

*Request to speak on part of Php4, so having a go at the whole book over the next few months.*

Preface: do we need to listen to Paul?

Many here have at best an ambivalent attitude to Paul; perhaps even antagonistic. Some reasons:

- Paul as over-complicating Jesus' message and turning it into systematic theology instead of a call to kingdom living. Needed perhaps for his time but we can go straight to Jesus and skip Paul altogether.
- Paul as a moralist harping on about Christian Living, which perhaps we had thumped at us heavily in our previous church experiences
- Paul as unrealistically optimistic and unrealistic in his life-advice, contributing to an attitude of 'buck up and be cheerful, God's working good out of your suffering, and you'll be rewarded in heaven for your trials even if things here never improve'
- Paul as outdated and socially irrelevant (or worse, offensive) esp re women, homosexuality, slavery, response to authority, plurality of religious experience
- Paul damping down the revolution of Jesus' message

I hold nearly all these prejudices against Paul. I also hold that he has not been included by mistake. Evidence suggests he was not easy to take in his own time either, but the early church thought his insights vital for its ongoing life. However much I struggle with him, he is the key figure who brought the gospel out of Judaism, understood it as applying to everyone, and worked to explain how it worked in a variety of cultures and experiences. I am not a Jew and without Paul I may never have been invited into the life of Christ. So I owe him at least enough respect to give him a fair hearing.

*Limited Listeners: If you don't have time for Paul, perhaps sit with God with that antipathy and see what bubbles up. Or if you love Paul, sit with God with that and be grateful for Paul's influence in your life.*

Overview of Philippians

Phpi a Roman colony in Macedonia. An agricultural centre. City established by Octavius with land grants to soldiers leaving the Roman army. Pptn inc many who were retired military. Strong loyalties to Roman emperor and to the empire in general. Archaeological evidence of much attention to status – inscriptions boasting about personal glories. No Jewish synagogue. Greek-speaking but strong cultural and ethnic ties to Rome. Women in many roles, inc running businesses and holding some social prominence.

Phpn church established early in Paul's journeys into Greece. Original leaders were women, and women still significant in community (Ph3 ref to two women). Phpns materially supported Paul's missionary work. Also gave generously to the collection he took up for the Christian poor in Jerusalem, despite being quite poor themselves (2 Cor ref to generosity of churches in Macedonia).

LETTER: Written by Paul to his favourite church. Paul is in prison (prob Rome) and the Phpns have sent Epaphroditus to help him – prob both bringing money and coming to spend time with him/ assist him in material ways. *Roman prisoners barely fed, depending on friends and family for decent nourishment.* Epaph also brought news from Philippi, telling Paul about some internal disunity in the Philippian church, and also that the Phpns are v worried about Paul. Possibly they were also concerned that the expansion of the Gospel (which they funded) was being hampered by Paul's imprisonment.

Epaphroditus has been so ill he nearly died – possibly got ill on the way, and has recuperated with Paul. The Philippians have heard of this and are worried. So Paul is sending him home, with a letter.

Four chapters, following (mostly) conventions of letters. Particular themes:

- The over-riding importance of proclaiming and living the Gospel: Christ, crucified and resurrected, establishing communities of hope and love, humility and service.
- Affirming special relationship between Paul and Phpn – friendship, partnership – affectionate and also almost contractual
- Urging right thinking: esp ch.2 ‘have the mind of Christ’ (the famous ‘emptying’ passage about Christ letting go of the rights and status that came with his true identity) but throughout an emphasis on attitude/ mind/ thought/ discernment
- Urging unity within the Phpn community
- That God is at work; God’s work is good; despite outward appearances God’s work will not be derailed

*Limited Listeners: Invitation to imaginative journey: what if Paul wrote to MHCC? If we sent someone to be with him in prison, what report might he hear? What might he wish to write back? To encourage and/or challenge? Fade in and out as we go, and whatever you hear, consider how a letter to MHCC may include something like that – and how we might respond if it did. How YOU might respond.*

## Chapter One

1-2: (standard) greeting. From Paul AND Timothy, but seems Paul was responsible for the content. ‘slaves of Christ Jesus’ shows Paul’s primary identity/loyalty (a possession of Jesus)

Emphasises ALL at Philippi – repeated in several places; tying in with theme of call for unity (Paul does not favour any party in the conflict but sees them ALL as Christ’s holy people) The only Paul letter greeting to mention elders and deacons – no-one knows why.

3-8 (standard) thanksgiving (but quite long – longest in Paul’s letters). Establishes relationship w Phpn out of which the letter is written – credentials for offering advice/guidance: Paul and Phpn are partners – word used for business partners – working together to spread the news about Jesus, to expand the community of believers. Paul loves them very much and believes God is at work in and through them.

9-11 (standard) prayer:

- Increase in knowledge/ discernment
- Which will lead to love for each increasing
- So you will live well, with nothing to hide when you eventually meet Jesus face to face
- Your lives will overflow out of this right-living
- Everyone seeing you will see that God is good and offer praise

Note that ‘right mind’ underpins this whole prayer; everything flows out of it. Major theme of the letter.

Ultimate aim is that people will praise God; everything else is on the way to that (ie standing ‘innocent on the day of judgement’ [v.10] is not the aim – it is a means to having people praise God)

*The rest of the chapter could be read as a missionary writing an update to his financial supporters to ensure them that all is going well, despite appearances. But also a letter to concerned friends, from a friend concerned also for THEIR wellbeing.*

12-18 Paul addresses Phpn concerns about his imprisonment. Concerns appear to be (1) that Paul is suffering (2) that the gospel is hindered (3) that division is resulting in the local (Roman?) church.

(1) Paul is rejoicing, because far from hampering the spread of the gospel it seems his imprisonment is facilitating it. Paul's personal circumstances are far less important to him than the gospel being spread. The whole section challenges the notion that prison = social shame = poor witness to Christ. Rather prison = opportunity to show the mind of Christ (patience, love, humility) = excellent witness to Christ. *Speaking into a culture that did not value humility or self-sacrifice but rather strength, power and position. Very confronting.*

(2) Paul sees the key as the one about the gospel being hindered. He assures them it is not. The whole judicial/military establishment is talking about Paul and knows that he is in prison because of the message he is preaching.

*Note: If your beef with Paul is that he dampens down the revolution of Jesus' life and work, consider: he is in prison because he challenged both the Emperor and the social hierarchy and system of honour of Greco-Roman culture. By saying 'Jesus is Lord' he denies that the Emperor is; by claiming God glories through weakness he is saying that the value-system of power, prestige and patronage is fundamentally wrong and needs to be inverted.*

Gospel also progressing because local church members are responding to his imprisonment by becoming bolder themselves with speaking of Christ – perhaps stepping into the gap formed by his absence. Much as many churches when their leader leaves discover the varied strengths and abilities of the ordinary church members.

(3) Preaching a gospel out of jealousy? What could this mean? Perhaps people who didn't like Paul were trying to overturn his influence by rounding up new converts loyal to themselves, who would likely oppose Paul. Appears no problem with the content of their preaching, just the motivation. Paul focuses on the good - that people are being brought into the community – rather than the motive. *A relief for me as a preacher: because I always have mixed motives, and love is not always the dominant one. But God works with what is spoken regardless.*

19-26 Paul considers his future: life or death.

Most consider this theoretical, as Paul did not have control over the outcome of his imprisonment. Considers he would like to be with Jesus, but for the sake of the church (specifically at Philippi!) he will accept with joy if he does not die, so that he may encourage the Phpn's. Perhaps also that if he is saved from death it will be a witness to Christ. *Could mean: so that when I get out I can come to you and continue the work, and my release can be seen as a victory for Christ.* But I think it means: by my attitude to living here in prison, in suffering, I am embodying Christ and therefore teaching and encouraging you.

*Prison life: horrific. Up to fifty prisoners crowded together, often underground and in darkness, with inadequate food and no sanitation. No sleeping quarters and often nowhere to lie down – instances of prisoners trampled to death by overcrowding. Especially bad when the 'inner room' – as when Paul and Silas were imprisoned at Philippi in Acts 16. Almost always shackled – as Paul notes here that he is ('in chains' not a metaphor). Deep social shame. Often held for years, sometimes without charge. Life at the whim of guards who could be cruel, and were significantly guided by bribes. Even in moments when things were going OK (a friendly guard? A visitor bringing sustenance?) death, torture and torment could strike at any moment. Psychological torture by nature. Also often instances of physical torture. Evidence of emperors/officials keeping people in prison rather than executing them, as prison was the worse punishment.*

*Possible that Paul was under house arrest, in Rome, rather than in a public prison, but both the Philippian concern for him (and apparent sense that he was being shamed), their sending of Epaphroditus to bring aid, and Paul's conviction that the whole Roman guard knows about his imprisonment suggests he is in a public prison situation when writing. Even if under house arrest, likely shackled to a Roman soldier at all times.*

(Craig Wansik – also source for info on prisons): Possible that Paul DID have a choice, and is expressing a real decision to live rather than die. Very common to suicide in Roman prison – particularly as those executed by the State lost their estate, but those who died while awaiting trial had their will honoured and their families inherited. Means to suicide was clearly available.

Or, less actively: If Paul chose not to defend himself at trial he would be executed. Socrates went this route, but more notably: so did Jesus. A real choice – to make a defence and stay alive, or to refuse to participate and allow them to kill him.

Why tell the Philippians about this?

- To encourage them when they felt like quitting in their situation: that Paul himself has considered suicide (active or passive) and sees more value in life, even life in the abyss of a Roman prison.
- To remind them that he is not afraid of death (in case he does die, and they hear of it and worry). *Paul a man in love with Jesus. Prob 25 years since he met him on the road to Damascus. Its not been an easy 25 years, and Paul would like to meet him again, and rest.*
- To give weight to his following advice/guidance. If Paul has chosen to stay alive *specifically for the benefit of the Philippians* they may perhaps feel obliged to take his advice to them seriously and act on it.

We think of Paul as a travelling missionary. A writer. A church leader.

He did travel but also spent long periods NOT travelling.

He was a writer but he never sat down to write his thoughts for posterity (that we have evidence of) – perhaps more accurately he was a correspondent, working on long-distance relationships, rather than a writer.

He established churches but doesn't seem to have had a position in any of them, and certainly not a position as a regional leader/ bishop/ coordinator

HE WAS A PRISONER. Often. For long periods, probably more time than he travelled. He died a prisoner. This identity was deeply shameful in his culture, yet he reconstructed it to be the highest form of Christian living. The memory of Paul as a prisoner surely shaped how he was held by the early church, and the value given to his letters. His experience of prisons almost certainly shaped his theology, worldview and compassion for other people. *When he says 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God', which many of us learnt by heart so we could tell others how sinful they were and how badly they needed our Jesus, he is writing as one who has lived long months and years in the company of those his society deemed 'fallen short of glory' – not just in their company but probably physically leaning up against them. When he says 'if I have not love I am a noisy gong' he's not at a wedding; he writes as one who has lived in the excrement of fellow prisoners and experienced them descending into tormented madness while shackled to his leg. When he urges moral uprightness he speaks as one who has lived at the whim of corrupt guards and jealous officials. When he says 'Christ has set us free' he speaks as one who knows captivity in ways you and I never have.*

What prisoners have most of is time. Perhaps Paul was able to develop his understanding of what the event of Jesus Christ meant because of the long periods he was incarcerated.

27-30 Paul turns from his own circumstances to the Philippians:

He wishes his life to benefit them, by modelling the behaviour he now explicitly calls for: stand firm, be united, let nothing get in the way of living out the gospel. We're in this together, so you can learn from my in-prison attitude how to live in your own circumstances. People will see how you live in response to your trials

and will know you are on to something good. If you argue with each other, they might get the wrong impression about what Jesus was on about.

You have been granted the privilege of suffering.

*The WHAT???*

*Note: not suffering in general, but suffering as a result of standing up for Christ. This notion has lots of baggage for me: a sort of pride in having people hate you because you are a pain in the behind, going on and on to them about Jesus and how sinful they are. I don't think this is what Paul means. Perhaps, in status-obsessed emperor-loving ex-military Philippi, they are being punished (socially or otherwise) for claiming Jesus as their reason for being, a nobody who died a criminal, who spoke of love for all and modelled redemption through sacrifice, and who called his followers to shed all airs and be servants of one another.*

Why a privilege? Maybe a kind of 'level up' opportunity: a chance to get better at loving, by trying it in a harder situation. *If I only do stage three I might get really good at stage three but I won't get any better than that – and I will probably get bored, and I might get arrogant. Not that it is competitive or progressive, but if we seek to really live as Christ lived, we can always stand to get better at loving.*

Paul is NOT saying that suffering in itself is a good thing. *No-one writing from a Roman prison could say that.* He IS saying that how I live in response to and in the midst of my suffering is an opportunity to enact a good thing in the midst of something terrible. And my response may become an even better thing BECAUSE it arises in the midst of something terrible.

This leads on into the next chapter, about having the mind of Christ, but that's for next time.

Summary/ overview

For us: Paul here is giving his credentials for having an opinion about the Philippians practice of faith (and perhaps for having something to say to us).

- (1) he is prayerful
- (2) he loves these Philippians more than anything except Jesus – in fact he loves them as much as Jesus loves them.
- (3) he is totally devoted to preaching and (more importantly) living out the love of Christ Jesus
- (4) he knows suffering. Really knows it.
- (5) he goes on being hopeful and gracious in his darkness.
- (6) he passionately wants to help other people live like Jesus

Despite my baggage around Paul, that does actually sound like someone I can respect and learn from.

What might someone so in love with Jesus have to say to our community, or to me?