

Prayer

Powerful Lord, giver of life and sustainer of our every breath; lift the burden of our sins, comfort our hurting souls and bring peace to our lives as we live and work for You. You are the source of all things; You are the foundation of all that is good; and You are the one who made me. Thank You, Lord God, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Manufacturing

Pray for large corporations making products which affect people's lives; e.g. cars, steel, computers. Pray that these products might be well made and used for good.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the spiritual gifts God has given you
- Pray for the U.N. and all who serve others through its agencies
- Pray for Israel and Palestine, and pray for God's will to be done

Meditation

By the power of the Holy Spirit, may we

Raise the standard of our prayers through Godly insight;
Clarify the direction of our mission within the world;
Speed up our ability and will to act in church meetings;
Enliven our worship as we respond to the Spirit's leading;
Take the Word of God seriously and study it daily.

And above all, may we

Take our eyes away from our own needs to look at others;
See Christ in those around us and show our faith in action;
Receive God's healing in our souls, minds and bodies;
Give testimony to the things of God whenever we are called;
Praise the Lord our God in every circumstance of our lives.

Thanks be to God!

Bible Study - Philippians 1:12-18a

¹² I want you to know, dear friends, that in reality, what has happened to me has helped to further the cause of the gospel, ¹³ with the result that the whole Imperial Guard knows that my imprisonment is for Christ, as well as everyone else! ¹⁴ Most of our friends in the Lord have grown in confidence because of my imprisonment and are more bold and fearless in speaking the Word of God!

¹⁵ Now, some of these preach Christ through envy or rivalry, but others do so with goodwill ¹⁶ and out of love for me, knowing that I have the task of defending the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ because of self-centred ambition, without sincerity and with the intent of increasing the difficulties caused by my

imprisonment. ¹⁸ *What really matters? Only this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, and for that I rejoice.*

Review

Something had happened to Paul, and he was in prison (1:13). He wrote this letter whilst being held by the Praetorian Guard, the personal bodyguard of the Emperor of Rome which had responsibility for conducting Imperial affairs throughout the Roman Empire. Paul did not tell us the reason why he was in prison, or where or when he was in prison, and we would love to know these details. They remain a subject of controversy, however, for Paul was concerned to proceed quickly, after his greetings and prayer for the Philippian Church (1-11), to the reasons for his letter.

In our passage today Paul expresses a mixture of concern at the activities of some preachers in the church at Philippi and also confidence that the Lord could use everything that was happening for good. This confidence is evident right from the start, where Paul speaks with apparent delight that his captivity meant that the Gospel had become a subject of conversation amongst the higher social ranks represented by the Praetorian Guard and their entourage. His imprisonment was therefore an opportunity for the Gospel neither he nor his opponents had foreseen, and Paul was delighted to speak of it. In addition, Paul's fortitude had apparently encouraged some within the church who could see from his positive attitude that the Lord was in control despite what might have seemed to be impossible circumstances.

It is obvious from verse 14 onwards that this positive attitude towards Paul's imprisonment was not shared by some within the fellowship of the church at Philippi. Having spoken of 'most' (1:14) of his friends who had grown in confidence, Paul then turned in the next verse to identify some who appeared to be his opponents and who were not included in his positive thoughts! He spoke of people who preached out of 'envy or rivalry' (1:15), implying that there were some within the Philippian church who thought they knew the Lord and the Gospel better than Paul and sought to set themselves up against his influence and also his message. Unfortunately, we can see how this might arise, because such competitiveness is all too easily apparent in our churches today.

Throughout his ministry, Paul had to deal with problems within the Church such as this. He knew that because He had a special calling from the Lord, he would be the subject of much opposition from people who had a higher opinion of themselves, but he remained utterly confident in the Gospel he preached. He measured everything he said and did against the standards of the servanthood and love of Jesus, and this is what Paul does here (1:16). On the one hand, he speaks warmly and encouragingly towards those who acted out of love for him and for the Gospel because he believed that true Christian fellowship bound Jesus' disciples together with each other and the Gospel they preached. On the other hand, he ruthlessly exposes the actions of those who claimed fellowship as believers but sought to divide the Church through their works of 'selfish ambition' which were 'without sincerity' (1:17).

As we will discover in the rest of his letter to the Philippians, Paul characteristically spent more time talking about the supreme importance of his Lord and the Gospel than anything else, but he was in no doubt about the danger posed by those who sought to divide the church for reasons of personal gain or influence. The same fierce defence of the unity of our Lord Jesus with His Gospel and His Church is needed by our leaders today.

Going Deeper

The preaching of the Word of God always takes place in some 'context'. By looking further into the text, we can learn more about how and why Paul preached and wrote as he did.

- *If you find that difficult because you do not know what Paul believed, then read through the whole of Philipians or another letter of Paul (it only takes a few minutes) and assess how closely what you read connects with what you have written in the previous exercise*

Final Prayer

Your warmth, Lord Jesus, is like the sun that bursts through the clouds on an overcast day, bringing not only light and warmth, but colour, vitality and new life. May we always be open to receive Your warmth and love, because it is Your unconditional gift. Thank You Jesus; AMEN

He was intent on exposing falsehood and believed in the purity of the Gospel. His example has much to teach us.

Further Study

Imprisonment ... Rome? Ephesus? Caesarea?

The first interesting issue that arises from this text is the circumstances of imprisonment that could have led to what Paul described in his letter. Paul faced imprisonment many times, not least when he first came to Philippi (Acts 16:19ff, but see also 2 Cor 6:5ff). Arguments have gone on for a long time as to whether Paul wrote this letter from Rome, where he was confined towards the end of his life (see Acts 28:16ff), or some other location at an earlier time, perhaps at some other city of the Roman Empire during his travels such as Ephesus (where Paul appears to be in prison as he writes – see Ephesians 3:1, 4:1).

Most of the debates centre around our understanding of the work of the Praetorian or Imperial Guard specifically mentioned by Paul in this letter (1:13). Their duties were centred around the court of the Emperor of Rome on Palatine Hill, and the Guard numbered several thousand senior and experienced soldiers. This is enough for some to conclude that this letter was written from Rome. However, the last six chapters of Acts contain the story of Paul's captivity for several years in and around Caesarea before being taken to Rome, in which time he was guarded by members of the Praetorian Guard whose responsibility was to look after Paul, a Roman citizen, after his legal appeal to the Emperor (Acts 25:10ff). During these years, Paul had an unprecedented opportunity to speak about the Gospel to senior Roman soldiers (Acts 23:16ff), the Jewish authorities and the Roman governor Felix (Acts 24), then Festus and King Agrippa (Acts 25,26). It does seem as if we have a sufficient description of the circumstances surrounding this letter here within Acts, before Paul was taken to Rome. There really is no other information either in or out of scripture that comes close.

Paul's welfare and the preaching of the Word

The world in which these events took place was a far more dangerous one than we know today. Journeys were more hazardous and disease was more deadly. One has the feeling from scripture that life was therefore valued more highly in those days because it could not be taken for granted. Later on in Philipians, Paul mentions the travels of one of his fellow-workers, Epaphroditus (2:25, 4:18) who appears to have recently brought a gift to Paul from Philippi and whose life was in danger during recent journeys. Certainly, someone had brought Paul a message that the people at Philippi were divided and there was difficulty within the Church. It is possible that the church had heard of the imprisonment of Paul, and this allowed those within the congregation who had problems with him and his teaching the opportunity to make their voices heard. Certainly, Paul writes later in his letter about some who were trying to teach the still young church that all Christians should be circumcised (Phil 3:2ff). Perhaps they felt emboldened to speak because Paul was 'behind bars' and more loyal Christians were disturbed. We can imagine the situation.

The main thrust of Paul's letter was therefore to offer reassurance to the loyal believers at Philippi. Paul had already spoken to them with the warmest possible affection as he opened his letter (1:1-11), and now he urged them not to loose heart but to rejoice and be confident in the Gospel! His first encouragement came by asking them to look not at their own situation, but at the global implications of what was happening. They had begun by being worried that the Gospel was compromised at Philippi, but Paul was eager to inform them that everything was in God's hands, for the Good News of Jesus was being discussed by all manner of people who would never have heard the Gospel had Paul not gone to prison (1:12-14).

There was one other matter for rejoicing. It may seem odd to us that Paul's imprisonment should give other preachers confidence (see 1:14), for would they not also fear being placed in jail for preaching as openly as Paul had done? We should remember that all this was happening only a few years after Jesus himself had been executed for preaching the Gospel and living a life of love. There must have been an on-going concern amongst some that any brush with the authorities might lead to instant death, as had happened to Jesus. By comparison, Paul's imprisonment was indeed far less severe, and Paul had obtained a stay of execution by appealing to the Emperor, something that would have given hope to the whole Christian church; hope that the Emperor might allow the Church to become legal after Paul's appeal! This is only a realistic argument if you accept my point about Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea, but it does seem to fit the situation.

The consequence of all this was an increase in '*speaking the Word of God*' (1:14). In different Bibles you will see that the words '*of God*' are sometimes missing; there was clearly an ancient difference of opinion about the original text of Paul's letter, but it is nevertheless quite clear that the '*Word of God*' spoken of here was not scripture, but the activity of declaring the Gospel (1:14). It is unhelpful for us to think of this as 'preaching', for the verse refers to any means of communication of the '*Word of God*', and is closer to what we mean by 'evangelism'.

Paul's opponents, and his response

It is not easy to see within the way Paul has written his letter, but he was obviously responding to information about people in the church who were teaching 'against' him and seeking to add to or alter the Gospel he had brought to Philippi. Paul makes a comparison between his opponents (1:15) and those who remained loyal to him, even though he was absent and had probably not preached at Philippi for many years. He speaks of those who preach '*out of love for me knowing that I have the task of defending the Gospel*' (1:16). Paul encapsulates within this phrase everything he had said about loyalty to both the fellowship of believers and the Gospel of Jesus Christ; for although the loyalty was indeed personal, God had used Paul to bring the Gospel to the wider world through his commissioning as an apostle by vision (Gal 1:1). Paul's '*defending the Gospel*' (1:16) refers not just to his tireless ministry to countless churches which effectively founded the church on European and Oriental soil, but also to his forthcoming 'defence' (a legal term) of the Gospel before the Emperor.

It is strongly implied within this text that the Gospel as preached by Paul was something that was unique and was unchangeable, and the opponents that he had within the church were seeking to add to or deviate from what Paul had already taught, and this is what Paul spoke so vehemently against. This is something that should cause us to think. Over the centuries, the Gospel has been preached in thousands of places and circumstances, and the different churches of our own day have a massive variety of doctrines covering every conceivable aspect of Christian faith. Surely there is room within all this for a wide variety of different interpretations of what God has done for us in Jesus, and how it effects us all?

The answer that Paul would give I believe, is 'no'. There is at the heart of Christian faith a truth about the love of God found uniquely in Jesus Christ which transcends all human interpretations, and without it, our churches are little more than religious sects offering different and competing spiritualities. Whilst this may be what some people want, it is not the Gospel that scripture speaks of, or that Paul defends in his letter to the Philippians. When Paul declares at the end of this passage '*what really matters? Only this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, and for that I rejoice.*' (1:18), he is not condoning any alternative Gospel. He is showing his confidence that in the midst of the turmoil of the church at Philippi, the one and only Gospel is unique and God is in control of all things, even if it appears that rivalry and envy has split the church apart. In the midst of

the turmoil of our own churches today, some of Paul's confidence in God and the Gospel, and his incisive dismissal of human divisive activity through ambition and envy, is sorely needed.

Application

The letters of Paul are all deeply challenging because they present us with claims about the truth of the Gospel which come from times far distant, and some of the details about the stories behind them are hidden from our view by the passing of time. Scripture asks us to accept that the Gospel spoken of by Paul in his letters is singular and unique, and there is a core to its message which is not a religious system that is subject to human interpretation and cultural change, but is universally true for all times and in all places. Paul writes as he does because of his conviction that God has called him to preach and live for this unique Gospel, and we must either agree with him or dismiss him as deluded.

If we agree with Paul, then we must face the challenge of these verses to accept that the Gospel is supremely important for all people, and that it is the same Gospel now as it was 2000 years ago. From the rest of Paul's writings, we know it is a Gospel through which God and His Kingdom is revealed to the world through the life and death of Jesus Christ, and is demonstrated in this world through the fellowship of all believers, the Church. It is hardly possible to identify with this Gospel or be part of this Church in a casual way, because its demands on us are total; and if we attempt to make demands on it, or make it fit into our own cultural or personal agendas, then we add nothing to the Gospel, we only display our human sinfulness. Those who did this in Philippi showed envy, rivalry, self-centredness and ambition, for example, and they probably did this believing they were right. This attitude, however, is what Paul so roundly dismisses in this text. The Gospel is not ours to meddle with; it is ours to accept or reject.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Read some of the stories in the last six chapters of Acts and familiarise yourself with the stories of Paul's captivity in Caesarea. Do they help you with this text?
2. Do some of Paul's claims about his personal identification with the Gospel (e.g. v16) sound too presumptuous? Why?
3. Should we accept any preacher in our pulpits providing they say they proclaim Christ? Should there be any 'checks', and what should they be?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find it hard to imagine the circumstances under which Paul was able to both endure prison, and also write in such glowing terms about the Gospel. However, this was the extraordinary outcome of the extraordinary life of an extraordinary man. What I have to accept is that the Lord Jesus Christ is able to make my life just as relevant and important for the Kingdom, but in quite different ways, which may well not include any kind of fame or public acknowledgement. Each of us must accept our calling.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *It may be helpful to face the challenge of this text head on and try to write down what you understand the Gospel to be. Having done this, ask yourself whether Paul would recognise what you have written as the same faith that he proclaimed at Philippi and for which he was imprisoned.*