

WHERE LOVE ABOUNDS

Philippians 1:1-11

Philippi was a city on the banks of the little river Gangites in eastern Macedonia, which was in the northern province of Greece, about ten miles from the shore of the Archipelago. It derived its name from the famous Macedonian king, Philip, the father of Alexander the Great. Philip founded the city in 368 B.C. for a very definite reason. There was no more strategic site in all Europe. There is a range of hills which divides Europe from Asia, or the east from the west. Just at Philippi that chain of hills dips into a pass. Through this pass the road from Europe to Asia had to go, so Philippi commanded the road from the west to the east.

Various circumstances combined to make the place prosperous. It was a great road center. The plains nearby were well watered and fertile. The gold and silver mines in the neighborhood had made the city a great commercial center of the ancient world. Caesar Augustus had granted Philippi the status and privileges of a Roman colony, whereupon the citizens enjoyed all the rights of Roman citizenship, including freedom from arbitrary detentions and penalties. The Roman language was spoken; Roman styles of dress were worn; and Roman customs were observed.

Very few Jews resided in Philippi. There is no mention of a synagogue there, presumably because there were not ten men to constitute one. By the riverside, however, interested worshippers found "a place of prayer."

God works through men. When He wants to do something God needs a man or men through whom to do it. He always needs a man or men of unquestioning obedience. Paul was such a man. When the Holy Spirit forbade him to go into Bithynia, another door was opened unto him. When God closes one door He always opens another. While Paul was at Troas he received a vision of a man entreating him to "come over into Macedonia and help us." Rejoicing in the prospect of new labors and new successes, and undeterred by the prospect of new sufferings, Paul and his company, in obedience to the call of God through the heavenly vision, at once set sail from Troas to proclaim the gospel of Christ in Europe. After a successful voyage of two days they landed at Neapolis, the port of Philippi, and immediately went up to the city which, because of its location on one of the main trade routes, offered a splendid opportunity for Paul's work in Europe.

The interesting story of Paul's stay in Philippi and the success of the gospel of Christ there is told in Acts 16, and a careful reading of it will reveal the fact that it is centered around three people who were converted to the Christian faith.

The diversity of life in this cosmopolitan center was revealed by these first converts — Lydia, an Asiatic business woman, who specialized in selling purple cloth; a demented, Greek slave girl, who brought her owners much financial gain through the telling of fortunes; and a Roman government official, who was serving as jailor in Philippi. From a study of these individuals we learn that there is no such thing as a stereotyped conversion. Some are converted quietly like Lydia, the successful and wealthy business woman, whose heart the Lord opened. Others are converted gloriously like the nameless, demon-possessed slave girl, who was saved from the depths of utter degradation. Still others are converted dramatically like the conscientious jailor in an earthquake experience of emotion.

Lydia, who was the first person to profess faith in Christ under Paul's preaching in Europe, proved to be one of the greatest trophies in his ministry. Her house served as a meeting place for the church in Philippi in the early days of its existence, and prior to Paul's departure from the city. This church grew to be the most loyal and helpful of all the churches which were founded or organized by Paul. There was a rare quality about the fellowship which Paul and the members of the Philippian church enjoyed. There grew up between them a bond of friendship closer than that which existed between Paul and any other church. They were very affectionate and generous toward Paul.

I. Paul's Greeting. Philippians 1:1-2.

This epistle begins by stating the name of the author, the one who was associated with him and those to whom it was sent. It was a very personal letter in which he presented in a familiar manner the essential elements of vital Christian living. From it we learn that the Christian is called to a life of continual rejoicing. When we read it we get some insight as to the possibility of rejoicing in the Lord daily. And just to think that when Paul wrote this letter he was in prison in Rome and expecting daily to be tried before Nero, which trial might result in the death sentence. This makes it all the more wonderful that the key word which occurred so frequently was "joy."

1. By the servants of Jesus Christ. 1:1a.

While this epistle is written in the first person singular, Paul unites with his own the name of Timothy. This beloved comrade, by his presence and help, cheered Paul in his imprisonment. At the particular time of Paul's imprisonment Timothy was the only friend who could be relied upon for sympathy and aid. Then, too, Timothy was well-known to the Philippians. He had been with them often and was soon to visit them again. They owed much to him. Whatever the conscious motive for linking Timothy's name with his own in this salutation, it was a touch of delicate courtesy on the part of Paul. Also, it is an illustration of the power which true friendship has to inspire and to bless. It is characteristic of Paul's way of identifying himself with his colleagues in the Lord's work. Much of Paul's success was due to his ability to enlist others.

Paul called Timothy and himself "bondservants of Jesus Christ." "Bondservants" is a term of true humility, yet when united with the name of "Jesus Christ" it is a word of real dignity. It denotes acknowledged ownership, complete dependence, and faithful obedience. However, it has no implication of servility or compulsory service. It indicates intense devotion and that willing obedience which is perfect freedom. Thus Paul here identifies himself and Timothy with the cause of Christ as men who belong wholly to the Lord and are acting in His name.

Contrary to his usual custom, Paul does not refer to himself as "an apostle" but only as a "servant of Jesus Christ." He did this for two reasons:

- (1) He had no need to defend or to exercise his apostolic authority with this church.
- (2) As a servant of Jesus Christ he was at once on common ground with his readers. There was no barrier of position between them; no reason why they too, as servants, should not share the experience of Christ of which he writes. Property of the Master is at his disposal.

2. To the saints in Christ Jesus. 1:1b.

"Saints" refers to all who are called out by the gospel of Christ and set apart unto all the blessings of redemption. "Saint" does not refer to a person who has attained rare heights of sanctity, or is sinless. It is simply God's name for every believer. Every person who has believed in Christ to the saving of his soul is a saint. He is separated to God in Christ.

"Saints" was the common term applied to all Christians in Paul's day. It is an ideal term, not indicating moral perfection, but rather such a relation to God as makes purity of heart and conduct an obligation to all to whom the term is applied. It implies not only a duty, but a glorious privilege. It is an inspiration to Christians to know that they are "saints." They were encouraged to become in actual experience what they already were in the mind and purpose of God.

The surroundings in Philippi did not provide a favorable atmosphere for the Christians to live for the Lord. However, since they were "in Christ Jesus," the important matter was not where they were situated physically, but rather where they were located spiritually. It is not where we are living but in Whom we are living that determines our victory. Too many of us want to measure God by our circumstances instead of measuring our circumstances by our God. Christ is the sphere of the existence of Christians; He forms the sum and substance of their being. For the true Christian all plans, purposes, activities and hopes are in Christ.

Two groups are mentioned specifically--"the bishops and deacons." The church is now well organized and is no longer a mission point. They are mentioned after the "saints," which may be an intimation that they were not regarded as superiors. The Greek word which is translated "bishop" means "overseer." Bishops were men to whom the oversight of certain matters had been committed by the church. To the extent that a pastor is charged with the supervision of a church, he is a bishop. "Deacons" are servants who minister in the church. They are not to rule the policies or to regulate the affairs of the church.

3. From God and the Lord Jesus Christ. 1:2.

"Grace" and "peace" is the divine order. It is never the reverse. There is no peace for a man in his natural state. Man must preceive the grace from God that provides salvation and from the Lord Jesus Christ who purchased it; then follows peace. Grace is the root and peace is the fruit. Grace and peace are blessings which come only from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. The Father is the Fountain of all blessings, the Son is the Dispenser of all blessings, and believers are the recipients of these blessings.

II. Paul's Gratitude. 1:3-8.

Paul was grateful for all that their fellowship had meant and still meant to him. Here is an inspired glimpse of a pastor's relation to his people, the more remarkable because Paul had not been present with them for ten years.

1. A. past remembrance. 1:3-5.

This embraces:

(1) A thankfulness to God for them. 1:3.

Paul paid them a noble tribute when he said that all his remembrance of them, during the long years of his imprisonment and suffering, was an occasion for gratitude. Can our friends give thanks for every remembrance of us? Paul's remembrance of the Philippians was always with thanksgiving. His noble sense of appreciation revealed the state of grace in which he lived. It reminds us of its lack in our lives. Most people know how to express their complaints, but very few extend their compliments. If we would spend more time thanking God for people we would have less time to find fault with them. If you want people to like you, all you need to do is to like them. You will be interesting to people just as long as you take an interest in them.

(2) A faithfulness in prayer. 1:4a.

Paul was a mighty man in prayer. He prayed in daytime and in the nighttime.

(3) A joyful petitioning on their behalf. 1:4b.

(4) A continuous fellowship in the gospel. 1:5.

This Philippian church had clung to Paul through all his difficulties. When they heard that he was in jail again, they sent a gift for his needs. Paul said, "You have clung to me. You have stuck to me through everything." When everything goes

lovely many people will go along with you, but when things are adverse and unlovely the ranks thin. Paul had gone through some terrible years, but the Philippians had never faltered in their love for him and devotion to him.

2. Future expectations. 1:6.

Paul was a Christian optimist. He had absolute confidence in the ultimate completion of the work of grace in these Philippians. He firmly believed that the Lord could be counted on to finish the work which he had begun, carrying it to completion. When God begins to do a thing, He finishes it. You cannot find in the scriptures where God began anything and gave it up. God never gives up. When He puts forth His hand, He finishes what He undertakes. When He saved us, it was not only for these few years of temptation, trouble, trial, and tribulation, but for the great day that is to come.

3. A present devotion. 1:7-8.

(1) He has them in his heart. 1:7a.

By this he means that he holds them in his memory, thoughts and affections.

(2) They are fellow-partakers of all his experiences. 1:7b. They have shown themselves to be united with Him in closest fellowship, both in his sufferings and in his witness for Christ.

(3) He longs for his friends. 1:8.

Paul was sympathetic and solicitous. He spoke of his love for them as though it were identical with the love of Christ. He was so truly one with his Master as to affirm that his personal longing for his friends in Philippi was inseparable from the love of Christ for them.

This paragraph, in which Paul expresses his joyful gratitude for his Christian companions, indicates that the strongest bonds of friendship are those which are formed by fellowship in Christian service. There are other ties by which hearts are united. Some are sentimental and emotional. Some are due to common interests and sympathies and mental attitudes. However, those which are the most sacred and abiding are the ones which are due to a common relationship to Christ, and to an earnest cooperation in work undertaken for His sake.

III. Paul's Prayer. 1:9-11.

1. For an intelligent love. 1:9.

We can render no greater service to our friends than by praying for them. Friendships cannot be elevated more or safeguarded better than by prayer. Paul prayed that the full tide of their love might be confined to right channels and kept free from all that was selfish and impure. He was exceedingly anxious that they might be able to tell the good from the bad. He prayed that their love might grow richer and richer in these two respects--accurate knowledge of right, and alertness in applying such knowledge to the experiences of life.

2. For a discerning love. 1:10a.

Paul prayed that they might have the power to detect the good from the bad even if they looked alike. If we have this discernment we know what we ought to do and ought not to do. Such love will enable one to "distinguish the things that differ," -- virtue and vice, false and true prophets, corrupt and incorrupt doctrines. Paul is emphasizing the need of wise and careful discrimination. He urges the choice of that which is good.

3. For a transparent love. 1:10b.

The Greek for the word "sincere" means "clear to the light," as when one holds up a jar of honey and the light streams through unobstructed. When subjected to the test it is just what it seems to be, genuine through and through. Sincerity means transparency. He who is sincere is known on the outside for what he is on the inside. So the sincere Christian is just what he appears to be; he appears to be just what he is. God give us more through-and-through Christians. "Sincere" comes from two latin words, "sine," meaning "without," and "cera," the word for "wax" -- "without wax." In the early days they made many of their vessels of wood, hollowed out, such as a basin. Sometimes when the vessel was finished, it was found that the wood had not been seasoned properly and it cracked, and the dealer, not wishing to throw it away, would seal the crack with wax. Of course the purchaser did not use it long before discovering the defect. So, if a man was an honest tradesman, and wanted you to know that his goods were sound, he would say, "without wax." So, "sincere" means that there is nothing made up in your life; it means that you are just what people see you to be; that Christianity is not a fine suit of clothes you wear on the Lord's Day; and that no broken places are going to show up some day. Paul asked that they be just like that.

4. For a fruitful love. 1:11.

The fruit is the practical effect of the indwelling of Christ. Fruitfulness is possible only by union with Christ. What God wants is fruit, not work. Much that is done today as Christian work is no more than the scaffolding of a building. The scaffolding is to be pulled down and only the building left. A machine can work, but a machine cannot bear fruit. For fruit there must be life. What God gives is life. He did not make us machines to work. God found us dead in trespasses and sin; lost, ungodly sinners, children of perdition, with nothing but evil. And He saved us and gave us life. Now that life is to bear fruit. God is looking for fruit, more fruit, much fruit.