

Philippians 1 Letter from Lockdown 26/4/2020

Now there's a thought, some of the New Testament was actually written from lockdown! The Apostle Paul didn't write this letter to his parishioners in Philippi from a cosy manse study overlooking the sea but from the fearsome Mamertine Prison in Rome! Yet despite the experience of being in chains and the possibility of execution Paul is remarkably positive, encouraging his readers to be joyful in their faith!

What an appropriate book to study together over these next few challenging weeks!

The occasion for Paul writing to his old parish was that they had sent one of their members Epaphroditus with a gift for Paul to help and encourage him. This was his 'thankyou letter'.

Aren't we glad of the internet at the moment and every way we have of keeping in touch with family and friends! It's actually been lovely to reconnect with some people we haven't seen or spoken to in years. There are a lot of promises to meet up God-willing when this corona pandemic is over!

We can sense a similar warmth in this 1st century letter. How delighted Paul is to hear from his old congregation, how kind of them to think of him and go out of their way to send help! Part of Paul's joy is the bond of fellowship he feels with these folk, even though they are so far away.

At a time like this when we are physically separated and cannot worship in the same building it's good to remind ourselves that we belong together nonetheless. All Christians are one family with one heavenly Father, one Saviour Jesus and we are indwelt wherever we are by the one global Holy Spirit!

Paul uses this occasion to remind his readers of what it means to be Christians, the blessings we are given and the path we must follow. Let me underline four lessons he mentions here in chapter 1. There are many but let me pick out a few of the main ones:

Joyful confidence in Christ

Godly perspective on life

Personal commitment to the cause

How faith works in practice.

First up, joyful confidence in Christ.

In v6 he says he is 'confident that He Who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.' It's not that Paul is naturally bubbly or optimistic, he has good reason for his confidence - the faithful character of the Lord. God gave His Son to redeem us, He won't discard us now as worthless. The Good Shepherd laid down His life for us, He won't let

us wander indefinitely lost! The Holy Spirit has begun a work of renewal in the heart of every Christian, He won't settle for a job half done! The Lord will persevere in sanctifying us throughout our lives, sometimes particularly in hard times! We sometimes lack confidence in ourselves, but we can have full confidence in Him!

This gives Paul a godly perspective on things that happen. He views everything through the lens of what God is doing to save the world through Christ and His growing Church. All the self-glorifying exploits of human beings are so limited and secondary by comparison.

Rome had imprisoned Paul as a troublemaker. Meanwhile the Emperor Nero imagined himself divine and plotted all kinds of cruel madness. From a worldly perspective this could look like failure, disaster even, but with a Spirit led godly perspective Paul cheerfully sees his imprisonment as a strategic opportunity to witness to his Roman guards about a much better 'man-who-is-god' and encourage the church to greater courage.

The Gospel is spreading and lives are being changed by God's grace, this is what matters most in God's plan, the truly 'big scheme of things'! God works all things together for ultimate good and we already noted at the start how from Paul's difficult and unfair period in lockdown came several of the most wonderful inspired books of the New Testament!

Note also here Paul's personal commitment. 'For to me to live is Christ, to die is gain' he writes. He is willing to be imprisoned, even suffer execution for the cause of Christ. He is willing to become a martyr or carry on evangelising and pastoring, both options are actually hugely challenging. He is surrendered to God's will whatever it brings. Let's not forget Jesus said we must be prepared on occasions to take up our 'crosses' and follow Him. When we face painful times in life let's seek to do so with the same trusting and gracious attitude as our Master and His Apostle!

Joyful confidence in Christ, godly perspective on life, personal commitment, let's note one more thing here in ch1 and it comes in v19. I've called it 'how faith works in practice'. Paul says deliverance will come about through the prayers of the church and the Spirit of Jesus Christ. He may be released from prison. He already seems to be released from fear and anxiety! The risen Lord Jesus is still very much at work throughout the world by His Spirit bringing light and hope and salvation in the darkest situations. He is Lord, He can do as He wishes but He wants to involve us so we are invited, encouraged, *urged* to pray!

Through our prayers the Spirit will move and deliverance will come. Whatever happens, this is how we set about conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of Christ. To Him be the glory!