B 2:1-4 thinking the same for the sake of others
 - B 2:5-11 the way of the cross and the mind of Christ
 - A 2:12-18 the advance of the gospel despite opposition
- 2:19-30 Paul's circumstances and the example of Timothy and Epaphroditus
 - 3:1-4:1 Don't be like the enemies of the cross
 - 3:1-11 share in Jesus' death by counting all things loss to know him
 - 3:12-4:1 wait for his glory
 - 4:2-3 Share the mind of Christ as you contend for his gospel
- 4:4-23 Partnering in the gospel

Text Notes

Philippians 1:1-11

Structure

1-2 Greetings

3-6 Paul's joyful confidence in God because of their gospel partnership

7-8 The ground of his confidence – the nature of the partnership God's work has produced

9-11 Paul's prayer: that the love of Christ will equip believers to be ready for His Day.

V1-2, Greetings.

Paul has no need to stand on his apostolic authority in this letter to his dear friends. He and Timothy are simply slaves of Jesus. Though he includes Timothy in the salutation, possibly because he is known to the church, it's clear from the body of the letter, which is written in the singular form, that this is a personal letter from Paul himself. It's a letter to the whole church – no one is excluded – though the overseers and deacons get a particular mention – possibly because they will have responsibility to teach and encourage the whole congregation in the gospel truths Paul will highlight. (In 4:21 it seems that certain individuals were to be responsible for passing on Paul's greetings to the whole church – probably the overseers and deacons who would be reading the letter to them.)

V3-6, Paul's joyful confidence in God because of their gospel partnership.

The letter opens with thanksgiving. Partnership in the gospel, v5, is clearly what drives Paul's joyful thanks for these Philippian Christians. But though this partnership is the ground of his thanksgiving the nature of it isn't really spelled out until v7-8 and certainly isn't the focus of Paul's praise. Instead he focuses first on the source of what he is convinced is evidence of God's work. So God, not the Philippians, is at the centre of his praise which is all-encompassing. He is thanked every time Paul remembers them, v3-4, He is thanked for all the Philippians, v4, and Paul is confident that His work began when they first heard the gospel and will continue until the day of Christ – it's for all time. So Paul, as he begins his letter to encourage these believers to keep standing firm together for Jesus whatever comes their way, is reminding them and us of what there is to be confident in. God is the one who begins a work in believers which will produce fruit. And that work won't founder because it is his alone. He will keep those who are his until the Day of Christ. We can have confidence in him.

V7-8, The ground of his confidence – the nature of the partnership God's work has produced.

The partnership in the gospel, v5, that so clearly prompts Paul's praise in v3-6 is only really defined in these verses which seemingly interrupt the flow of his thought as he moves from thanksgiving(3-6) to prayer (9-11). The definition of the partnership is in v7. The Philippians have shown themselves to be partners because they have shared in the grace gift that God has given Paul of suffering for and proclaiming and defending the gospel (see 1:29 for a similar idea). From the first day until now they

have done this in two ways - by supporting him financially (4:10-20) and prayerfully (1:19) even while he has been in prison - and also by following his example and remaining true to his teaching and convictions as they too have continued to proclaim the gospel themselves, even in hostile circumstances (cf 1:27-28, 2:14-16). Just as Paul has been given the gift of suffering for and proclaiming the gospel so they too have chosen to share with him in it.

And this definition is bracketed by love. It's not just an academic assessment. Paul holds them in his heart, v7, and yearns for them with the affection of Christ Jesus v8. It's part of the partnership. The love he feels for them is a gift of Jesus – the love that has been poured into his heart by the Holy Spirit - and enables him to love the Lord, his people and his work. And it's a love that is strengthened by the conviction that God is at work in the Philippians producing the partnership he has experienced in the past and is still experiencing now. Gospel partnership is a partnership with other believers that stands for and lives out the gospel whatever the circumstances, but it's also one that is rooted in the love that gospel produces and grows from it as we live for the Lord Jesus together and engage in gospel work.

V9-11, Paul's prayer: that the love of Christ will equip believers to be ready for His Day.

Given the nature of the Philippian church it would be easy to conclude that they actually need nothing. They're a loving, growing fellowship who are seeking to live for the Lord Jesus and to partner in gospel work. Paul's prayer springs from what he's said so far, but its aim outstrips their present circumstances and looks to the future. It's ultimately focused on the Day of Christ.

Just as Paul's love for them springs from the love of Christ in him, v8, so he prays that their love too will abound. Here what he prays is that this love will overflow into every area of life and thought. The areas he prays particularly that this love will penetrate are perhaps surprising to a generation like ours which thinks of love largely as a warm fuzzy feeling. He wants their love to overflow more and more, certainly, which will undoubtedly involve emotion, but prays that especially it will penetrate into two areas – knowledge - a growing personal knowledge of God through Christ – and all discernment - an insight in situations where it is necessary to choose the very best. Why? Presumably Paul prays this because he knows this is what they need in order for them to contend unitedly for the gospel of Jesus, not being frightened by those who oppose them (1:27-28). That will involve both their self sacrificial love for one another following the pattern of the Lord Jesus (2:1-11) and their godly living in a crooked and twisted generation (2:14-16). It will involve longing to know Christ and therefore choosing to consider everything else loss for his sake (3:8-11). It's worth noting that this all begins and ends with Jesus. The love which is to overflow is the love of Christ Paul talks about in v8. And that prayer for growing godliness which will result in believers being prepared for the Day of Christ and being pure and blameless then is only possible because they are filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through him in the first place. 'The seed that produces this kind of fruit is the right relationship with God that has been made possible through Jesus' death on the cross.' (William Taylor)
Ultimately Paul's concern isn't for the Philippians though. It's that God will be glorified and praised. And that matters more than anything else.

Purpose: Praise God for the gospel of Jesus. It produces partnership through abounding, discerning love, preparing us for the Day of Christ.

Application:

Praise God for and rejoice in the gospel.

Be confident that He will produce the fruit of righteousness through the work of Jesus in our lives and those of other believers. Therefore there's no need to despair, for if it is God who works through the gospel we can trust Him to complete the work He has started, even in circumstances that seem to us to be almost impossible.

On the other hand we must also beware of pride which takes credit for what is God's work alone. If anyone had cause for self congratulation it was Paul as far as these Philippian Christians were concerned. He had brought the gospel to them and disciplined them in the faith. They were seeking to follow his example. Yet he gives all the praise to God for them. He doesn't put their growth down to good techniques or hard work or anything that he has done.

Why not take some time now and think of some Christians at church. Praise God for what you see of gospel growth in their lives. And pray for them, that this growth will continue until the Day of Christ.

Thank God for the partnership the gospel produces.

While the nature of gospel partnership is developed further later in the letter, in what we see here there is much to thank God for. What evidence do you see in our church family of commitment to the gospel priorities of Paul? When you identify it, thank God for it. What might it look like for us individually to be gospel partners? How might our groups develop that kind of partnership more and more? How might we develop gospel partnership with other Christians elsewhere involved in gospel work – our mission partners, for example..

Pray that whatever our circumstances we will love the Lord and pursue what is most vital in our lives together so that we may be godly now and ready for Jesus' return.

What circumstances make it hard to do that? Is it ever right to step back from the hard work of gospel ministry? What should guide our answer? Are there areas in our lives where we're not longing for change and growth? As we pray together in our groups week by week, how can we make sure that our prayers have 'bite' in these things? How far is the direction of our praying for ourselves and for our groups driven by the coming Day of Christ? How might our prayers change if we followed Paul's example?

Philippians 1:12-26

Context and themes

With verse 12 we move into the main body of Paul's letter. The themes we noticed in the first study are further developed as we see something more of what partnership in the gospel looks like and as we see the requests of Paul's prayer worked out in his own circumstances. It anticipates too what comes later in the letter as Paul uses his perspective on his own circumstances now to encourage the Philippians to continue to stand as he has done in their own similar circumstances (see 1:30).

This passage is a distinct unit. It begins and ends with progress – the same word is used for the advance of the gospel in v12 and the progress of the Philippians in v25. And within the passage there are two sections – the first (v12-18a) which shows how Paul's present (seemingly difficult) circumstances have resulted in the progress of the gospel as Christ is proclaimed and the second (v18b-26) which shows how Paul's future circumstances will turn out for his salvation and for the progress of the Philippians. So a passage which contains news about Paul is actually an opportunity for him to show his priorities to the Philippians and encourage them to share them. Joy is (literally) at the heart of the passage – both present and future for Paul, v18, and future too for the Philippians as they grow in the faith of the gospel, for this joy is linked to a growth in the Philippians' own understanding of the nature of the gospel of Jesus.

Structure

12-18a

12 Paul's conviction

13-14 How?

15-17 Seeming obstacles

18a Paul's conclusion

The Present

Know my circumstances progress the gospel

Gospel advanced through the praetorium and all the rest

Gospel advanced through emboldened brothers in Rome

though some out of knowledge and love

Others out of imagination and rivalry

Christ is proclaimed so I rejoice

18b-26

18b-19 Paul's conviction

20 How?

21-24 Seeming obstacles

25-26 Paul's conclusion

The Future

I know this (thru your prayers & HS) leads to my salvation

Because I eagerly expect not to be ashamed

But that with full courage Christ will be honoured in my body

An uncertain future for Paul

Living would be better for the Philippians

Dying would be better for him

I will remain for their progress and joy in the faith

And so that Jesus is glorified.

Text Notes

1. Rejoice! The gospel progresses through any and every circumstance v12-18a

While it's not surprising in many ways that Paul is keen early in the letter to fill his friends in on his circumstances given their concern for him (4:10) it is worth asking why he goes into such detail about them. The answer lies in the context of v9-11 and in v30. Paul will go on to say in v30 that these dear Christians are facing exactly the same conflict as he has faced and is facing. They know his previous conflict – they saw it – the pagan opposition in their own city when Paul first came with the gospel, the Jewish opposition in other parts of Macedonia (see Acts 16 and 17) and through the contact they've been able to maintain they've heard all about the present conflict he's facing too. They know all about the collection for the Christians at Jerusalem – after all they contributed to it! – and that when he reached Jerusalem he was nearly lynched, faced an entirely false accusation and eventually ended up in prison in Rome awaiting trial. His whole case was, as Motyer puts it, 'beset by a mockery of justice'. Yet he still insists that these circumstances have advanced the gospel. If the Philippians are, like Paul, to stand firm in the face of such conflict they need to have the knowledge and discernment Paul prayed for them in v9-11 to see that the most important thing is that Christ is proclaimed.

That must be why he starts with a desire that these believers should 'know'. (It's worth noting all the other references in this section to knowledge, understanding and assurance). He doesn't just want them to know how he is, but how these things have served to advance the gospel. And he makes clear that the gospel has advanced not in spite of his circumstances but because of them.

First, the gospel has advanced in the prison itself, v13, as it has become clear to the whole Praetorian guard (commentators suggest there would have been 9,000 of them) as well as to 'all the rest', presumably members of the public in Rome, that Paul's imprisonment is for Christ (in fact Paul doesn't use the Greek word *hyper* – on behalf of – he uses *en* – in – suggesting Paul sees himself as sharing in Christ's suffering as well as suffering because of him). As Paul encountered different Roman soldiers no doubt he had many opportunities to preach Christ to them and it was his chains both that gave him that opportunity and made clear the nature of belonging to Christ.

Second, the gospel has advanced in Rome as most of the brothers have become more confident to speak the word of God boldly, v14. Although it's counter intuitive, Paul's imprisonment seems largely to have emboldened the church in Rome to speak the word fearlessly (see 1:27-28 where Paul makes clear that this is what he wants for the Philippians too). Note that it's the brothers Paul is talking about, not just the elders and deacons. Nearly everybody is now willing to share the gospel and not just with people who are well disposed towards it, but with those who presumably are more hostile – (there would be no need for fearlessness if there were nothing to fear!)

Third, and perhaps most strikingly of all, the gospel has advanced through those who seem to preach it with bad motives, acting out of envy or rivalry. Verses 15-17 present a seeming threat to the progress of the gospel: although the majority preach Christ out of love (knowing, v16, that Paul is not in prison because his ministry has failed in some way but as a direct result of his defence of the gospel – the

reason he was arrested in the first place) there is a minority who are preaching Christ also, but do so with different motives and with a different understanding.

A some out of envy and rivalry

B others from good will

B1 out of love and knowledge

A1 out of rivalry and imagination

In contrast to the majority, this minority act not out of love, but out of envy and rivalry – something the Philippians also knew a lot about (see 2:3 and 4:2). There is no reason to think that these are not real brothers preaching the real gospel. Paul gives no indication that their teaching was false (which you would expect if it was cf 3:2). It is their motivation that is the problem. Instead of knowing like the first group they are thinking, v17 or imagining. They don't understand the gospel nature of his imprisonment or the suffering that is bound up with belonging to Christ and serving him so think that they can afflict Paul in some way by what they do. Commentators agonise over quite what this means. Probably the best explanation is that they are Christians who have had their noses put out of joint by the arrival of the great apostle in Rome and now are pleased to see him in reduced circumstances, so flaunt their freedom in the face of his lack of it, thinking to bring him annoyance or discomfort. And of course that is something that many of us can identify with. It's very hard when some other Christian gets all the attention while we are ignored or undervalued and very easy to rejoice when things go wrong for them or even to seek to undermine them ourselves to make them look bad and ourselves better.

Yet Paul's reaction is very different. He rejoices because he sees what is the most important – that the gospel is being preached all over Rome, whatever the motives for doing it, and he knows that Jesus is therefore being made known. This should be an encouragement for the Philippians. Don't be discouraged by the rivalry going on in the church, he's saying. Don't be frightened by those who oppose the gospel. Rejoice that the gospel of Jesus is progressing and will continue to progress – that is its nature – and partner with me as you seek to do what I do in very similar circumstances.

2. Rejoice! Our progress and salvation are sure as we partner in the gospel of Jesus v18b-26

Paul moves from rejoicing in the present at the end of the last section to his future rejoicing as this section opens. This rejoicing is again linked to knowledge. (Note the joy and knowledge at the beginning and end of this section, v18b-19 and v24). Not this time what Paul wants the Philippians to know (though the inference is that he wants them to know it too), but what he knows himself. His circumstances, though apparently bleak, will turn out for his deliverance, v19, just as they have turned out for the advance of the gospel.

Though not identical, there are strong similarities in this section with the first half of the passage. Both start with a stated conviction which is explained, difficulties which are cited and then both end with a concluding statement. This second half moves from a conviction about Paul's own deliverance to a conclusion related to the progress in the faith of the Philippians. It moves from his own future rejoicing to theirs. Paul's struggles about whether it is better to live or die, though based on a conviction that Jesus will be honoured in his body whatever happens, move from what will lead to Paul's deliverance to what will aid the Philippians' growth. Paul is unable to separate the issue of his salvation from his

gospel partnership with his dear brothers and sisters at Philippi. Neither is he able to separate it from his overriding concern for the glory/honour of the Lord Jesus.

While the word deliverance itself could mean simply Paul's release from prison, that is unlikely in this context. It's the same word that is translated 'salvation' in 1:28 and 2:12. Then too Paul uses it acknowledging even in the next verse that he may die, and quotes it directly from Job 13:16 which is also in the context of Job's final vindication before the Lord. It's worth noting too that Paul doesn't just say that he will be delivered through his adversity, but that he will be delivered as a result of it.

So Paul is confident that on the last day he will be saved. The basis for this confidence is at first glance rather surprising. He is certain of salvation because he is certain that he won't be ashamed of Jesus (see Mark 8:38) but will honour him in his body, whether he lives or dies. His perseverance will lead to his salvation. Of course that sounds rather as if Paul is hoping in himself. The context of his assurance must persuade us otherwise though. His hope is that his perseverance will happen through the prayers of the church, v19, the answer to which will be the help of the Spirit of Jesus. Paul wants the Philippians to pray for him what he is praying for them – that the Lord will help him to be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness. His confidence is not so much in himself, then, but in the God who has begun a good work in him and therefore will be sure to continue it until the day of Christ (1:6). Although he could have prayed all this for himself on his own (and no doubt did) he seems to expect that his own progress in the faith towards the day of salvation will take place in partnership with these believers he's writing to (as well as vice versa). He's dependent on the Lord, but he's dependent too on their prayers, confident that God will answer them according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus (4:20).

The end of v20 introduces the quandary Paul will ponder in the next few verses – the uncertainties as to whether he will live or die as he awaits the outcome of his trial. Though steeped in the Old Testament which again and again associates deliverance by the Lord with rescue from enemies and death (eg Ps 25:19-20, Ps 79-9-10, Ps 91) the reality of the situation is clear to him. He will be delivered as Christ is honoured in his body whether he lives or dies. And actually to die is better. V21 isn't just a personal statement for Paul – this is true for me, something else might be true for you – this is the normal experience of every Christian. Living is about knowing Christ. Dying is better because we will be with him and be like him (see 3:7-11 for Paul's expansion of this). Though it's clear to Paul that either state will lead to his salvation he still faces an immense emotional struggle in v21-24 (the commentators tell us that the word used suggests a traveller on a narrow road with walls of rock on both sides – unable to turn either way- see O'Brien P129 for more details of this). He longs to be with Jesus because he knows it will be better by far, but also knows the reality that it will be better for the Philippians if he is released and has the opportunity to continue to partner with them in the challenges they are facing which he will outline in the chapters that follow.

So Paul's conclusion in v25-26 isn't really that much of a surprise. As he did in the first section he subordinates himself to the demands of the gospel and the honour of Jesus Christ. 'He is confident, then, not of his release as such, but that his presence will be a blessing to the Philippians in the future *if* he is released.' (O'Brien P139). Just as in prison he was used as a means of the gospel's progress, so now on his release he will be used for the progress of the Philippians. Though he wants to be with Jesus, he wants even more that Jesus should be glorified as the Philippians continue to grow and rejoice in their faith. Just as he expects them to be instrumental in his deliverance/salvation, v19, so he expects that he will be in theirs. And in setting out his perspective for them like this he provides an example for

them to imitate (see 3:17) as they face frightening opponents and internal rivalries themselves. In it all, as they struggle to keep living and speaking for Jesus in partnership with Paul God is at work achieving his purposes, enabling them to stand through the help of his Holy Spirit and the prayers of believers making them ready for the Day of Jesus.

Application

1. Rejoice! The gospel progresses through any and every circumstance v12-18a

- As believers we should be marked by confidence and joy, not in ourselves, but in the gospel of Jesus – both in its power for a lost world in this section, and for ourselves as it equips us for the day of Christ. It's worth asking therefore, as we study a letter full of joy, what our own joy is in. Can others see my joy in the Lord and the priority of his gospel or would they struggle to identify it? If not, how can I remedy it?
- Are we single minded about the proclamation of the gospel, as Paul is? Is it the most important thing to me? More important than other things going on at church, more important than personal pressures or external opposition or our own prestige? How do we feel when others' gospel work is praised and we are ignored? Are we ever tempted to see other Christians or other churches as rivals even when they are preaching the real gospel? How far are we motivated by the honour of Jesus rather than our own honour or the honour of our church?

2. Rejoice! Our progress and salvation are sure as we partner in the gospel of Jesus v18b-26

- How far do we share Paul's perspective on the Christian life? Can we identify with the sentiments of v21? Why not spend some time meditating on those truths this week?
- How far do we expect others to be involved in our own personal growth? How aware are you of obstacles to growth in your own Christian life? What do you ask your group to pray for you? What would it look like if our prayer requests at Central Focus were like this with these priorities? How can we get beyond the superficial as we pray with one another in our groups and outside of them and seek to partner with one another for each others' progress and joy in the faith?

Philippians 1:27-2:11

Context and structure

This section forms the beginning of what many regard as the main part of the letter. V27 can easily be seen as a header for the material that runs from this point until the beginning of chapter 4. This idea is strengthened by the words from it that are repeated at the end of the section. So politeuesthe, (a word connected to citizenship, translated in the ESV let your manner of life) is paralleled by 3:20 politeuma, citizenship. Stekete (stand) is paralleled in 4:1 by exactly the same word, and sunathlountes, striving side by side, is paralleled by sunathlesan – laboured side by side in 4:3.

Within that big section, 1:27 to 2:18 seems to stand as a distinct unit, with an ABBA structure. The A sections – 1:27-30 and 2:12-18 focus on the advance of the gospel in the face of opposition. Similar ideas in both include gospel/word of Christ, God's sovereign control, salvation, opposition/conflict, as well as presence/absence and partnership with Paul. The B sections, 2:1-4 and 5-11 begin and end with two sorts of glory – one the vainglory of v3 (translated conceit in ESV) and the other the glory of God the Father in v11. Both sections focus on thinking the same – phroneite, v2 and v5 for the sake of others.

Yet our section looks back too. In the last section, v12-26, commitment to the advance of the gospel leads to Paul holding fast to it himself and sharing with the Philippians in their personal progress to salvation. We see exactly the same pattern here as the new section begins. Paul's great hope for his dear friends is that they too will follow the same pattern (cf 3:17). Peter O'Brien sums it up like this: 'As they are wholly committed to the advance of the gospel, that is, its dynamic onward march, they will walk worthily of the gospel by holding fast to it, preaching and confessing it in spite of opposition.' (O'Brien P148). It's a concern for the glory of the Lord Jesus and of his gospel that produces real spiritual growth in partnership with other believers.

Walking worthily of the gospel inevitably involves living for Jesus and his word and in the light of our privileges in him considering others better than ourselves. Conversely it involves not being frightened or distracted by opponents and not looking to one's own glory. It involves going the way of the cross as we engage in the same struggle that Paul had and that has been granted to every believer as we share in Christ and suffer with and for him.

Text Notes

1:27-30 Live worthy of the gospel of Christ – rejoice in contending for it and sharing in suffering for Jesus

The way the sentence is constructed makes it clear that v27 is emphatic. This is what Paul wants for his readers above everything else. It will be explained in more detail throughout the rest of the section, but it's summarised here in v27. He wants them to live as citizens of heaven. That will involve two main things –1. standing firm in the face of opposition for the faith of the gospel, and 2. doing so side by side. Thus their progress of v25 is to be linked to their desire for the progress of the gospel and their unity (note the one mind, one spirit that shows what standing firm and striving for the gospel will actually look like). Paul's reference again to his own circumstances links his wishes for them to what he has told

them of his own practice and perspective.

The reason for the call to stand firm and to strive side by side comes in v28. They are facing frightening opponents. Commentators come to different conclusions as to who these enemies are, but in the light of Paul's return to similar themes in v12-18 where he refers to a crooked and twisted generation in the world, as well as his statement that they have seen him engaged in the same struggle, it's most likely that he is thinking at this point of pagan opposition to the gospel in Philippi rather than the Judaizers of chapter 3. (Though by the end of chapter 3 it's clear that all who are opposed to Jesus - whether through opposition to his people or the preaching of a different gospel - are his enemies and face the same destruction (1:28 cf 3:19).)

The surprising statement at the end of v28 is explained by v29-30. Their endurance in the face of opposition is a sign of salvation (cf 1:19 for a similar statement). Why? Moises Silva puts it like this: 'You must interpret what is happening to you as evidence of God's design to save you! Why? *Because suffering is the way to glory, God's gift of salvation for his children.*' (Silva P96). Conversely, the opposition to God's gospel and people is evidence that the opponents are facing destruction and therefore there is no need to be frightened of them. These signs are not necessarily personally felt - rather, they are objective facts. And they're realities under the sovereign control of God himself. Belonging to Jesus inevitably means suffering for him and suffering with him (3:10). (Just as in 2 Corinthians, it's suffering specific to being Christian that Paul has in mind here.) As we seek his glory and the advance of his gospel there will be opposition. So it's not even that sufferings are inevitable if we are Christians. It's that they are God's gracious gift to us - an assurance that we belong to Jesus and therefore walk his way. That was true for Paul when he was in Philippi and is still the case for him even now.

2:1-4 Live worthy of the gospel of Christ - as those who belong to him seek unity through humility

You'd expect this paragraph to push the same point on - you're sure you belong to Jesus, you've experienced the realities of the gospel and union with the Triune God - so stand firm for the gospel... Instead he changes focus by moving back to ideas in 1:27 so far not dealt with - in one spirit, with one mind (the one soul of 1:27 reappears in v2 here). Paul knows that living worthy of the gospel isn't just a matter of persevering through external opposition, it's also about internal unity - partnership - and that comes from adopting an attitude of mind that belongs to the gospel - humility - the very opposite of the vain-glory (here translated conceit and see 3:19) that is a mark of being an enemy of Christ. Is it possible to contend for the gospel without this change of mind internally? Paul seems reluctant to separate their partnership from their standing firm and their growth, so the answer is probably not. It's impossible to contend for the gospel against those who oppose it while it is effectively being denied by our lives together. It's impossible to long for the glory of the Lord Jesus while at the same time wanting our own (vain) glory. (Commentators often don't put the entreaty to Euodia and Syntyche to agree in 4:2-3 in the main body of the letter, but this section suggests that if internal unity is as important an issue as standing fast against external opposition then the internal argument, no doubt with the factions it was creating, was as big a threat to the church living worthy of the gospel as the pagan opposition in Philippi or the preaching of the Judaizers in chapter three).

V1-4 are one long sentence. Paul's appeal in v1 is to their experience of being Christian and it's emotive, relational words he chooses. Just as you know that the gospel of Jesus has called you into relationship
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with the living God, he's saying, so work out that same experience of gospel unity in your own relationships. Though it's feelings he initially appeals to, the key verb in v2 (and in the whole paragraph) is to think. This unity of mind which is essential if they are to strive together for the faith of the gospel is only possible if they put aside rivalry (cf 1:17) and conceit (literally vain-glory cf 3:19 with its opposition to 1:26 and 3:3) - the marks of those whose focus is on themselves, who long for their own glory and who fail to understand that suffering for Jesus is his gift to those who believe in him.

Paradoxically, though putting aside rivalry and vain-glory will lead to one mind (lit thinking the same) it works itself out in thinking differently - not thinking the same, but rather considering others better and therefore looking to their interests as well as our own. What would that have looked like? Amongst those Christians who sought to afflict Paul in Rome it would have meant a desire to partner with him and to share in his suffering as they preached his message rather than a desire to make themselves look good at his expense. Among the Judaizers of chapter three it would have meant turning away from looking for glory in what is earthly and for the Philippians themselves we will see the outcome Paul longs for in 4:2-3 - the agreement of Euodia and Syntyche and the whole church working together to put aside unimportant differences and to bring that about as they seek to work for the good of others above their own.

v5-11 Live worthy of the gospel of Christ - share his attitude, knowing that God has honoured him for it

Though much ink has been spilt on the question of whether or not this hymn was Pauline or something that already existed it's clear from v5 that it fits exactly with what Paul wants his readers to understand. The mind they are to have, v2, is one they already have. It's the mind of Christ Jesus, theirs by union with him, and which exemplifies fully and completely what it means to consider others better than oneself.

It splits naturally into two sections - v6-8 and v9-11. v6-8 focus on the voluntary humiliation of Jesus for the sake of others. Perhaps the most helpful background is that of Jesus washing his disciples' feet in John 13:1-20 where we see the glorious Son of God become a slave in an acted parable pointing towards his death on the cross. Here too Jesus chooses not to use his divinity for his own advantage or as an excuse to avoid suffering, but rather sees it as qualifying him for the task of redemption only he could achieve. Thus he obeyed God rather than grasping at equality as Adam did. It's worth noting that he didn't exchange the form of God for the form of a slave - rather he manifested the form of God in the form of a slave - he made himself nothing by putting on, not taking off. This humiliation progresses in stages to the lowest point - death on a cross. (Though of course to us as well as to Paul's readers the cross immediately signifies salvation the focus here is on the complete obedience and humility of Jesus - the contrast is in 3:18-20 where to be an enemy of the cross is to be self glorifying and earthly focused.)

v9-11 consist of one long sentence and is not an exact parallel. Instead of steps down there is one main action, and the subject has changed. God has highly exalted Jesus and this is clearly a response to his obedient action - note the therefore at the start of v9. The name that is above every name is God's own name, Lord, v11 (cf Is 42:8) and the purpose is so that every knee will bow and every tongue confess it (cf Is 45:23), whether voluntarily or involuntarily. The humility and obedience of Jesus to death on a cross leads to his honour and glory and finally to the glory of God the Father.

How does all this fit in the context of the letter? As those who belong to Jesus, these Christians are to
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adopt his mindset. And this is not impossible - though Jesus is unique they are new creations in him, created to be like him and therefore share now in his priorities. Like him they are not to cling to a desire for their own glory, but to put it aside by seeking the interests of others. It's this attitude that God honours and it's Jesus' name that is to be glorified, not anybody else's (see 2:21). Though it is true that the Christian life is about sharing the suffering of Jesus now in order to share his glory later (cf 3:10-11, 20-21) this hymn's focus is more on sharing his attitude than on hoping to share his glory. Paul is saying in v9-11 not so much that Christians can expect glory if they do the humility, but that God honours this mind of putting others before oneself and his purpose is that Jesus will be honoured by everybody.

Don't seek your own glory, he is saying, rather follow the Lord Jesus and seek the interests of others, knowing that he, not we, deserves all the glory.

Application

1. Rejoice in contending for the gospel and sharing in suffering for Jesus.

Believe that any suffering we face as a direct result of standing for Jesus is a gift from him, and an assurance that we belong to him. Facing opposition isn't a sign that God has failed to answer our prayers or abandoned us - He is graciously allowing us to walk in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus. While not seeking suffering then we have not need to be frightened of any opposition that might come our way.

It's worth remembering too that for those who oppose us they face a fearful future - opposition to Jesus and his people is a sign of impending destruction - no need for us to fear them then, but instead in compassion, and knowing ourselves to have been in the same situation, we must seek to hold out the word of life even to them (more of this in the next study). It's worth examining ourselves therefore. Do we seek to avoid suffering by toning down the gospel? Do we avoid taking it or standing for it to those we believe will be the most hostile?

2. Share Jesus' mind by serving others

The gospel must drive us to humility - if we think we somehow deserve to be united with Christ we'll almost inevitably seek our own glory and look down on others. As I am filled with thankfulness for the Lord Jesus, as I recognise the privilege and assurance of receiving any experience of suffering for him, as I'm more aware of what it means to know him, then my heart must turn away from myself and my own glory to a sense of unworthiness and a desire that others too may grow to know him more. My experience of the Lord isn't a solitary one.

Some questions to ask ourselves therefore. How closely do our internal attitudes match our external profession as believers? Do we think it matters or are we content to just say the right things? As we meditate on our experience of fellowship with the Lord what will it look like to consider others more significant than ourselves? In what areas of our church life are we prone to rivalry and vain-glory? In our groups how can we learn to move away from being attention seekers and power grabbers? What are the best interests of others? How can we further them? How can we be partners

Philippians 2:12-30

Context, structure and themes

Verses 12-18 conclude the first major section of the letter which began at 1:27 and is therefore continuing to expand on what it means to live worthy of the gospel. Its most clear links are with 1:27-30 which focus on striving for the faith of the gospel in the face of opposition. There are several verbal links with this section – presence and absence, salvation, gospel/word of life, opponents, crooked and twisted generation. Yet there are also links too with 2:1-11 – the central section of this unit which concludes at v18. The obedience of v12 links to v8, the grumbling and questioning of v14 links to the ideas of unity and humility in v1-4 and Paul's own willingness to die for the sake of others mirrors the attitude of his Lord in v5-11.

Verses 19-30 structurally speaking are outside the main section, bracketing it instead. They pick up on the situation and plans Paul described in 1:12-26 and which he now returns to. Here he describes how Timothy and Epaphroditus have both helped him and outlines his hope to send them both to the Philippians before he comes himself. That said, in many ways both sections of our study are a fitting conclusion to the wider block of material from 1:12 onwards. For as Paul resumes discussion of his plans he also gives worked examples of what it means to live worthy of gospel.

The whole of the passage therefore helps us see much more clearly what it means to live as God's own people in a hostile environment – seeking the interests of Jesus through holding out the gospel and serving his people sacrificially and selflessly even to the point of death.

Text notes

12-18 Work out your salvation to the end by uncomplainingly holding out the word of life even to those who oppose you

The therefore of v12 links this section directly to what has just gone. In the light of Jesus' obedience they too are to continue to obey. The main verb, though, the sense of which runs right through the paragraph, is to work out their salvation. The nature of the obedience isn't at this stage spelled out, though it must relate to the example of Jesus in the previous paragraph, who also obeyed, v8. There must also be at least a strong suggestion that it involves partnership in the gospel too since this is the only other thing Paul has said has always been true of them (1:5). (This might explain why Paul ends this section focusing on why he will rejoice even in his death if it contributes to their offering of faith to God.) This section takes some of the themes from 1:27-30 and expands on them too, though whereas there opposition was an assurance of salvation in the future, here we see that that future salvation is to be worked out in the present in the context of opposition.

Paul's tone is reassuring – his readers are his beloved and he is confident that they will continue as they have begun (1:6). His concern for them is that they work out their own salvation – the possibility of his visit being irrelevant to this. We've been told already in 1:27-30 that the opposition they face is a sign of future salvation. Now we are told that this assurance should lead to action in line with it in the present. Those who are saved are to live as those who are, by working out what is true in practice every day.

We're not told until v14-16 what this will involve(although those verses do expand and amplify what Paul has already said), but what we are told first is how this happens, what its purpose is and therefore what their attitude should be as they do it.

Just as they are to think as Jesus did because they share his mind (2:5) so they are to work out their salvation because God is at work enabling them both to will (ie want to) and to act. Even as they seek to live worthy of the gospel it is God himself who makes it all possible – both the volition and the action. The internal heart that will enable them to consider others more significant than themselves and to act for their best interests and the external action which will enable them to stand even in the face of opposition both come from Him. It's not surprising that Paul calls on them therefore to work their salvation out in fear and trembling. In Exodus 20 that was the attitude of the people who stood far off at the foot of Sinai and couldn't approach God or bear to hear His voice because He was so terrifying. Yet here Paul says that the experience of every Christian is that God is at work in each of us – in our hearts and minds and wills – enabling us to live for Him. How can we not then be fearful and trembling as the God of the universe enables us to do His will? This truth too must guard us against pride or complacency or dejection in our Christian lives. Note too that God does this for his good pleasure. In context that must be his purpose of v10-11 – that every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to God's own glory. Ultimately our working out our own salvation isn't for our benefit, but in order that Jesus should be glorified and God the Father too.

Though in a sense we've seen in the rest of the section what it looks like to work out our own salvation, in v14-16 we see some more of what it means. Interestingly, it's full of Old Testament language. Verses 14 and 15 contain a specific allusion to Deuteronomy 32:5. There, as Moses faces the prospect of his own death and as the people stand on the brink of the promised land, they are reminded of the experience in the wilderness – instead of being God's children they are a crooked and twisted generation, blemished by sin. Grumbling and questioning were their hallmarks – against the difficulties of wilderness living, against the leader God had given, and against God himself. Here Paul uses the language to different effect. He wants his readers to be children of God without blemish. The crooked and twisted generation are those they live among, (though this must included their pagan neighbours – see the world at the end of the sentence, the amount of OT language at least suggests that Paul also includes the Judaizers who will be described in chapter 3). However, Paul is concerned that the Philippians do things without grumbling or complaining as the Israelites did in order for this to happen. Though there is no suggestion in the letter that the Philippians were grumbling against God, Paul's concern in 2:1-4 as well as 4:2-3 does seem to indicate that grumbling and complaining within the congregation was at least a possibility. And Paul says that it matters. He wants them to be pure and blameless on the Day of Christ (1:10) but he also wants them to be free from accusation in the present and he wants them to be significantly different from the crooked and twisted generation they live amongst. The suggestion is that this can only happen if they abandon the grumbling and questioning they are engaged in, or at least are tempted to. They are to shine as lights in the world – probably a reference to Daniel 12:3 where the wise and those who turn others to righteousness are like stars – something that fits well in this context. And they are to do this both by abandoning grumbling and by holding fast to the word of life. This can be translated either as holding onto the word of life or holding it out. Both senses are helpful here. They mustn't be deflected from the word of truth either by physical opposition or by false teachers, but just as Daniel prophesied, those who are wise and valued by God are also those who hold out the word which can bring people from death to life even to those who oppose them. They're not to flee opposition but to be assured of their salvation because of it (1:28). They're not to become like unbelievers by failing to work out their salvation. More than that

they're to have confidence in that word which brings life by seeking to share it as they live in line with it (not grumbling or complaining) even with those who are most vehemently opposed to it.

Though Paul's focus is the present, his goal is the future. He longs that in the Day of Christ he will be able to see the results of his labour in them and be proud. (He may well have in his mind Isaiah 65:17-25 – the picture of the new creation with people enjoying the fruit of their toil with their children, their labour not in vain, and rejoicing.) Again, his expectation is that their progress in the faith will be as a result of partnership. And we see something in Paul in v16-17 of what it means for him to live worthy of the gospel and to have the mind of Christ. It means expending yourself even to death for the sake of others, counting them more significant. Paul has in his mind the drink offering which is poured out over or beside the burnt offering (see esp Numbers 15:3-10). It was something that was added last and completed the sacrifice, not the sacrifice itself. His use of the same verb in 2 Timothy 4:6 makes it certain that he is referring to his own death. He is saying that even if the only purpose of his death is to make their faith complete he will be glad to do it. Perhaps he envisages that just as his sufferings have encouraged many of the brothers in Rome it may well encourage them to stand firm to the end as he has done. So just as he will be glad even in that eventuality he urges them to rejoice with him too.

19-30 Learn from the example of Timothy and Epaphroditus to seek Jesus' interests by serving in the gospel and for the sake of others

Though at first glance this section may look like little more than travel plans, Paul, by inserting it here instead of at the beginning or end of the letter, gives it a far greater significance. It effectively brackets the section on living worthy of the gospel 1:27-2:18 with worked examples – of Paul himself in 1:12-26 and 2:16b-18 and of Timothy and Epaphroditus in 2:19-30.

The section comprises two parallel paragraphs, both commendatory and at least appearing to cover the same topic – the sending of Timothy and Epaphroditus for the mutual benefit of the Philippians and of Paul. One Paul hopes to send, the other he thinks it necessary to.

V19-24 In a few short verses Paul encapsulates in his description of Timothy what it means to live worthy of the gospel. The paragraph is bracketed by Paul's hope to send him to Philippi (v19, v23). The reason, or at least the ostensible one, is in 19b. Paul wants to be encouraged by hearing of how the Philippians are doing, for though he is sending Epaphroditus it must be unlikely that he will come back again. Paul's commendation of Timothy is based on his conviction that he has no one like him. Literally this is like souled, linking it to the one souled (translated in full accord) in 2:2 and also suggesting that Paul thinks that Timothy has the same mind and priorities that he has. The reasons for this conviction are twofold and follow. First, v20b-21, he will be genuinely concerned for their welfare. Perhaps surprisingly, this seems to be linked to seeking the interests of Jesus Christ in the following verse. This fills out the thought of 2:4-5. Having the mind of Christ, v5 means looking to the interests of others, v4. Seeking his interests means going his way of obeying, even to the point of death, for their sake, in order that he and the Father will be glorified (2:9-11). Timothy is like souled with Paul, therefore he seeks the interests of Jesus and he does that by being genuinely concerned for the welfare of the Philippians. Love for Jesus inevitably leads to love for others as our mind is transformed so that we share his priorities and seek to live his way for his glory. The second reason is in v22. He has proven worth. What's more, the Philippians know it because he was with Paul when he first took the gospel to Philippi. He's shown himself to be like souled with Paul by serving with him as a son with a father in the gospel. He's related to Paul humbly and closely, serving as a slave (the same root as the servant or slave of v7)

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in the gospel. Paul longs to hear more good news of the Philippians, he knows that Timothy will be an encouragement to them in the gospel, concerned for their interests as he seeks the interests of Jesus. His only reason for delay is his own uncertain situation, perhaps the pastoral problems he alluded to in chapter one or the fact that he wants to wait until the outcome of his own trial before sending him, hoping that he himself will be able to come as well.

V25-30 If Paul hopes to send Timothy, he thinks it necessary to send Epaphroditus straight away, presumably bearing the letter. He seems to think that an explanation is necessary though. This paragraph is bracketed by service – minister in v25 and service in v30 are from the same root. Paul describes him in terms that explain his relationship both to Paul himself and to the Philippians in v25. The first three related to Paul escalate in intensity – he's a brother (ie a Christian), a fellow worker (cf 2:3, a gospel worker) and a fellow soldier (see 1:27-28, one who strives against opposition for the faith of the gospel). He is also the messenger of the Philippians, having brought their financial help (4:18) for Paul and more personally a minister to his needs – he didn't just bring the gift and then go away – he evidently served him practically and personally. The reason for his being sent is in v26 – Epaphroditus has been far more distressed by the effect of his illness on his home church than by the illness itself. Presumably the Philippians heard about this because Epaphroditus became ill on the way to Rome. Paul fills them in on what they may not have known though - that Epaphroditus was so ill he nearly died. Perhaps he was so determined to fulfil the ministry he'd been given by his church that he pressed on to Rome even while very ill and became much worse. Paul is grateful to God that he spared Epaphroditus and therefore also spared him from the sorrow of his death on top of the sorrows of his own situation. His sending of Epaphroditus will therefore, he hopes, both bring joy to the Philippians and lessen his own anxiety about him. Yet he feels obliged to stress in v29 the importance of receiving him in the Lord and honouring him and others like him. Perhaps he is worried there is a danger that the church will feel that he has failed and has not completed his mission properly. So Paul stresses the way in which Epaphroditus has followed the way of the Lord Jesus. Like Paul he has been prepared to die to complete the service of the Philippians (cf 2:17). (Presumably this has been the practical and personal care that they have been unable to supply because of their distance from Rome.) Like Jesus he has obeyed to the point of death for the sake of others. He, and others like him, are to be honoured therefore.

Application

Work out your salvation to the end ...

The assurance that God is the one who is at work in us both to supply the inward motivation and equip us for every act of service must cause us to be diligent in working out our salvation. It should produce assurance but not complacency and a sense of right fear and trembling as we contemplate the reality of the creator of the universe being at work in our hearts and minds.

There can be no sense of conversion being an end in itself – the certainty that God has begun a good work that he will complete on the Day of Christ must lead us to be focused on being ready for that day therefore. Though as we mature as people and as Christians our situations (and possibly our energy levels!) might change, but our determination to work out our salvation knowing that God is at work in us must and should only grow.

If God's good pleasure is that Jesus be honoured on the last day it must too be worth considering how my life can be used to further that end – an honest assessment of my hopes and fears, my priorities

...by uncomplainingly holding out the word of life even to those who oppose you...

Paul wants us to hold onto the word of life ourselves so that we are free from accusation, and particularly that we avoid grumbling and complaining. As we've seen and will continue to see, that means not acting from rivalry or conceit, not wanting to be one up on others. Our lives together must describe the gospel which honours Jesus rather than ourselves and produces people who follow his way of self sacrifice rather than self glorification.

It also means holding out the word of life even to those who are hostile. Opposition often causes us to back away from it, or to tone down the message that causes it. It is worth asking therefore who I pray for and seek to share the gospel with. Is it only those I think will respond favourably or will at least acquiesce? How far am I tempted to miss out the bits I think will offend?

...seek Jesus' interests by serving in the gospel and for the sake of others...

What can we learn from the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus? Could Paul describe us or our groups in similar ways? The examples we've seen in this section are of people who know what it means to work out their own salvation - who look away from themselves and in three other directions – pleasing God by being poured out until the day of Christ, holding out the word of life to a pagan world (Jew and Gentile) and striving so that other Christians complete the race too.

Leaders notes Philippians 3:1-11

Context, structure and themes

Paul is writing his letter to the Philippians in the context of opposition. His Philippian friends have seen him seek to live worthy of the gospel in the face of it and know that though he is now in prison in Rome nothing has changed (cf 1:30). That opposition had consequences for Paul himself but it also had consequences for the Christians in Rome. It split them into two camps. Some chose to associate with him in his imprisonment and become confident to speak the word without fear (cf 1:28), even as they faced the prospect of drawing more suffering on themselves. Others stuck with preaching the gospel, but chose to do it whilst stepping away from partnership with Paul, avoiding suffering by association and instead acting out of envy and rivalry.

The Philippians essentially faced the same choice. In the face of frightening opposition from the world around them (1:28), Paul's call to them was to let their lives be worthy of the gospel of Christ. That involved acting in line with the mind of Christ (2:5) and not acting out of rivalry or vain-glory (2:3), instead considering others more significant than themselves. It would involve not just believing in Jesus, but also suffering for his sake (1:29) as they sought to follow his example of casting aside his rights and making himself nothing, to the point of death, for the sake of others.

Living worthy of the gospel, the theme, arguably of the whole letter, and certainly the main section (1:27-4:3), in chapter two is focused around the model of the Christ hymn of verses 5-11. The way in which the gospel is to be held out/onto in the face of opposition (15-16), is without grumbling and questioning (14) as instead they make themselves nothing for the sake of others (3-4). (Something only some of the Christians in Rome had grasped 1:15-17.) It's a pattern Paul himself has embraced (cf 1:12-26; 2:17) and which he urges them to value in Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30) too (cf 3:17). So we've seen to this point in the letter that walking the way of the cross is focused on humbly seeking the interests of others rather than one's own.

In chapter three we see a shift. There's still opposition, but this is not pagan or local, but from Judaizers (probably coming from Jerusalem) – those claiming to be Christians who teach obedience to the Jewish law. They are not described as opponents of the Philippians (cf 1:28) but as enemies of the cross (3:18). And this enmity doesn't seem to be so much because of their **message** (which is inferred rather than stated), but their **priorities**. Their **mind** (3:19) is the precise opposite of the **mind of Christ** (2:5).

Chapter three clearly functions as a complete section – it begins and ends with a call to his brothers (3:1, 4:1) to rejoice in the Lord (3:1, 4:4). In the previous section the rejoicing had been in and with other believers (cf 1:25; 2:2; 2:17-18; 2:29). Here the call is specifically to rejoice in the **Lord himself** – the focus of the entire chapter. Living the way of the cross here is about putting aside personal achievements and glory for the sake of gaining Christ and his glory.

The chapter, though one section, splits into two halves with complementary themes. With v1 as a heading for the whole section, verses 2-11 focus on the past and the present – counting achievements and status loss in order to be found in Christ. Verses 12-21 focus on the present and the future – the goal of sharing Jesus' glory rather than gaining present self-glory.

Structure

- 1 Stay safe! Keep rejoicing in the Lord
- 2-6 so don't rejoice in status or achievement
- 7-11 instead put these aside in order to know him and share his life and death

V1, Stay safe! Keep rejoicing in the Lord

Two chapters in, with two to go, it seems slightly odd that Paul begins his section here with 'Finally'. It may equally well be translated 'well then' or 'furthermore' though, which makes a lot more sense in the context. In the face of opposition Paul has encouraged his dear brothers and sisters to put self aside and to engage in gospel partnership as they follow the way of the cross. He's just concluded chapter two by urging them to receive Epaphroditus (and others like him) with joy because he followed this example of Jesus in almost dying for the service of the gospel. But now he reminds them to rejoice not just in other Christians, but in the Lord himself. It will keep them safe, he says. For, as we will see, rejoicing in the Lord means not choosing to rejoice, or put confidence in, other things. The 'same things' mentioned here are likely to be the warnings he goes on to give in the rest of the chapter, which he has given them before (2:18) rather than the call to rejoice. The rest of the chapter explains how rejoicing in the Lord will keep these Philippian Christians safe.

V2-6, so don't rejoice in status or achievement

It's clear from v2 where the danger to the Philippian church is coming from. Paul tells them three times to 'look out' for a particular set of people. The verb's meaning is closer to 'take note of' than 'beware', but there's still no doubt that this is something serious. These people are described in escalating language, and each term is an inversion of a Jewish boast. In their **person** they are dogs – that is, they are unclean and eat what is unclean (in some contexts dogs and Gentiles could be used almost interchangeably). In their **actions** they are workers of evil – rather than doers of the law they behave like the law-breakers abhorred by the psalmists (eg Ps5:5; 6:8; 14:4). (They also contrast strikingly with the fellow workers in the gospel (4:3) and Epaphroditus, who almost died for the work of Christ.) And in their **religious practice** they are mutilators of the flesh. Their focus on circumcision is more like, according to Paul, the pagan cuttings of the flesh that are forbidden by the law (cf Lev 19:28; 21:5).

Why does Paul use such strong language of them? It must be explained by what he says at the end of v3. Their teaching and practice all come from a confidence in the flesh. By the end of the chapter Paul will show us why to have such an attitude is to be an enemy of the cross of Christ and by the end of this passage why and how it must be done away with. Here in verse 3 he simply shows what a real believer is and in the process demonstrates a great spiritual reversal – the Judaizers are the new Gentiles, while these Gentile believers in Jesus he's writing to are included amongst those who become the new Jews. Paul focuses on the last of his descriptions of them first. The circumcision (that is, the true people of God) are those who **worship by the Spirit** (ie who have entered the new age of salvation promised by the prophets and have hearts circumcised by him) and therefore who **glory in Christ Jesus** – the Spirit leads them to trust Jesus for righteousness rather than themselves. So they place **no confidence in the flesh**. That is, they no longer trust anything that human beings put their trust in to make them right with God. So to follow the Judaizers would not, as no doubt these teachers were claiming, help the Philippians to go **on** in their relationship with God – it would actually take them **back** – back to the time

when they were Gentiles and outside of the promises and salvation of God. Because their teaching and practices stemmed from a confidence in the flesh which is opposed to the cross of Christ.

Paul shows this by examining in detail the very best things that a person could put their trust in for salvation – his own pedigree and practice. And it turns out that he can not only match, but outstrip the Judaizers in his qualifications. Again, circumcision is the key issue, followed by three inherited privileges and three personal achievements. He was circumcised on the eighth day – that is, he is a child of Jews who obeyed the law and circumcised him when he should have been – he wasn't circumcised later in life (as proselytes or children of mixed marriages like Timothy were). Then his privileges escalate – He's an Israelite, not a proselyte or child of proselytes, and from a special tribe. Though a child of the dispersion he wasn't a Hellenist and his family were strictly observant of the law – he was a Hebrew of Hebrews. As far as his achievements go, these too escalate. As far as his attitude to the law went, he was a Pharisee – set apart for it and zealous for it. This zeal was demonstrated in his seeking to stamp out the Christians whom he regarded as deviating from it. As far as adherence to the law was concerned, no one could accuse him of breaking it (blameless is not the same as sinless, but is to do with being free from the possibility of accusation by others). As Moises Silva helpfully points out too, 'no one could argue that [Paul's] conversion to Christianity was attributable to prior failure in his Jewish life-style.' (Silva p175)

So Paul is reminding his readers that they are to rejoice in the Lord by looking out for and therefore avoiding the mind of the Judaizers, with their confidence in the flesh. It doesn't seem from Paul's language as if he really thought the Philippians were in danger of succumbing to the Judaizers' teachings (see for example the very different language he uses to the Galatians cf Gal 1:6). The Judaizers seem to be outside the church rather than within it, though their message is obviously known and their mind is also readily discernible. Then too Paul has been so confident in his language earlier in the letter about his dear friends' partnership in the gospel and his assurance that they are partakers of grace that it is hard to imagine that they are on the brink of falling into heresy. Yet his warning is nonetheless a real one.

These Christians in Philippi, like other Christians around the world and Paul himself, are facing opposition which is frightening. These powerful so-called Christian teachers, with their way of doing things, their focus on status, glory and personal achievement, must have been very attractive, particularly to Christians feeling weak and vulnerable. And though the church might not be in danger of succumbing to their teaching, they might be much more likely to succumb to their methodology. Some of the Christians in Rome were acting out of rivalry and vain glory and this seemed to be paralleled in the Philippian church with the rivalry of Euodia and Syntyche. There seemed to be a danger that the Christians were moving away from glorying in Jesus and walking the way of the cross to focusing on personalities and power just as the false teachers were. But Paul reminds them that to go that way is to turn away from rejoicing in Jesus and to turn instead to **self** confidence – something that might look religious, but actually turns out to be pagan and leaves them facing destruction (3:19)

V7-11, instead put these aside in order to know Jesus and share his life and death

In language very reminiscent of the Christ hymn of 2:5-11, with its sequence of privilege given up, death and exaltation, Paul shows first how and then why the attitude of confidence in the flesh so characteristic of the Judaizers must be done away with.

The 'how' is in v7-8. With increasing intensity Paul sets a negative evaluation of his former way of life against a positive description of his new experience. The mind of Jesus, which did not 'count' equality with God a thing to be grasped, and is worked out in 2:3 in 'counting' others more significant than self, is now seen here in 'counting' everything that could potentially be trusted as loss, in fact as dung, or refuse, v8. He counts as loss and so gives up everything. The reason for this accounting decision is seen in parallel with it – it's for the sake of Christ and in order to know him and to gain him. Paul knows you can't trust in privileges or achievements or anything else and Jesus. They are mutually exclusive. So just as in the parable of the pearl of great price, Paul gladly gave up all his religious privileges and personal achievements in order to gain Christ.

Verses 9-11 go on to explain why confidence in the flesh must be done away with by showing what it means to gain and know Christ. It involves **righteousness, relationship and resurrection.**

Righteousness: Verse 9 explains on what it means to gain Christ. It involves being found in him – being united with him now, but fully united on the last day. This is made possible because of the manner in which he will be found in Christ – he will be one who does not have a righteousness of his own. In v9 the righteousness of one's own that comes from law (and which Paul has given up) is contrasted with the righteousness that depends on faith and comes from God. The centre of this little chiasm shows that this status of being rightly related to God comes not from one's own faithfulness, but from the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus – the one who perfectly obeyed the Father (cf 2:8) and therefore is able to share what is his with those who have faith in him.

Relationship: if verse nine enlarges on the experience of **gaining** Christ, v10 enlarges on the experience of **knowing** him (v8). Paul's prayer of 1:9-11 is that the Philippians' love may abound in knowledge and all discernment so that they approve what is best and so are pure and blameless for the day of Christ. Here this knowledge is described in far more personal terms. It's not just about the decisions you make, but the relationship you have. It's the believer's experience of Jesus' own death and resurrection. Knowing Christ means knowing the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings in the everyday events of life. These things can't be separated. The power of his resurrection is known and experienced through the experience of sharing in his sufferings. And this is an inescapable part of being a Christian. In 1:29 Paul describes believing in Jesus and suffering for his sake as a gift given to believers. Here in 3:10 it's described as becoming like him in his death. Paul counts it an honour to share Christ's sufferings, because to do so is to enter into deeper relationship with him.

Similar ideas are explored by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4 where he talks about bearing in his body the death of Jesus. There suffering was connected to proclaiming the gospel, so in those specifics won't necessarily be something that every Christian experiences. Here the suffering is for every Christian. It's going the way of the cross – counting all things loss in order to gain Jesus and in chapter 2 counting self nothing for the sake of the progress of others. It's focusing on the glory of Jesus, the progress of his gospel, the progress of other Christians at cost to ourselves and our own status and glory. And this suffering is the means God uses to transform us into the likeness of his Son.

Resurrection: Knowing Jesus has its roots in the past – trusting his death for righteousness rather than our own works. It has implications in the present – it involves sharing in his sufferings and experiencing his resurrection power through them as we become like him. But it also has ongoing consequences for the future. Paul knows that his past decisions and present lifestyle as he trusts in Jesus and shares with him will lead to his future glory. However it may happen, he will gain the resurrection from the dead – he will share his glory (cf 3:21).

Application

Rejoice in the Lord - don't rejoice in status or achievement

In a church like St Helen's we may not feel that we are in much danger of succumbing to error, and especially not the error of drifting into works based religion. Yet in other ways it would be remarkably easy for us to take our eyes off Jesus and focus on ourselves instead. Is it possible for us to trust in our status as small group leaders, for example, as an assurance of our status in the congregation and almost as an assurance of our salvation? Do we ever use 'we belong to St Helen's' as an equivalent of 'we are the circumcision'? Do our privileges as a church ever blind us to our dependence on the grace of God? What are we confident in and why? As we examine our consciences are there things we know we put our confidence in that we need to count as loss? If so, how might we go about doing it, and keep doing it?

Rejoice in the Lord - grow in knowledge of Jesus as we share his life and death

If we had to describe knowing Jesus, what would we say? How far does our answer match with what Paul says here? Why not spend some time meditating on the immeasurable value of knowing Jesus and sharing with him? Do we count it as a gift when we experience walking the way of the cross (either in facing opposition as we stand for him, or putting the growth of others before ourselves or recognising our own lack of status and importance in the face of the righteousness that comes from him alone)? How can we learn to rejoice in him when things seem tough? What should it feel like to be his follower?

Leaders Notes Philippians 3:12-4:1

Context, structure and themes

We've seen so far in Philippians that living worthy of the gospel (1:27-28) the main theme of the letter so far, is all about Jesus. Longing for him to be honoured as they **proclaim him** boldly in the face of frightening opposition. **Thinking like him** as they walk the way of the cross – counting themselves nothing as they seek His interests – the progress of other believers.

Verse one stands as a header for the whole of chapter three. Here we see that these believers are to live worthy of the gospel of Christ as they rejoice in Him alone - something which will keep them safe. For this rejoicing will involve not just their emotions, but the whole of their lives. They are to identify with Him - becoming like Jesus in his **death** (3:10) – sharing his sufferings as they count everything except knowing Him loss. (3:2-11) And in the second half of the chapter they are to live worthy of the gospel of Christ by rejoicing in Him as they eagerly wait to share his **resurrection life** (cf 3:11). This will involve putting other ways of thinking aside and pressing on to the goal of sharing Jesus' future glory rather than looking for present self-glory. So the call of chapter three echoes the summary of the Christian life Paul gives in 1:21 and follows the pattern of Jesus in 2:6-11. Living worthy of Him, rejoicing in him, means death now and glorification by and with him in the future.

Rejoicing in the Lord will therefore involve shunning the example of the Judaizers of v2. For they don't glory in Jesus and in v18 turn out to be enemies of His cross –not only do they fail to **proclaim him**, but they don't **think like him** either.

It is rejoicing in the Lord alone which will enable these Philippian Christians to stand firm in Him (4:1, cf 1:27) and to proclaim him faithfully as they do so humbly and unitedly.

Structure

12-16 Press on to salvation – be united in thinking this way

17-21 Wait for salvation don't live as enemies of the cross

4:1 This is how you stand firm in the Lord

Text notes

V12-16, Press on to salvation – be united in thinking this way

Verses 12-14

Paul wants to counter any suggestion that he has reached perfection, even if others are saying so about themselves. And this isn't just a personal opinion. It's grounded in the facts he expressed in v10-11 and in many ways echoes the thoughts of 2:12-13. He seeks to work out his salvation because he knows it is already secure. God has begun a good work in him that he will continue (1:6), sharing in Christ's suffering as he faces opposition assures him of it (v10 cf 1:28) and he knows that the Philippians are partnering with him to that end (cf 1:19). Yet he also knows that he has not yet attained to the resurrection from the dead, v11. So the assurance of his unity with Jesus leads not to complacency or passivity, but to activity. He looks to lay hold of what is his own because Christ Jesus has **already** made him his own. V13 focuses on the **manner** of this pressing on. In v2-11 he counted his pre-Christian

reasons for confidence as loss. Here he is probably thinking of even his achievements and gains as a believer in Jesus. Just like an Olympic athlete he doesn't look back at the ground he's already covered or even his opponents. His whole focus is on the finishing line for which he strains forward.

If v13 is about the manner of running, v14 focuses on the race itself, and particularly the prize awarded to all those who finish. (This isn't a race where you have to come first in order to get it! – notice that in v17 Paul wants everyone to join in imitating him) And notice too that this prize is not an abstract one. It's the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus – ie salvation. It's a call issued by God, so rather than some kind of reward for service Paul is much more likely to be returning to what he has just talked about. 'The prize is the full and complete gaining of Christ for whose sake everything else has been counted loss' (O'Brien P433) assured by the divine and heavenly salvation call Paul has already received. Paul's focus is all on Jesus – because he is sure he belongs to Him he casts everything aside in order to know Him even more fully.

V15-16 contain three short sentences, each of two clauses. They can be set out as follows:

As many as are mature	let us think this
If you think differently	God will reveal this also to you
Only to what we have attained	by the same we should walk

(from Silva P205)

Just as in v12-14 Paul's call to action in the first and third sentences is on the basis of what is already sure in Christ. The second sentence therefore needs to be interpreted in the light of the other two. And it's all bound up with thinking. So who is it that he wants to think this and what is it exactly that he wants them to think? The **who** are the mature, or perfect. Some commentators think that this is used ironically of false teachers, but there is little or no evidence in the text to back this up. It's better seen as a generous call to all who consider themselves real and growing Christians to be consistent with what they are and have – the thrust of much of what he has already said in this paragraph.

The **what** must be connected both to the immediate context and to his usage of 'thinking' or 'mind' or even 'agreement' (the same Greek word is translated in several different ways in the ESV) already in the letter. (See 2:2; 2:5 and 4:2, which all use the same verb). Thinking this way is having the mind of Christ, 2:5, worked out in the humble-mindedness of 2:2. And thinking otherwise, therefore, isn't so much about doctrinal difference, as about a failure to cast aside self-focus and self-glory by looking to Jesus alone – the attitude that Paul has been seeking to demonstrate right through this chapter. Of course inevitably such an attitude leads to squabbling and disagreement. We saw it in the Corinthian church. Paul has seen its effects on the Christians in Rome. So it's not really a surprise that even in Philippi it's going on. For Euodia and Syntyche are thinking differently too, 4:2, as we shall see in the next study. Christians can sound mature, they can talk of godliness and growth and profound issues of theology, but if their entire focus isn't on Jesus alone and His salvation then actually they're not mature at all. Yet as Paul is able to rejoice in the progress of the gospel in Rome despite this, so he is confident of God's work in Philippi too. God is the one who will be at work in their hearts and minds so that they **will** and **work** for his good pleasure (cf 2:13) and so Paul knows that He is perfectly capable of bringing light to the cloudiest of minds.

The logic may be surprising to us, but Paul says that rejoicing in Jesus will guard the Philippians from disunity. For as they recognise both their own inadequacy and His complete adequacy they will glory in

Him, not in themselves and will share the same mind (which is His) and therefore there will be no place for disagreements. And this is what pressing on to salvation will always look like.

Wait for salvation - don't live as enemies of the cross v17-21

As at other times in the letter Paul follows his exhortations with an example and a reminder of their enemies. Having called them to follow Christ and reminded them of the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus in chapter 2 he now calls them explicitly to follow him, v17, as well as others who are following his example. Note too that Paul urges them to **join in** doing this. It's not something that one or two individuals are to try – rather, it's something they are to work at **together**. (In his concern that each one shares the mind of Christ he still wants their unity.) While this may seem at first glance to be rather self centred, a quick consideration of the context should persuade us otherwise. Paul is calling them to be like him in his attitude and priorities. He's said previously that he's not already perfect, but has shown that he is seeking to walk in the way of the cross as he shares in the sufferings of Christ, becoming like him in his death and straining forward for what is not yet his. He wants them to do likewise. And the reason for his urgency is soon apparent. They are imitate him, v17, because many walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Paul wants them to look out for these, v2, but to look to Paul and those who follow his example as well. Verse 18 tells us two things about these enemies – firstly they are numerous, and secondly it's their **thinking and behaviour** that is the problem. They are enemies of the cross in their **walk**. There are two ways of living, according to Paul – walking the way of the cross by thinking the same as Christ, or being an enemy of it by thinking otherwise. It's something that distresses Paul greatly – both presumably for the sake of those who are living like this and for those they might be leading astray – and so he has warned them repeatedly.

The particular nature of their walk is made clear in v19 with four short expressions. Their destiny is eternal destruction (cf 1:28), their god is their belly, they glory in their shame and their mind is set on earthly things. Though at first sight they look like pagan libertines, it's more likely that these enemies are in actual fact the same group as those described in v2. Paul inverts all their claims (just as in 3:2) to show what they really are. They may preach salvation, but actually they're heading for destruction. Just as those in 1:28 demonstrate their destiny by their opposition to the Philippians, so these demonstrate it by their enmity of the cross in the way they think. They may be serious about food laws, but actually they're just like the pagans who are focused on their own unrestrained appetites. They may call themselves the circumcision, but actually their glory is in their shame – they are no different from the sexually immoral gentiles. They might talk about the promised land, but in reality their confidence is their flesh and their mind is set on earthly things – the realm of sin. Paul has called the Philippians to live worthy of the gospel of Christ – as they **proclaim Him** boldly in the face of opposition and as they **think like Him** by humbly seeking His interests as they seek the progress of others (cf 2:20-21). These men are enemies of the cross in both these aspects – in their **message** which fails to glorify Jesus alone and in their **mindset**, which is utterly opposed to His – seeking their own glory rather than His interests.

The contrasts Paul draws in v20 are massive and striking. Our citizenship or commonwealth is in **heaven** – we belong now to the heavenly kingdom which will never pass away as **earthly** things do. Therefore we are confident to wait for a **Saviour** to come in the future (rather than face the future **destruction** of the enemies of the cross). Our **Lord** is King Jesus, rather than our **god** being our belly and we are sure that he will transform our lowly bodies as we share his **glory** rather than looking now for **glory** in our **shame**. Because we are citizens of heaven, Paul is saying we will wait to share Jesus' glory rather than looking for our own. We will be Jesus focused rather than self focused, future minded rather than

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driven by the present, belonging to a heavenly kingdom rather than looking for earthly reward. Now is the time to share in Jesus' suffering and death (3:10). The assurance that we belong to him, and are part of his heavenly kingdom, waiting for the salvation that is already ours in him, gives us the confidence to walk his way until that day. And because we know that God has already highly exalted Jesus (2:9) and will make everything subject to him (2:10-11) we can be confident that he will be able to make us like him, transforming our bodies to be like his glorious one.

This is how you stand firm in the Lord 4:1

Rejoicing in the Lord, perhaps surprisingly according to chapter 3, involves **sharing in Jesus' death** as we count all things loss for the sake of knowing him, and **waiting to share his glory**. All we are and have and hope for is about Him and His honour. Living really is Christ and dying really is gain (cf 1:21). As we find joy in Him we find joy in His way and His glory. It also involves turning away from walking like the enemies of the cross who are concerned for their own glory, who are earthly minded and who have their minds fixed firmly in the present. They seem not to think that they need a saviour, for they believe that their salvation is in their own hands. What matters to them is the praise of men and their own selfish needs. Going their way, says Paul, is not safe – it leads to destruction, just as much as open opposition to the people of God does in 1:28. Living worthy of the gospel (1:27), according to chapter three, means living a cross centred life – one that is always focused away from self – looking at the Lord Jesus, trusting in his salvation, longing to know him more, glorying in him alone and waiting for the day when we will fully know him and be found in him. And that is how you stand firm in the Lord. It's a summary of all that Paul has said so far. It's what he longs for his dear friends. It's also a verse that looks forward. For verses 2-3 give a particular outworking of this standing firm in the Lord as we consider the situation of Euodia and Syntyche. Because their rivalry, springing out of a failure to think the same way, seems to mean that they are no longer labouring side by side with Paul in the gospel (cf 4:2).

Application

Press on to salvation – be united in thinking this way

Rejoice in the Lord by seeking to make what is already ours in him our own. Though the Christian walk will look different at different stages of life and in different circumstances we mustn't use our assurance of salvation in Christ as an excuse for sitting back and settling for comfort in our Christian lives. If we've grasped at all what it means to know Jesus, then it must motivate us to long to know him completely when we meet him on the last day. That means not looking back to previous high points in our Christian lives – the student missions we participated in, some difficult decision we made when we stood for him rather than succumbing to the pressure of the world around us. It also means not allowing previous failures or disappointments to stop us in our race. Instead it will mean seeking to grow in our knowledge of him and longing for the day when everything will be complete in him. Not being distracted by previous successes or failures.

Maturity means thinking in this way – self-glory or pride have no place in the church of Jesus. Rivalry and disagreement stop us walking the way of the cross and take our eyes off Jesus and onto ourselves. In a church like St Helen's it's easy to leave disagreements unresolved by simply moving on. But even if

unknown by anyone else they will inevitably distract us from the race to heaven because we're to join together in imitating Paul as he walks the way of the cross.

Wait for salvation - don't live as enemies of the cross

To be an enemy of the cross here is not so much a matter of preaching as of mindset. It's worth considering then where our hopes, dreams and fears are focused. Are there ways in which we are self centred, present focused, looking for glory from others in our own achievements? Are we waiting for heaven, or are we expecting fulfilment in the here and now – perhaps in a job or a relationship, in our hopes for our children or ourselves? Do we trust that the best is certain, even if we don't yet have it fully, and that there can be nothing more wonderful than being with the Lord Jesus on the last day, sharing his glory as we see him and become like him? Are we in any danger of being enemies of the cross in the way we live?

If we're to join together in following Paul's example, how can we do that practically? How can we encourage one another to walk the way of the cross, longing for the fulfilment of our salvation in Jesus and not being distracted by other things? We're not a church that is big on emotional expression, but how can we encourage one another in joyfully loving and serving the Lord as we seek to know him and serve him?

Philippians 4:2-23

Context, Structure and Themes

The main body of Paul's letter to the Philippians starts at 1:27, with his call to his dear friends to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ, as they **contend** for it **together**. In 1:12-26 Paul had outlined his overriding concerns – both for the progress of the gospel, v12, and the progress of the Philippians, v25. From 1:27 onward Paul has shown that to live worthy of the gospel of Christ means to go the way of the cross - - having his mind, 2:5, means sharing his priorities of seeking the interests of others. It also means becoming like him in his death (3:10) by counting any other reasons for confidence as loss, but instead longing to know Jesus more, and waiting patiently to share his glory (3:20). Enemies of the cross, by contrast, are those whose focus is not on Jesus, but themselves, not on heaven but on earthly matters, not on the future but the present. Their danger to the Philippians seems to be not so much in their teachings, but in their attitude – for it is fundamentally opposed to the mind of Christ and will not contemplate sharing in his sufferings or counting others more significant.

It seems that some of the Christians in Rome, though they believe in Jesus and preach the real gospel, aren't prepared to share in His sufferings (cf 1:29). They act out of rivalry and won't partner with Paul in his imprisonment for the sake of Christ, but instead seek to afflict him (1:17). Though Paul rejoices that the gospel still continues to advance (1:12), he must be sad that these Christians are not progressing in the faith (cf 1:25). Paul's prayer for his Philippian friends has been that their undoubted love will continue to abound with knowledge and discernment so that they will be filled with the fruit of righteousness (1:9-11). He wants the mind of Christ they already have to affect their will and their work (cf 2:13). So he urges them to follow the example of the Lord Jesus himself (2:5-11) and to be guided by the examples of men they know like Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:29-30) as well as himself (3:17). He rejoices in the partnership in the gospel of these dear and faithful friends of his (1:5), but wants that partnership, underpinned by the mind of Christ which humbly seeks the interests of others, to affect every aspect of their relationships – not just with Paul, but in the church in Philippi. He longs for them to continue to proclaim the gospel, even in the face of suffering and opposition, but to do it in a way that embodies it – unitedly, humbly, sacrificially.

In terms of the structure of the passage, v2-3 properly belong with the main body of the letter which runs from 1:27 – 4:3. 3:20-4:3 act as the end of an inclusio, reiterating key words from 1:27 – citizenship 3:20 (let your manner of life comes from the same root word), stand firm 4:1 and laboured side by side 4:3. However, these verses are also the first of a series of exhortations which examine in more detail what it means to stand firm in the Lord (4:1), a verse which points forward as well as back. V4-9 hang together as a short section, and so do v10-20, verses which seem to link back to the themes of 1:1-11.

- 1 Stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved....
- 2-3 ...with one mind contending
- 4-9 ...trusting in the God of peace
- 10-13 ...copying the model of Paul
- 14-23 ...partnering in the gospel

Text Notes

Stand firm thus in the Lord...with one mind contending v2-3

In a letter to Christians who are evidently dear friends it's quite surprising that there are so few personal greetings. At the very end of the letter every saint is to be greeted (v21), but, apart from Epaphroditus, the only members of the congregation at Philippi mentioned by name are Euodia and Syntyche. Structurally, this exhortation to them seems to fall within the main body of the letter and, because of that, to amplify what it means to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. Of course Paul must have been genuine in his thanksgiving for this church who had been partners in the gospel with him from the first day until now (1:5). This direct personal appeal to two individuals in the church, however, must suggest that this was no minor tiff.

Paul's language is very strong – he beseeches both these women (individually) to agree in the Lord. The ESV misleads us slightly in its translation here. It's actually exactly the same phrase as was used in 2:2 – it means to be of the same mind, or more literally still to think the same thing. No doubt there was a disagreement which Paul was being very careful not to take sides over. In fact, he doesn't even mention what it was, though no doubt he, as well as the whole congregation listening, knew. The bigger issue was that these women were failing to think as befitted those who belong to Jesus and share his mind. They weren't sharing his priorities. They were failing to consider the other better than themselves. They were failing to count everything a loss for the sake of Christ and his gospel.

From what Paul says here it seems that Euodia and Syntyche were key members of the congregation. They are described as fellow workers, and those who had laboured side by side with Paul. They had been working together in contending for the gospel. Paul is clear that these women are real Christian sisters. Their names are in the book of life. Perhaps, as it often does, the pressures of outside opposition had intensified some smaller disagreement. Perhaps the anxiety caused by gospel suffering had led to them taking their eyes off Jesus somewhat. Paul says that they have laboured in the gospel side by side with him. Of course in his absence that's not physically possible, but there must at least be some suggestion that they're not labouring side by side with anyone in the gospel at the moment. Their disagreement is too consuming.

Paul doesn't tell them they have to come to the same conclusion. He does tell them to have the same mind in the Lord. In context that must mean looking to the eternal good of their sister. In humility considering her more significant. Not acting out of rivalry or selfish ambition. While it is possible to proclaim the gospel whilst harbouring feelings of ill will towards another Christian (think of the Christians in Rome cf 1:17) it's an awful thing to be trying to do. You can't really proclaim the gospel with your mouth while your attitude is more like that of the enemies of the cross than the Lord Jesus. And practically, disagreements consume so much emotional energy that there's very little left for looking outwards. No wonder that Paul calls these women to come to one mind in the presence of the whole church. One person, Paul's 'true companion' (there is plenty of speculation in the commentaries as to the identity of this individual, but no certainty) is to have particular responsibility for this, but the implication must be that all are to play a part. While we are not to publicise disagreements, once disagreements are in the public arena this passage makes clear that the resolution of them is the responsibility of every believer. Public sin in the church family is not a private affair. And this particular sin had the potential to affect the ability of the whole church to proclaim the gospel in the world.

Stand firm thus in the Lord ...trusting in the God of peace v4-9

Verses 4-9 may look like a random collection of thoughts, but they are more closely connected than they might at first appear. Again, rejoicing in the Lord is its summary (cf 3:1), so the series of exhortations is in the context of their relationship with the Lord. They are to rejoice in Him, confident that His peace will guard their hearts and minds (v7) and that He himself will be with them (v9).

Rejoicing in the Lord means that their reasonableness (better translated gentleness – see O'Brien) will be known to everyone. Joy in the Lord will produce a forbearing spirit which will witness to the change He has made in their lives as the world watches (cf 2:14-15). As they rejoice in Him they will remember that He is near, both temporally and spatially - He is soon to return (cf 3:20) and He is close to His people (eg Ps 34:18; 145:18; 119:151). It's only that confidence that can lead us to put away anxiety and instead pray about everything. The peace of God isn't so much then a subjective experience but the means by which our hearts and minds are guarded. It's talking therefore about the right relationship with Him that comes through the Lord Jesus. It's His salvation, which is beyond our complete comprehension, that will guard our hearts and our minds. Paul's image is of soldiers standing guard – garrisoning our thinking, our wills and our emotions. God will keep us safe – whether our specific requests are granted or not. So we can have absolute confidence to put our anxiety away and to turn thankfully to Him in prayer about everything.

And we are not to be passive in this whole process. We are to fill our minds with things that are good in themselves and beneficial to others (v8-9). Christian citizens are to think about the concerns of heaven. Paul has taught them what they are and given them opportunity to see this kind of thinking worked out in his own life. The Philippians, no doubt, had many other things to fill their minds with. They faced opposition from a pagan world, false teaching from outsiders claiming to be Christian and two of their key members had a serious public disagreement which no doubt was affecting the whole church. Yet Paul encourages them to rejoice in the Lord and to trust confidently in Him. Being gentle to all in a way that can be seen, praying always about everything rather than basking in anxiety. And filling their minds with what is beautiful in His sight and will endure into the new creation. His salvation peace will keep them safe while they do it, v7, and His own presence will remain with them, v9.

Stand firm thus in the Lord...copying the model of Paul v10-13

In this closing section of Philippians Paul turns to what must be one of the main reasons for writing the letter. Though he's alluded to their remembrance of him and their partnership in the gospel (1:3, 5) and spoken warmly of Epaphroditus and his commission as the messenger of the Philippian church to Paul, he hasn't actually yet thanked them for the monetary gift they have sent him. These last two sections of the letter provide an opportunity for him to do just that. At the same time it also provides an opportunity for Paul to model the things he is teaching them (cf 4:9).

As Paul calls his dear friends to rejoice in the Lord (4:4), so he makes clear that this is what he does himself. Though initially this looks like a rebuke or at least only a lukewarm thanksgiving, 10b makes clear that Paul knows the Philippians were always concerned for him, but have only now had the opportunity to show it. (We will remember from our studies in 2 Corinthians that Paul's acceptance of support from the Macedonian churches hadn't gone down well with the Corinthians. Paul had since then encouraged all the churches he was responsible for to give instead to the churches in need in

Judea. It may well be that now, when the collection has been delivered and Paul is in prison in Rome, this has been the first opportunity for the Philippians to give to him in this way.)

Paul is clearly torn in how he responds. He wants to express his sense of joy in the Lord at their partnership expressed by their gift, but doesn't want to give the impression that he feels neglected or in need. As he has encouraged them to entrust themselves to God's perfect provision for them and to look to his example he wants to make clear that he too has learned to be content – whatever his circumstances are. Note that it's not something that happens passively. Paul has **learned** it. And he's learned it as he's faced extreme situations – plenty and hunger – abundance and need. (The implication is that in **all** of these extremes contentment is something that needs to be learned – it hasn't come automatically, and there's been as much opportunity to learn it in abundance as in physical need.) The way he has learned contentment comes in v13. The God who strengthens him has enabled him to be content in every situation. Paul's contentment comes from dependence on the Lord and a trust that he will equip him for every situation and bring him safely to salvation on the last day (cf 1:20).

So Paul is grateful for their concern, but his overriding concern for them is that they should learn that in their situation they too can trust the Lord to supply all their needs, just as he has done. They have no need to fear or to be anxious. The God of peace will guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus through the salvation He has brought, He will be with them always and he will strengthen them so that they can keep trusting Him and rejoicing in Him in every situation.

Stand firm thus in the Lord...partnering in the gospel v14-23

In this final section Paul spells out what it is that the Philippians have done in sending Epaphroditus to him with their gift. They have shared his trouble. Again Paul uses the partnership group of words (translated 'share' in v14 here) he used in 1:5 and 1:7. Their gift was a sign not just that they cared about Paul, but that they identified with him in his ministry and so were sharing with him in the apostolic task of proclaiming the gospel. Even in Paul's absence they were striving side by side with him for the faith of the gospel. (cf 1:27). And v15-16 makes clear that this is something the Philippians have always done. The beginning of the gospel refers to their first reception of it. They have been partners in the gospel from the first day until now (1:3-5) and this has been shown in their generous and faithful financial support of Paul. They gave even before he left Macedonia, v16, and they gave when no other church did. (See 2 Corinthians 8 for a further description of their financial partnership with Paul.)

Yet again in v17 Paul feels he needs to issue a disclaimer (cf v11). It's not the gift itself that he's interested in. It's what it signifies. In v14-16 it signified their partnership in the gospel, and it's the progress of the gospel that he wants (cf 1:12). And in v17-18 he makes clear that he is also more concerned for their progress (cf 1:25) than he is about the gift per se. Using accounting language Paul says he's looking for compound interest for his Philippian friends. He's interested in the fruit that increases to their credit, the answer to the prayer of 1:9-11. It's therefore both present and future. They will gain it fully on the day of the Lord Jesus, but they will also experience it in the present. As their love abounds in partnership in the gospel they will know God's presence and God's blessing as they come to know the Lord Jesus more, sharing in his suffering and his resurrection power. Continuing the metaphor in v18 Paul says that he himself is already paid in full.

And in 18b he moves from commercial to sacrificial language. Not only is their gift a joy to Paul, it's also of immense value in the sight of God. It's a fragrant offering (the same language that is used of the www.st-helens.org.uk

priestly sacrifices of Exodus 29). The Philippians may not have been consciously aware that in giving to Paul to support him they were offering a sacrifice pleasing to God, but Paul makes clear that this is what it was. In seeking to support the preaching of the gospel they are making an acceptable sacrifice. Partnership in the gospel will bring fruit for the Philippians and be pleasing to God.

Verses 19-20 bring the section to a close and also draw the themes of the whole book together. The language he used in the prayer of 1:9-11 is used again here, as the answer to the prayer is seen. Paul longs in his earlier prayer for fruit that increases. Here he looks to the same glorious God to supply that need. Paul has learned dependence on Jesus in any and every situation as he focuses on the progress of the gospel and the progress of other Christians. Now he assures his friends who are partnering in that same gospel with him that they too will share those limitless resources. Note that Paul calls Him **my** God. Just as God has done for him, so he is confident that He will do for the Philippians too. To our God be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Application

With one mind contending

St Helen's is a very different church from Philippi, but if the disagreement of Euodia and Syntyche was seemingly so significant as far as Paul was concerned, it must be worth asking how we regard disagreements within our own church family. For ourselves personally, if we find ourselves at loggerheads with someone, do we just seek to avoid that person? If we feel it's a significant issue do we try and gather a group of people who agree with us to stand against the views of that other person? What will it mean for us to think the same thing as Paul encourages these two women to do? How can we consider the other person more significant than ourselves? Are we ever tempted to hang on to pride and be unwilling to make the first move, particularly if we are convinced we are right? What is the difference between thinking the same thing and coming to the same conclusions on a matter (whether it's an understanding of what was said or done in a personal matter or a doctrinal disagreement).

If we're aware of people in our church family who are publicly disagreeing, what should our responsibility be to them? How can we help them so that they get back on track with labouring together for the gospel? How can we avoid being instrumental in escalating things? When should we step in and when shouldn't we?

What will it look like to be more concerned with Jesus' honour than our own? How can we make sure we don't get distracted from the task of proclaiming his gospel by our disagreements? How can we make sure that our relationships mirror the gospel of peace we have received to the outside world?

Trusting in the Lord

What opportunities has the Lord given us to learn contentment? How well have we used them? What are we anxious about? What will help us not to be? Are there things we choose to cling to rather than pray through? Why is that? How can we get better at filling our minds with the concerns of heaven? What might this look like in practice in our quiet times with the Lord, in our conversations with other believers, in our use of leisure time?

Partnering in the gospel

How can we learn to be growing partners in the gospel a) in our own church family and b) with others proclaiming the gospel throughout the world? What part do our finances have to play in this? How far do I see my giving to gospel work as an opportunity for my own personal growth? How far do I share the attitude of the Philippians to money? (see also 2 Corinthians 8:1-5). What part do I see my finances playing in supplying my own needs? Am I right to do so?