

Philippians Introduction (PM)

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- [0 : 00] Such a joy to share with you in this very joyful epistle of Philippians. I'm charged with giving you an introduction to the epistle and expanding the first two little sections.
- That's three lectures in the course I taught at Regent, but we're trusting God to enable me to say just the things that you need to hear tonight about this lovely epistle.
- A Scottish philosopher by the name of Thomas Carlyle was one day asked by a young pastor what his parish needed the most. And the old philosopher replied, what this parish needs is a man who knows God otherwise than by hearsay.
- This letter is written by an apostle who knows God other than by hearsay. And it appears that the people of God in Philippi knew that God in the same intimate way and were significantly transformed by it.
- They were formed and being transformed by their intimacy with Christ. They are undergoing transformation in such a way that joy exudes from their lives.
- [1 : 13] Robert Null Holland once defined spiritual formation as the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others. I like that, but I want to just stress one little thing in addition to that, that true formation and transformation is joy-filled.
- It's not onerous. Sanctification is one of the most difficult things we wrestle with as Christians and we're often defeated by it. But I think it's meant to be joy-filled rather than being defeated.
- It is only going to be joy-filled if it is first of all evangelical rather than legal. What do I mean? If it flows from good news, if it flows from the gospel of the God who loves us and who is for us in Christ.
- It is always responsive to the reality that in Christ God is for us. And that already in Christ He has made us righteous before Him. It is joyful.
- This transformation process is joyful also because it is lived out in the reality of union and communion with the living Christ. And if there's one phrase I think might characterize the whole epistle and encourage us is chapter 1 verse 21, for to me to live is Christ.
- [2 : 31] And I want to stress that it is joyful not because there is no suffering and no hardship in the process of this transformation. Paul is chained to a Roman soldier as he writes this epistle.
- And the Philippians live in a town dominated by the imperial cult of Rome. And this little community that is so fragile is always in danger of being under the persecution.
- This is a little community of probably 50 to 100 people. And so the miracle of this people I think is that they are joyful despite their circumstances.
- They are joyful in the midst of very difficult circumstances. And the one who writes to them can write to them and model what it means to be transformed in the midst of very difficult circumstances. The very ground of their joy as they have been justified and are now being sanctified is that they already know that God and his son is for them and has humbled himself, chapter 2, to become one with them, to become human for them.

And that he lived and died to reconcile them and to redeem them. And that same Christ is now reigning and they are reigning in him. And it is joyful because they know that union with Christ by the Spirit is their very heart of their experience.

[3 : 58] And so this is the very nutshell, I think, of what's going on in this epistle. In a nutshell, this is a call for joyful Christian formation through intimate communion with Christ and imitation of Christ based on Paul's lived conviction about and his lived experience of Christ.

The call is expressed by drawing the story of the readers into Paul's own story as part of the larger theological story. I know that the order of the books of the New Testament isn't necessarily something that is inspired, but it's always struck me that Philippians come slap bang in the middle between Ephesians and Colossians.

And those are two wonderful mountain peaks of Paul's expositions, one of the church in Christ and then of Colossians, Christ in his church. And in the middle is this valley, this valley of Philippians, in which Paul gets practical.

He shows how to bring heaven to earth. And so it's a wonderful epistle. And I want to share just a few introductory comments. First of all, who wrote this epistle? It's almost universally agreed by scholars that Paul actually did write this epistle.

And for there not to be any controversy in this regard is quite remarkable, given that the style and vocabulary or semantic field of this letter are in some senses unusual for Paul.

[5 : 24] So, for example, 42, I didn't count them, but some scholar did, 42 of the 1633 words in this epistle. I mean, who counseled those words?

42 of the 1633 words in this epistle are found nowhere else in the New Testament. They are called technically hapax legomena. That is, they only occur.

And 34 are unique in the Pauline corpus. Some of the new words that Paul uses relate to Paul's new circumstances in a Roman imprisonment setting.

He talks about Caesar's household. Those are both new words. Praetorian guard. And the word citizenship is also new to Paul in this epistle. Ben Witherington, a New Testament scholar, to whom I'm indebted for these observations, states that things Roman are on Paul's mind in this epistle.

He is in Rome, and they are in the second city of the Roman Empire, which is Philippi. Who are these readers? Paul's new vocabulary arises, I think, above and beyond everything else, from the highly emotive and personal family language in this epistle.

[6 : 38] He uses, this is by far the most personal and social letter that Paul writes. So, for example, he uses the term for the Philippians, his loved ones, chapter 4, verse 1.

And of the eight times the word beloved or loved ones is used by Paul in all of his epistles. He uses it three times in this epistle. He loves these people, and they clearly love him.

He addresses his readers as brothers and sisters more frequently by percentage, seven times more than in any other of his letters. And the language of sharing is also unusual in this great epistle.

He uses a family of words that all begin with S-Y-N, sin. We use the word synthesis, for example, in English. And so there are a number of times...

So, for example, in our very passage, in chapter 1, verse 7, he talks about the fact that they were sharers together with him in divine grace. And then in chapter 1, verse 27, he says, striving together in the work of the gospel.

[7 : 47] And in chapter 1, verse 29, fellow sufferers. So this is... He is very close to these people, and he trusts their Christianity. He trusts the depths of their devotion.

And he's a fellow sufferer with them and they with him. And some commentators have said this is actually an epistle about the church as family, more than any other epistle.

It's a church... It's an epistle of family relationship with these amazing converts in Philippi. A little bit about the makeup of this little community.

It kind of reflects the makeup of Philippi at that time, which was an important Roman city. It was a place where Roman generals retired. When they retired, they went to Philippi.

But it was also a very cosmopolitan city. And it's thought by scholars that the people that Paul is writing to are also very much cosmopolitan.

[8 : 43] Not too many of the Roman elite were part of this church. But he said... Lynn Kohig says that a third of these church people were Roman citizens.

Most of them had been freed from being slaves. Or they were God-fearing people... God-fearing Jewish people also like Lydia, who's mentioned in the book of Acts. And there are also some Greeks in this community because of the names Epaphroditus in chapter 4, Judea and Syntyche.

These are Greek people. And so it's a wonderful mix. A little bit like Vancouver in many ways. A very cosmopolitan city. And here is a part of this, however, is that the Roman dominance over the Greek population is felt keenly in this society.

And perhaps even in the church. Because the Romans had a monopoly on the wealth. They controlled the politics. And there was a strong emphasis on Latin as a language. And 60 to 65% of the city were non-Romans.

And even some of the Roman believers, being of the service class and freed slaves, may have had mixed emotions about the Romans. A last little piece. Two little pieces about who this group of people are.

[9 : 57] They live in the midst of the presence of the imperial cult, expressed very powerfully in Rome. Some scholars believe that Paul has a primary purpose in this epistle of countering the imperial cult with the message that Jesus is Lord.

Right? Because in the great Christological hymn of chapter 2, it reaches its climax where Jesus is Lord of all.

And so there are two very different narratives going on in that culture. And they're being contrasted. And Paul is reminding them deeply of their deep Christian roots and of the narrative that Jesus is Lord and how that affects absolutely everything.

All in all, we get a sense of the power of the gospel to unite people in this amazing little community. People of such different cultures. The wide array of ethnic, social, and economic classes alongside the built-in tension between the Greeks and the Romans does, as Lin Coex states, make this unity hard to imagine outside of Christ.

Hard to imagine this community coming together apart from Christ. And the opponents, the interesting thing is Paul's not that much concerned about defending in particular doctrines in this epistle.

[11 : 19] He's really about practical Christian life. But he does mention some opponents of the gospel. Chapter 1, verse 28, those who oppose you. And then in chapter 3, verse 2, very strong language.

Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers. I'm glad I'm not preaching that Sunday. And then chapter 3, verses 18 to 19. Many of these people live as the enemies of the cross of Christ.

So the first comment to make about all that is that this is not a major preoccupation for Paul in this letter. That is, it doesn't shape his substantial teaching. However, he does mention the opposition with unusual vehemence.

And I think there are two reasons for that. The opponents are Gentiles promoting the Roman imperial cult, which is contrary to the gospel, and in direct opposition to it. And second, there are also Jewish agitators like those in Galatia who are promoting circumcision for Gentile believers or telling Gentile believers they had to become Jewish before they became Christian.

What's the purpose of this epistle? Ostensibly, it's to thank the Philippians for the gift they had sent him upon learning of his detention in Rome. But in doing this very elaborate thank you letter, he teaches us in wonderful ways what it means to be formed initially and transformed throughout our lives into the image of Christ and into joy, J-O-Y, as a result of encountering the risen Christ with his community together.

[12 : 54] What's also remarkable about this epistle is what's not there. There is no defense of Paul's apostleship. There are no theologically loaded words like grace, faith, and belief, or believe.

At least they occur very rarely. And there's one important term that's not there at all, which is very indicative of the fact that Paul's not about defending the doctrines.

And that's a little word in Greek that's pronounced gar. It's not prominent. Whenever Paul is in the heat of an argument, he uses this word gar all the time. Gar, gar, gar. I don't know if that would translate into English when you're having an argument, but he doesn't use it in this epistle.

This is a lighter, more joyful epistle, even though the author and the readers are suffering and Paul himself may be facing martyrdom a little bit later on. The word joy occurs 16 times.

So I think I'm on safe ground in saying that that is a really important term. So last word by way of introduction is you can't miss how Christ-centered Paul is in this epistle.

[14 : 05] And if you like, there are four aspects of the character of Jesus that will be a little bit of a hook for you as you come through this epistle. Number one, in chapter 1, verse 21, Christ is my life.

For me to live is Christ. In chapter 2, Christ is my mind. In chapter 3, Christ is my goal. In chapter 4, Christ is my strength. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Christ my life. Christ my mind. Christ my goal. And Christ my strength. Now, let's come to the text. Verses 1 to 2, what are they about? Well, one could ostensibly say it looks like a normal Greco-Roman greeting.

And yet there are some very distinctive words here that are important. And really, there are six little things I want to share with you that come from verses 1 to 2 and then verses 3 to 11.

And they all have to do with what makes formation and transformation possible. In verses 1 to 2, I think there are three givens that undergird our formation and transformation as the people of God.

[15 : 13] Number one, Paul begins with the words, Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. He doesn't use the word apostle because he links himself with Timothy, and Timothy wasn't an apostle. But when he uses the word servant, it's not just servant.

It's bond slave. And most of the commentators, when they say this, Paul doesn't have to defend his apostleship to this group of people. They already believe in him as an apostle. But when he says the word bond slave, that echoes strongly the concept of apostolic authority.

And so, even as he begins this epistle, Paul reminds them in a very sort of humble way that he is an apostle, and that their faith and their formation and their transformation ultimately depend on apostolic authority and apostolic teaching.

And I want to say to you that the same is true for us. There's a certain charismatic core of the gospel that we have received, and it is the core for our transformation.

And it rests, of course, centrally on Christ. Christ who died. Christ who has risen. Christ who will come again. So, first of all, the first given of our transformation is apostolic authority.

[16 : 29] I'm not sure we teach enough about the reality that there is a finality to divine revelation in the apostles. It's absolutely crucial to our faith that that is a reality.

But more than just that, what the apostles taught us is the grounding for our formation. Quickly, number two, church. Church to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi together with the overseers and deacons.

That's a wonderful address of these people. It already gives them hope of transformation if he's already calling them holy ones. You're already saints. I want to encourage you with that, I think Paul is saying. And I want to encourage you with the fact that you are God's holy people because you are in Christ Jesus.

That's the source and the sustenance for your holiness and your growth in Christ. But the main point that I wanted to make here is this. There is no hope for our formation and transformation outside of church.

God calls us to be the church. I guess I'm speaking to the converted because you're all here and you're all regulars, I think. But I think there's been a tremendous fallout of people attending church as a result of COVID.

[17 : 38] And I just want to say a little word of encouragement. Come back to church. Those of you who are listening, perhaps, in other ways. So, there is, in other words, in the New Testament, there is no such thing as an unchurched Christian.

It's impossible. When you come to know Christ and you're bonded to Christ, you're also bonded with the church. You are in Christ and you are in the church. And so, I guess I'm just saying, keep on being the church.

In the midst of all of our faults and failings as the church, we still need the church. And it forms us and shapes us. Third, notice the gospel. Gospel words in verse 2.

As he introduces this great epistle, he says, Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Joy would usually be wished upon readers in the Greek culture and good health in Latin letters, according to F.F. Bruce.

But Paul here takes over and adopts an older Jewish formula of shalom and amplifies it to include grace and peace together. And so, the form of Paul's greeting reflects, the form of it reflects pagan customs of the Greco-Roman world.

[18 : 53] But the content is very much that of the Christian gospel as reflecting continuity with the Old Testament in the shalom word, yet injected with grace as the very catchword of the New Testament.

And where does it come from? The Trinity. From God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Because I know the Holy Spirit isn't mentioned, but the Holy Spirit's often not mentioned, because the Holy Spirit is the silent person in the Trinity.

But here we get this wonderful reality. And Paul gives us, in a nutshell, what the gospel is. It's grace given to us. It's peace as a consequence of grace. And it flows to us from the triune God of grace, who is the God of love.

The God who invites us into relationship. Who draws us into his very life. Now, very quickly, lastly. Verses 3 to 11. Just three points, if I may.

From 3 to 11. I think the question being answered and asked and answered in verses 3 to 11 is, okay, we're talking about formation and transformation. Who does it? God do the transformation?

[19 : 53] Or do I do it? Or do my pastors do it? And I guess I want to say yes to all three. But I want to say that primarily Paul emphasizes in this epistle that God does the transformation.

He says, He who begun a good work and you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. This paragraph has some important things to say about agency in Christian formation.

Who's the primary agent? And it's very clear that the primary agency is the triune God who forms us. What God has done and is doing and will do is the theme of this great paragraph.

The first great encouraging thing that we need to know is that God is responsible for our transformation. We can't do it on our own. And this passage covers, I don't have time to go into all the details, but it covers the initiation of God's work in us, the continuation of God's work in us, and then the completion of God's work in us.

And he mentions the day of Jesus Christ twice over the second coming. This is the great context within which we are transformed. We are slowly being transformed bit by bit, but we never arrive until the day we see Jesus.

[21 : 10] And when we see Him, we will be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. That's the words of John. But I think the great encouragement here is that God is the beginner of my formation.

You know, one of the Philippians listening to this letter would know this to be true. Lydia, the businesswoman, the seller of purple linen. She could pinpoint a time when she came to faith, and no doubt she could give a personal testimony about how she heard Paul's gospel message in Acts 16, and she had believed.

But when Luke records a conversion, it's cast in a different light. Not so much about the faith she exercised. It says the Lord opened her heart to respond to God's message.

It was He who had begun the good work. And as Alec Mateer says in his commentary on this text, salvation would be a wretchedly unsure thing if it had no other foundation than my faith, than my having chosen Christ.

The human will blows hot and cold, is firm and unstable by fits and starts. It offers no security of tenure, but it is the will of God that is the ground of our salvation. No one would be saved had not the Lord been moved by His own spontaneous and unexplained love to choose His people before the world was, and at the decisive moment to open our hearts to hear, understand, and accept the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

[22 : 36] This is what our assurance rests in, the fact that God is at work. And He will carry it on to completion, and He will do it, and He will bring it to fruition, to the praise and glory of God.

Verse 11. However, it sounds like it's all God, and therefore I am negated completely. There is no human participation in this at all, but that's just not the case. I hate to use this word.

I know it's a very big word, but it's the word compatibilism. See, God's agency and my agency are somehow compatible. I don't know how, but it's true.

Because as I read this lovely text, I see that it's not, Paul doesn't just stop and say, okay, it's all God. It is all God in a sense. But he also moves on and says, it's also all you.

And it's the pastors in your life. And so he gives us a lovely description of how God uses means of grace to change us, to convert us in an ongoing way.

[23 : 40] And I'll just give you four A's about the pastor's role in our transformation here. Which I think is an appropriate thing for me to say in light of the fact that Aaron is going off on a sabbatical.

And by the way, it's not a vacation. It's not a vacation at all. It's encountering the living God in a fresh way. There are vacation parts to it.

But I'm just so delighted you're having a sabbatical. You deserve it, Aaron. But look at the four things that this pastor, Paul, has done for his community. Verse four.

In all my prayers for all of you, I pray with joy. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you since I have you in my heart. And whether I'm in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, you get the idea there's some affection that Paul might have for these people.

He loves these people. As I know Aaron loves you. And then he gives them, so the four A's. A pastor's affection, a pastor's assurances, a pastor's actions, and a pastor's aspiration.

[24 : 45] His assurances, he tells them that in his prayers, he actually wells up in joy when he prays for them. And that surely would encourage them.

And then a pastor's action, he talks about the fact that he's praying for them all the time. So if God does it all, why does Paul need to pray? This is the point of asymmetric compatibilism.

It's all God. It's primarily God. And all that we do, we do in God. Even our prayers are empowered by God. But apparently God's working and Paul's praying are compatible, not contradictory.

And lastly, the pastor's aspiration. But lastly, it's all God. It involves the means of grace, of pastors who pray for us and encourage us and inspire us.

But thirdly, there is the necessity and nature of the agent of the person, himself or herself, in this formation. There are four or five things that Paul tells us these people did.

[25 : 58] They were committed to the tenets of the gospel, verse 7. They participated in the spread of the gospel, verse 5 and 8. They were committed to the work of confirming the gospel. They were persevering from the first day till now.

They were enduring even though, even when it would be costly for them. And they were giving a defense of the gospel. What are all those things a sign of? They're the sign of grace in these people.

And they were working even as God was working. So let me try to sum this up. God is at work. And we are at work. And we are at work in his work.

And ultimately, all glory goes to him. The life of transformation that is joyful involves divine agency.

And that gives us joyful assurance. But it also involves human agency, which is real and vibrant. And so we give all that we are and all that we have afresh to Christ in order that we might enter into the fullness of assurance and find joy in transformation.

[27 : 08] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

You're welcome.