

Sermon – 56/05/2010 am

Greetings and Grace

Study Text: Philippians 4:21-23

The beginning and ending of a letter are often the most difficult to write. We have the custom of starting with 'dear so and so'. Then we write 'how are you?' Some Christians write 'greetings in the Lord Jesus Christ'. In Paul's day the custom was to introduce yourself and then indicate to whom you were writing. So we read *Paul and Timothy ... to all the saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi* (1:1). As he writes this opening greeting he includes the majestic name of Jesus Christ as the link between himself and his readers. They are all men and women who belong to Jesus Christ and hence united in Christ.

How do we end our letters? This can be more difficult than the beginning. The ending will vary depending on the relationship we have with the reader. Some of us were taught the difference between 'yours faithfully' and 'yours sincerely'. Both seem to be out of fashion these days. We may end personal letters with 'love and prayers'. 'Regards' or 'kind regards' is common today, at least in emails. 'Yours in Christ' might be used when writing to believers. A fellow I know signs off with OHMS, taking 'his majesty' to be the Lord Jesus Christ.

We come today to the end of this letter which Paul and Timothy wrote to the church, or to the saints in Christ Jesus, at Philippi. The 'Amen' in verse 20 seemed like the end but that was the closing cry of a doxology. The following three verses include personal greetings, the grace and the closing 'Amen'. It may be that Paul wrote these closing words with his own hand (Colossians 4:18). Timothy may have helped him in writing the bulk of the letter.

Greetings

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus (4:21). The opening greeting was to all the saints in Christ Jesus – that is to the church as a whole. This closing greeting is to every saint – singular. Paul must have been thinking of the different members of that congregation. He could have mentioned Lydia and the jailer if they were still there; but many others had joined the church since Paul first visited, some of whom he had not met. He does not mention names. He was probably aware of the dangers of leaving someone out. He does refer to various members by name when writing to the church at Rome but he had not at the time visited that church.

Paul regarded each one in the church with the same love and affection in Jesus Christ. He prayed for every one of these 'holy ones' or saints. He had no favourites. He did not belong to a particular party within the church. Paul always promoted unity in the church, not disunity through partisanship. He told these believers to look out for the interests of others not just their own interests (2:4).

In addition to personal greetings, Paul conveyed the greetings of brothers who were with him in Rome. Again he does not name them, although he does so in other 'prison letters' written at this time. Timothy was named earlier in the letter, as was Epaphroditus, as being brothers and fellow workers. He was going to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi with this letter.

Others who may have been with Paul include Aristarchus from Thessalonica, a fellow prisoner and travelling companion (Colossians 4:10, Acts 20:4), and Demas, also from Thessalonica but who later defected. Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, the young man over whom Paul and Barnabas had a

falling out, was in Rome at this time. Luke the beloved physician was also with Paul. Epaphras and Tychicus from Asia (modern Turkey) were also in Rome, but these men may not have been known to the Philippians.

Paul was not out doing his own thing in ministry. On his first missionary journey the church sent him out with Barnabas. On his second mission he took Silas with him. Along the way various brothers joined the team. These co-workers came and went according to the needs of Paul and of the churches.

In this closing greeting Paul also refers to the saints in Rome and especially *those who are of Caesar's household* (4:22). The church in Rome was not united in the fellowship with the apostle Paul. Some were jealous of him and became contentious. In their preaching they sought to make trouble for Paul while he was in chains (1:16). But Paul showed no malice towards these men. He simply rejoiced that Christ was being preached. In this greeting he does not exclude them. He conveys greetings from all the saints in Rome.

What are we to make of the reference to members of Caesar's household? Paul was a prisoner when he wrote this letter. Although it is possible he was in Caesarea, the evidence points to him being in Rome. He was not discouraged by his situation; on the contrary, he saw a golden opportunity to share the gospel with the whole palace guard (1:13). Soldiers were on a roster to guard him day and night. He was probably chained to them for their time of duty. The needs of the soldiers would have been met by servants and slaves working in the palace. Caesar's household would refer to this extended group of servants, not just to blood relatives of Caesar.

It is amazing that Paul singles out this group of saints for special mention in this closing greeting. There must have been a significant number of them. It indicates how effective his ministry had been while he was in prison. Paul did not wait for 'ideal circumstances' in which to preach the gospel. He did not make excuses for not preaching the gospel. Wherever he was he was telling people about the Lord Jesus Christ, about the cross and the resurrection and about the judgment.

Paul was ready in season and out of season to preach salvation through Jesus Christ. The Lord knew what he was doing in taking Paul to Rome as a prisoner. He used Paul to bring the gospel to the very heart of the Roman Empire which ruled the world at that time.

These members of the royal palace must have found it difficult to live and work in such a pagan environment. What did they do when the emperor demanded to be worshipped as a god, as some of them did? How did they respond to the decadence and immorality they witnessed in the palace? Hendriksen writes 'eternity will tell what great blessings must have resulted from lives dedicated to Christ amid such worldly surroundings'.

Do you complain about the worldly surroundings in which you live and work, or do you see the opportunities the Lord is giving you to tell about the grace of Jesus Christ, about the cross and the resurrection, and the judgment to come?

Grace

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all – or with your spirit. The apostle closes most of his letters with this benediction, but he did not write these words as a mere formality. He knew the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you? What do we understand by this word 'grace'? Paul opened this letter saying *grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:2). He closes saying *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit* (4:23).

The grace of Jesus Christ is foundational to all that Paul writes in this letter. He writes to people who are partakers with him of grace (1:7). A major theme of this letter is rejoicing in the Lord. Even while in prison Paul was rejoicing. He urged the Philippians to *Rejoice in the Lord always*. Such rejoicing was possible because of the grace of Jesus Christ.

The grace of Jesus Christ is seen in the Son of God humbling himself and coming into this sinful world. He came to die upon the cross. Why? For us. He died because of our sin. *The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord* (Romans 6:23). Jesus is that gift of God. We can do nothing to save ourselves from death and the fires of Hell. Jesus was obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross (2:8). This is the grace that Paul knew.

In the grace of God Paul could stand against the enemies of grace. He stood against 'dogs' or false teachers who were diluting, no destroying, the grace of God by teaching circumcision and legalism. Paul knew that the way of works righteousness was a dead end. He knew and he taught the righteousness which is from God by faith (3:9). *By grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves it is the gift of God* (Ephesians 2:8).

By grace we are citizens of heaven waiting for our saviour to return from there. We live in this fallen world but are not of this world. Our desire is for the kingdom of God. *The grace of our Lord Jesus be with your spirit*. We are a new creation in Christ Jesus. We are born again of the Spirit of God. We have the mind of Christ. We have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in us. Let us then walk in the Spirit and be as shining lights in this dark world.

This letter is one of triumph and joy in the Lord. Paul said *for me to live in Christ and to die is gain*. He could say this because of the grace of Jesus Christ. Do you know the wonder of this grace of Jesus Christ? Are you living each day in his grace? Are you growing in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*

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