



Paul's letter to the

PHILIPPIANS

LESSON 4

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-30

A Meditation & Prayer for *Those Who Feel Stuck*

How, O Lord, do we wash another's feet
when we cannot touch?

Where our understanding falters,
where our knowledge dwindles,
where our expertise ends,
O Lord, you meet us there.

Your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path
when we cannot see the next right step.

O Loving God, you have said this is your will:

to be joyful always
to pray continually
to give thanks
to do justice
to love kindness
to walk humbly with you.

Our portion is you and your redemptive work.

Show us how to be your ambassadors to this hurting world.
Teach us how to use our hands and resources when words fall short.

Define your ministry of reconciliation for each of us, Jesus.
Bless those who have not the time or privilege of feeling stuck:

those on medical frontlines
those stocking shelves
those teaching their children
those caring for the vulnerable
those turning the gears of our beloved city.

O Author and Perfecter of our faith, you use us
to write a beautiful story amid crisis.

As parts of your body, appointed by the same Spirit,
we do not receive your grace in vain,
and trust we have everything we need to abound in every good work.

Amen.

“The Cave of Saint Paul” in Ephesus



A bit of archaeological and early church history...

The Cave of St Paul (so named by excavators), located in the foothills on the southern side of ancient Ephesus, has yielded intriguing finds related to early church history. Possibly associated with a legend of St Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, the cave has been a Christian sacred site since the 1st or 2nd century. It was decorated with frescoes and inscriptions over the course of many centuries, including a portrait of Paul in the 6th century.

The cave was discovered by a group of Lazarist priests, Fathers Henri Jung and Eugene Poulin in 1892. It was “re-discovered” in 1906 and excavated by the Austrian Archaeological Institute.



Photo: N. Gail/ÓAI.

The cave consists of a corridor leading to a back room cut into the rock which served as a chapel for religious services. In the corridor there are two niches in the walls blackened with soot from lamps which lighted these alcoves centuries ago. The actual cave enclosure is in the form of an elongated cavern measuring approximately 49 feet long, 6.5 feet wide and 7.5 feet high. The main passage leads back to a slightly expanded rectangular area measuring about 9 feet wide.

It is adorned with numerous inscriptions and visual portrayals covering the gamut from Old Testament saints to soldiers from the Byzantine Middle Ages. Under the layers of plaster on the corridor walls are Greek phrases such as “Paul help your servant” - written in charcoal and chalk. According to the Austrian Archaeological Institute, over 500 visuals and inscriptions have been discovered on the partially uncovered frescos, dating from the 4th century to the 12th/13th century, and the theme is consistently Christian.



Photo: Michael J. Caba

In the late 1990s Dr. Renate Pillinger from the University of Vienna discovered an early fresco on the western wall of the grotto’s passageway that includes a clear picture of the cave’s namesake, the Apostle Paul.

<— The painting of Paul, which had been plastered over by subsequent occupants, is dated by Pillinger to the late 5th to early 6th century AD.

Photos and information by Michael J. Caba / BiblePlaces.com / The Ephesus Foundation

Philippians 2:11-30 (NLT)

Shine Brightly for Christ

12 Dear friends, you always followed my instructions when I was with you. And now that I am away, it is even more important. Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. **13** For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.

14 Do everything without complaining and arguing, **15** so that no one can criticize you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people. **16** Hold firmly to the word of life; then, on the day of Christ's return, I will be proud that I did not run the race in vain and that my work was not useless. **17** But I will rejoice even if I lose my life, pouring it out like a liquid offering to God, just like your faithful service is an offering to God. And I want all of you to share that joy. **18** Yes, you should rejoice, and I will share your joy.

Paul Commends Timothy

19 If the Lord Jesus is willing, I hope to send Timothy to you soon for a visit. Then he can cheer me up by telling me how you are getting along. **20** I have no one else like Timothy, who genuinely cares about your welfare. **21** All the others care only for themselves and not for what matters to Jesus Christ. **22** But you know how Timothy has proved himself. Like a son with his father, he has served with me in preaching the Good News. **23** I hope to send him to you just as soon as I find out what is going to happen to me here. **24** And I have confidence from the Lord that I myself will come to see you soon.

Paul Commends Epaphroditus

25 Meanwhile, I thought I should send Epaphroditus back to you. He is a true brother, co-worker, and fellow soldier. And he was your messenger to help me in my need. **26** I am sending him because he has been longing to see you, and he was very distressed that you heard he was ill. **27** And he certainly was ill; in fact, he almost died. But God had mercy on him—and also on me, so that I would not have one sorrow after another.

28 So I am all the more anxious to send him back to you, for I know you will be glad to see him, and then I will not be so worried about you. **29** Welcome him in the Lord's love and with great joy, and give him the honor that people like him deserve. **30** For he risked his life for the work of Christ, and he was at the point of death while doing for me what you couldn't do from far away.

Philippians 2:12-13

Live Out Your Salvation As God Works In You

CONTEXT

Previously, Paul's call to cultivate the mindset of Christ (2:5) was followed by an example of what this mindset looks like in action (2:6-11). Now, Paul says, the Christ Hymn must work out the new patterns of thinking and living for the Philippians (2:12-18). Here we find Paul expressing what it means to be a people who worship in this way, who sing this song, whose minds are being transformed by this vision of who God is because of this vision of who Jesus is.

COMMENTS

Paul returns to his original desire—*obedience to God expressed through cultivating the mindset of Christ, for the sake of Christ and the gospel*—by applying what he has just written. Now he says, “If this is the people you are, whose mind is shaped by the mind of Christ (2:5-11), you have to work out what this is going to mean.” This is the reason for Paul telling the story of Christ in the first place: as the model and means for them to continue to work out [their] salvation for the sake of God's good purpose.

The Philippians had always followed Paul's instructions when Paul was with them, but now that he is away from them, it is even more important that they learn to think things out for themselves. That's why Paul says that their present task is to work at bringing about (that is, “showing”) their salvation and to take it seriously (v. 12).

Paul doesn't mean “bring about” or “work out” in terms of them “earning” their salvation, but instead to let their salvation have its outworking in their thinking and living, acting out what this really means, living out the salvation that Christ has brought them through the way they live in relationship with one another.

Our minds may go to Romans 12:2, where Paul says to be transformed by “the renewing of your mind,” so that we can figure out and put into practice what God's will is. To be sure, there's no way Paul could explain everything to the Philippians or give guidelines for every situation they might encounter. Instead Paul is constantly encouraging people to grow and mature, to see and understand things in a new way (cf. 2 Cor 5:16-21).

In other words, Paul's question is, “What is this salvation going to mean and look like in practice?” His answer (vv. 12-13), is that it will look like *holiness*, a new way of life, a radically different way of living than what the world has seen.

Why? And how? “Because God is the one at work among you, providing the will to do what pleases God.”

Paul believes that through the presence and power of the Spirit, the living God dwells in and with every Christian to transform their lives from within. This goes back to what he said in 1:6, that “*he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*”

The Philippians must take responsibility to work out the salvation that God has given them, doing so with a sense of “holy awe and wonder” (a better wording of “fear and trembling”). The God who has saved his people is an awesome God, and Paul calls them to realize that this God is working in them and with them.

Philippians 2:14-18

Shine Like Bright Lights for Christ

BACKGROUND

This passage moves along with imagery taken from the Old Testament, particularly Exodus and the Temple. People in the early church knew that Jesus had been executed at Passover time. Passover, in the spring, was the time when the Jews celebrated and still celebrate the exodus from Egypt—the time when God went down to Egypt and snatched his people out of the hands of Pharaoh to take them to their inheritance, their promised land. Along the way, the Israelites received the Torah and the Tabernacle (the place where God would come and dwell with them and lead them as a holy presence in their midst). There was, however, plenty of trouble along the way (as some have said, “You can take Israel out of Egypt, but it’s much harder to take Egypt out of Israel”). When the Israelites were on their way to their inheritance, they grumbled and argued and questioned. They wanted to go back to Egypt. They were frightened that they would meet hostile people who would oppose them. But as the story goes on in the first five books of the Bible, they are still the people who have been set apart and called to be light to the nations as they are led by the presence of God to their inheritance, their promised land.

COMMENTS

Paul uses this Old Testament imagery to suggest that, as a result of the salvation they’ve received through the faithfulness of Christ, and because of God’s abiding presence willing and working within them, they are the new exodus generation. **Paul says there must not be grumbling or arguing among the Philippians** (as was the case among the Israelites; see Exod 16; Num 14; 16-17), so that no one can fault them. **He calls them to live innocent and blameless lives as children of God** (language used by God to begin the renewal of the covenant with Abraham in Gen 17:1). As a result, they will “shine like lights in the world” (Daniel 12:3), “in the midst of crooked and perverse people” (Deut 32:5).

Paul knows it is dark in the world, and he calls the Philippians to live in such a way that shows people that there is a new and better way to live. That’s why people became Christians in the first three centuries, when Roman emperors were doing everything they could to stamp this movement out. People didn’t become Christians in the first three centuries as a result of reading great theologians or doctrine. **They became Christians largely because there were people down the street who were living in a different way, and they noticed it. They were being kind to one another. They were being generous to their neighbors. When people did bad things to them, they didn’t try to get revenge. They were people who seemed to radiate a different kind of life.** And people would look at them and say, “I didn’t know you could look like that. How can I have that same thing? How does this work?” In many ways, the reason Christianity spread in the first three centuries of the church is due to the impact that people like this had, shining like lights in a dark world.

Paul says they are to continue doing this by holding on tightly to the word of life (v. 16)—the word of the gospel—the word about Jesus and his death and resurrection. Paul takes great pride in the Philippians living in this way. He has suffered so much and perhaps had many voices telling him he had wasted his time and lived in vain. Their example, however, will prove that his work has been worthwhile. Paul will rejoice even if he loses his life, even if he is to be poured out like a drink offering (v. 17). Here he is using temple imagery, a metaphor taken from the Jewish sacrificial system. Pictured is the burnt offering, the service itself and the drink offering poured out in connection with the sacrifice (Num 28:1-7). Indeed, a drink offering was a gift given to God that was poured out but not *wasted*. Paul says that perhaps the Philippians’ faith is like the main offering and his life is the drink offering that’s poured out with it. If that happens to him, he will celebrate and share in their joy (this links back to 1:19-26). Even if Paul is called to suffer and die in this moment, it will be a cause for celebration.

In other words, Paul is preparing the Philippians for every possible situation. In the event that he dies, he doesn’t want them to think that everything has gone wrong. **He wants them to learn to think for themselves with the mind of Christ, shaped by the words of 2:6-11, so they can be holy and united, and not ashamed or afraid of anything that the world can do to them or say to them.**

Philippians 2:19-30

Timothy and Epaphroditus

Paul commends two of his co-workers, Timothy and Epaphroditus, and announces their travel plans (2:19-30). Although Paul is separated from the Philippians, he plans to keep in touch with them by sending Timothy and Epaphroditus to Philippi.

Both the length and the language of these two commendations suggest that these men also serve as examples for the two central concerns that emerged in 1:27–2:4. Timothy models serving the gospel by caring for the needs of others; Epaphroditus models the suffering that accompanies serving the gospel.

TIMOTHY (2:19-24)

Timothy seems to have been one of Paul's most constant companions, mentioned frequently in his letters as well as in Acts 16-20. Paul plans to send Timothy to them soon, and he looks forward to receiving news of the Philippians via Timothy. He is confident that this news will be good.

Paul has no one else like Timothy, who is genuinely concerned for the welfare of the Philippians (v. 20). The contrast with everyone else who is pursuing his or her own interests (v. 21) reminds us of Paul's words in 2:1-4. Clearly his concern there for the Philippian community reflected his own experience of attitudes shown by those Christians with whom he is in touch in prison. These people are failing to do what Paul has urged the Philippians to do—namely, to put the interests of other people first.

“But you know how Timothy has proved himself. Like a son with his father, he has served with me in preaching the Good News” (v. 22). Timothy is already well known to the Philippians (according to Acts 16 he had accompanied Paul on his first visit to the city). Like a son learning a trade from his father, Timothy has served with Paul in the work of the gospel.

Paul plans to send him as soon as he sees “how things go” with him (v. 23)—presumably in order to bring news of the outcome of his trial to the Philippians. But since Paul has expressed confidence regarding his release, he trusts “in the Lord” that he will be able to visit them soon (v. 24).

EPAPHRODITUS (2:25-30)

Paul considers it necessary to send Epaphroditus to Philippi as well, presumably as the bearer of the letter (v. 25). Epaphroditus had been sent by the Philippian church to bring Paul their gift and to assist him in prison. Why is it now “necessary” for Paul to send him back? Apparently because the Philippians have heard that Epaphroditus has been seriously ill and are anxious as to whether he has made a full recovery (vv. 26-28).

Since Epaphroditus is now better, Paul is eager to send him to Philippi because he knows they “will be glad to see him.” Then, Paul “will not be so worried” about the Philippians (v. 28)—likely because Paul expects to share in their joy over the return of Epaphroditus.

Paul wishes to assure them that Epaphroditus has accomplished the task entrusted to him, even though it appears he is returning early. He is to be welcomed “in the Lord” with joy and to be held in honor because of what he has done for “the work of Christ” (vv. 29-30). These words refer to his ministry to Paul. In undertaking the work of Christ, Epaphroditus came close to death and risked his life in order to do what the Philippians could not do for Paul. They had sent generous contributions to assist him, but they were not with him in prison, and therefore could not minister to him personally. Paul urges the Philippians to honor their representative, who has not only carried out the task entrusted to him but also has done it at considerable personal cost.

Reflections

1

Becoming the Gospel

If Paul wants his readers to act purposively for the salvation of all, what does that salvation look like in real life, “on the ground,” so to speak? Biblically speaking, and particularly for Paul, salvation incorporates the whole of God’s desires for humans individually and corporately. It includes a life of faith, hope, and love; of Christ-like self-giving for the good of others; of peace and reconciliation with God and one another; of restorative justice; of righteousness and, ultimately, of full participation in the glory of God. It is something believers talk about, yes, but above all it is something they *do*, something indeed they *are*. And when people actually *are* something — something that stands in contrast to normal living — they will provoke reactions. This way of understanding mission calls us to participate by “*becoming*” — to hold fast to, and to hold forth, the gospel in faithful, creative, embodied word and deed. (Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 48-49).

2

The External Witness of our Internal Behavior

So much of what Paul says here builds on the imperative: “*Do everything without complaining or arguing.*” Because most of us are good at such behavior (I certainly am), it is easy to dismiss this as cliché or mundane; but the very fact that Paul spends so much energy giving biblical and theological support to it suggests otherwise. This is spoken in the context of their—and our—being God’s children in a fallen world. Our communal behavior, especially as that is reflected in our attitudes toward one another, goes a long way toward determining how effectively we *hold out the word of life* in such a world. Thus, mission is the bottom line, and internal fighting among the people of God is counterproductive. Paul’s use of the story of Israel (in this case its failure), as his way of including the Philippians as God’s people says much about our own place in God’s story. Again the concern is with our actions and behavior—with our succeeding where Israel failed. The underlying theology in all of this is God’s own character, as that is now reflected in his children who bear his likeness as we live out the life of the future in the present age. Only as we reflect God’s own image and likeness will our witness be worth anything at all, in terms of its focus and in terms of the fruit it bears.

3

In Christ We Are Never Alone

Paul’s words about Timothy, Epaphroditus, and the Philippian community remind us of the support and comfort that we can experience, even when we are on our own. The mutual concern and prayers of those who belong to Christ mean that we are never out of touch. Even with a capital charge hanging over his head and deliberately sending home the man who had come to support him in prison, Paul shares the joy of Epaphroditus’ friends at his recovery. He does not need Epaphroditus’ physical presence and material assistance to know the comfort of belonging to a community that is as concerned for him as he is for them. Christian community is not a solitary experience, and we are able to share its rewards and joys with one another, as well as its demands and difficulties.

Discussion

Philippians 2:12-18

1. What is your favorite Old Testament book, story, and/or character and why?
2. What does Paul mean when he tells the Philippians to work out their salvation? What is he asking them (and his readers today) to do?
3. Where does Paul think the motivational power for a life of holiness comes from and why does it matter?
4. How do we avoid falling into “grumbling and complaining” — as Paul warns against — especially in our current situation?
5. A “drink offering,” which Paul mentions, was a gift given to God that was poured out but not *wasted*. What can you do this week to make your life that kind of a gift to God and others? Where do you need to experience the empowering presence of God in a fresh way?

Philippians 2:19-30

6. Share about someone in your life who you trust. *Why* do you trust him or her?
7. Why does Paul single out Timothy and Epaphroditus, and what stands out to you as you read of how Paul speaks of them? How do they serve as examples of the kind of mindset that Paul urges in his readers?
8. Who in your life has nurtured your faith, and what difference has this made? What is one way that you can take a genuine interest in someone else’s welfare this week?