

## Sermon – 16/08/2009 am

### Servants and Saints

Study Text: Philippians 1:1

Paul's letter to the church at Philippi has been described as a thank-you note jotted down for Epaphroditus to take on his return to this church. It is some thank-you note! Some of the best known and best loved portions of Scripture come from this letter. The so called 'parabola of redemption' passage (2:6-11) describes the humiliation and exaltation of Christ more gloriously than anywhere else in Scripture.

Paul describes salvation by grace alone in the clearest possible way as *not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but the righteousness that is by faith in Christ* (3:9). He describes his own traditions and works as rubbish, or in the older versions as dung, when it comes to salvation from sin and death.

This letter is Paul's most personal. The personal pronoun 'I' or 'me' is found most extensively in this letter. Paul opens his heart to the Philippians whom he knows so well and loves so much. *For me to live is Christ and to die is gain* (1:21). *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me* (4:13) is a well known verse, although sometimes taken out of context. And finally, the words of chapter 4 verse 4 are well known from the chorus 'Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice'. This verse is widely regarded as the key verse of the letter.

Before we look at the contents of this letter we will briefly look at the context in which it was written. Where was Philippi? What sort of city was it? What do we know about the church there? Where was Paul and why did he write this letter?

### Philippi – The City

The city of Philippi was a Roman colony in the region of Macedonia which is in Northern Greece. It is called the foremost or first city of the region (Acts 16:12). The city was founded by King Phillip II, the father of Alexander the Great, and was prosperous because of gold mines in the area. It was about 15km inland from the port city of Neapolis.

Two hundred years after Phillip the Romans took the city. It was the site of the historic battle in 42BC between the republicans Brutus and Cassius, and the avengers of Caesar's death, Antony and Octavian. Octavian became Caesar Augustus. He resettled many retired military personnel in this city – all proud Roman citizens. This may be the background for Paul's teaching on citizenship (3:20). It was a strategic city on the footstep of Europe, and on the main road from Rome to the east.

### Philippi – The Church

The apostle Paul ventured into this city on his second missionary journey (AD50/51) after the HS called him to *come over to Macedonia*. He went there with his fellow missionaries, Timothy, Silas and Luke. Apparently there were not enough Jews in the city to form a

synagogue, because on the Sabbath day these missionaries went out of the city to the riverside where they expected to find a place of prayer.

At the river they met Lydia, *a seller of purple* (Acts 16:14). She had come to Philippi from Thyatira to sell purple dye. The Romans it seems liked this royal colour and were rich enough to buy it. It was a very expensive dye obtained from shellfish in the waters of Thyatira. Lydia was a business woman but also a worshipper of the true God. She had already turned from paganism to embrace the God of the Jews. Lydia, it is often said, came from Asia with earthly treasures but was about to discover spiritual treasures in Europe.

On that most wonderful Sabbath day Lydia heard the apostle Paul tell of how the promised Messiah had come to save his people. As Paul shared the gospel the Lord opened her heart to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. She and her whole household were baptised and she welcomed Paul and his colleagues into her home (Acts 16:15).

Who would be the next member of the church at Philippi? Things do not always go according to the plan a missionary or preacher might have. Paul did not count on what happened next in this city, but he was ready to preach the gospel in any place at any time. A demon possessed girl started to follow Paul and his partners around the city. The demon recognised them as servants of God telling people how to be saved. Paul got distressed by this demonic endorsement of his ministry. In the name of Jesus Christ he cast the demon out of this poor girl.

In return for freeing this girl of the demon, her owners dragged Paul before the city authorities. A roaring multitude gathered and the magistrates ordered Paul and Silas to be flogged without questioning them. Trouble making Jews were not tolerated in this Roman city. These missionaries were put in chains but all that night they kept on praying and praising God. God sent an earthquake to open the prison doors and free the prisoners from their chains.

The Roman soldier who was responsible for the prisoners was about to commit suicide when Paul called out to him. He was aware of what Paul had done and what he believed about God. Pleading what he must do to be saved Paul said *believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household* (Acts 16:31). The jailer and his family became the next baptised members of the church at Philippi.

When Paul and Silas were asked to leave this city they first went to Lydia's house where they met and encouraged the brothers (Acts 16:40). In addition to Lydia, and the jailer, the slave girl was probably there along with some converted prisoners. Timothy left not long after Paul and Silas, but Luke it seems stayed on in Philippi. Paul visited this church again on his third missionary journey, both going and coming, but no details are recorded apart from the indication that Luke rejoined him (Acts 20:1 and 5).

Paul has no troubles in his relationship with this church – unlike the other churches he founded. They were very supportive of him in his ministry, sending gifts to him when he was in Thessalonica (4:16) and in Corinth (II Corinthians 11:9). This letter was prompted, in part, by another gift sent by this church to him when he was in prison in Rome. They heard that he was in need and dispatched their elder Epaphroditus with a gift for Paul (4:18). Epaphroditus stayed on in Rome to look after Paul while he was in chains.

## Paul the Servant

Letters today, if you happen to have seen one lately, begin with ‘dear so and so’, and end with ‘yours truly so and so’. The writer will indicate their title after their name if it is an official letter. Letters in Paul’s day had the same details but not in the same places. The writer’s name and title was given at the beginning of the letter. The recipient’s name came next.

*Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ (1:1)*. Why Timothy? His name was included in two of the other prison letters, Colossians and Philemon, and in other letters. Paul met Timothy in Lystra on his second missionary. He was a young believer and Paul took him along with him on this journey. He was like a son to Paul. It is no surprise that he was with Paul in Rome caring for his needs. Paul was hoping to send Timothy off to Philippi soon to find out how they were doing (2:19).

Paul included Timothy under the title *bondservants of Jesus Christ*. Timothy was not an apostle so he could not include him under that title. In this letter Paul does not use his title ‘apostle’. Apostle means ‘sent one’. Paul was called and commissioned by the risen Jesus. He was an apostle by the will of God. Apostle was an authoritative title which Paul used in most of his letters but not this one. In most of his letters he was dealing with problems of a doctrinal or disciplinary nature and hence wrote with his God-given authority. There was no particular problem at Philippi, at least none that challenged his authority.

Paul adopted the title ‘bondservant’ or in other translations ‘servant’ or ‘slave’. The literal meaning is ‘slave’. But a slave has connotations of being unhappily bound to a master. A servant is not bound but serves his master or employer freely. Bondservant is not a common word but is useful in that it conveys the meaning of both slave and servant.

Paul was bound. He was bound to the most wonderful master there ever was – or is – namely the Lord Jesus Christ. This master bought him with his own precious blood. He was bought with a price (I Corinthians 6:20). He was bound to Christ and would never leave him for another. Paul would serve this great master all his days. Being a bondservant of Christ is the most humbling yet most privileged position anyone can occupy. Peter, James and Jude similarly take this title. What about you?

Just because Paul includes Timothy in the signature does not mean he was a joint writer. He was with Paul and would have agreed with what was written. He may well have taken down the letter as Paul dictated it while in chains.

## People – The Saints

Paul was writing *to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi (1:1)*. Who were these saints? It sounds as if there were a lot of saints in this church – and living saints at that! Paul was of course referring to all the believers in this church. He included bishops and deacons just in case they were thought not to be saints! Being a saint is not the same as being saintly. Here the word saints mean ‘holy ones’. It refers to our position before God. We stand before God as those made holy in Christ. *We are a chosen people and a holy nation ... a people belonging to God (I Peter 2:9)*.

The term saint is widely misunderstood today. The idea that the Pope or any other man can declare who is, or who is not a saint, is completely foreign to the Bible. The very notion of a

‘Mary’ or ‘John’ doing miracles after they have died, and the Pope or his men verifying these, is not only a shambles but an utter shame and abomination before the Lord.

*With bishops and deacons* (1:1). The word ‘bishops’ is *episkopoi* in the Greek, and is better translated ‘overseers’. Bishop is another word that is misunderstood because it is misused by the church today. Notice it is bishops plural. There was only one church at Philippi but a number of bishops. Bishop is another word for overseer or in fact elder. Paul calls the same leaders of the church at Ephesus ‘elders’ and also ‘bishops’ (Acts 20:17 *cf.* 20:28).

It is unusual for Paul to mention elders and deacons in the salutation. Why did he do so here? It may be an endorsement of the leadership of these men in this church. Remember he did not use his authoritative title ‘apostle’. Did he have confidence in these appointed men to give oversight to this church?

The servants are ‘of Jesus Christ’. The saints are ‘in Christ Jesus’. There is no avoiding the truth that saints and servants are all called by Jesus Christ, called to be holy, to live in him and not in the world. Are you one of the servants or saints in Christ Jesus?

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*