

13 Philippians. The Contagious Joy of a Political Prisoner

Outline

Greeting, 1:1-2

Thanksgiving and entreaty, 1:3-11

Paul's personal situation in prison, 1:12-26

The praxis of Christ and his followers, 1:27--2:18

Timothy and Epaphroditus's mission, 2:19-30

Concerning circumcision and the law, 3:1-11

Paul's exemplary praxis, 3:12--4:1

Exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche, 4:2-3

Joy and peace in prayer, 4:4-7

Paul's values and virtues, 4:8-9

Thanks for manifestations of solidarity, 4:10-20

Greetings and benediction, 4:21-23

1. Contagious Joy. Philippians, another jewel written by Paul from a prison (1:7, 13-14, 17) focuses on the believer's joy in every circumstance. Such joy is the second in his list of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 ("love, JOY, peace...."). We cannot identify the location of this imprisonment with certainty, but its unjust and oppressive character, in opposition to the free proclamation of the Good News, is obvious (1:12-18). As in the case of Philemon (see above), the traditional place of the imprisonment is Rome, which would imply a late date for the letter

(60-62 AD). Now, however, scholars more commonly propose an imprisonment in Ephesus, with an earlier date (56 AD). The city of Philippi was a colony in the province of Macedonia (to the north of Greece), so the church there was the first in Europe.

In Philippians Paul is a paradigm for the kind of joy in the midst of persecution and oppression that Jesus commanded in the eighth and most extensive Beatitude (Matthew 5:11-12 // Luke 6:22-23; Philippians 2:17-18). Paul and Silas already had manifested such joy when they established the church in Philippi and were imprisoned for their preaching (Acts 16:11-40; see “singing hymns”, v. 25, with the jailer’s conversion following the earthquake). Paul prays for the church with gratitude and joy (Philippians 1:4) and rejoices whenever the Gospel is proclaimed, even when done from malicious motives (1:18); he commands the church: “Rejoice in the Liberator always; I’ll say it again: Rejoice!” (4:4; see 2:2, 19, 28, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 10).

Paul’s joy, ever paradigmatic for the oppressed and the depressed, is thus not the escapist variety common in Oriental religions of his day; nor was it the “contented cow” materialist variety (3:19), be it of capitalist, Marxist or even Pentecostal ideological species. Paul’s joy is that of a believer persecuted and imprisoned because of his proclamation of Jesus’ Good News. He hopes to be liberated by Jesus, either from jail (1:19; Luke 4:18-19; Acts 16:22-40) or from this life, to live always with his Liberator, “for that is far better” (Phil. 1:22-23). Paul’s joy flows from his commitment to the priority of the Gospel (1:7, 12, 16-17, 27; 2:2; 4:3), the centrality of the resurrected Christ (2:5-11; 3:11), God’s liberating justice (3:6-9; 1:11; 4:8), the solidarity in mutual love of friends in the international, multicultural network of new communities (2:1-4; 3:10; 4:10-19), and a firm hope that encompasses the individual, the church, the new humanity, and the universe (1:6; 2:14-16; 3:11-14; 4:3-7). In addition, Paul always felt free to express his indignation against injustice and oppression (3:2, 18-19; Romans 1:18); perhaps for this reason Paul did not fall into the depression typical of those who continually seek to repress their anger.¹

2. “Prison Letters” and Prisoners. Traditionally the New Testament was thought to contain seven letters from Paul himself while in prison. Now, however, five of the traditional seven “prison letters” (three --> pastoral letters plus --> Colossians and Ephesians) are thought to have been written later by the Apostle’s co-workers. Thus only Philippians and Philemon of the Pauline letters actually come directly from the Apostle during an imprisonment. However, John the Baptist was killed in prison, Jesus himself was taken prisoner before his crucifixion, and his apostles Peter and John were imprisoned (Acts 3--5; 12). Thus, not surprisingly, the New Testament strongly emphasizes solidarity with prisoners, either to free them (Luke 4:18-19; Acts 5:1-21; 12:1-19; 16:16-40) or simply to visit them (Hebrews 13:3; Matthew 25:31-46, repeated four times). Such courageous solidarity with prisoners contrasts markedly with many churches today whose only “ministry” to prisoners is to promote the death penalty and ever more severe sentences for them (cf. the spiritual traditions that still produce political prisoners like Ghandi, Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela!).

3. Women Leaders. During his second missionary journey (50 AD), when Paul and his companions Timothy and Silas sought to establish the church in Philippi, Lydia, a woman and traveling merchant, head of her own household, first welcomed the Word and offered hospitality to the missionaries (Acts 16:11-15). Philippians shows that prominent women continued as leaders in this first European church. Paul’s principal aim in writing the letter apparently was to achieve reconciliation between two such women, Euodia and Syntyche, church leaders, whose dispute threatened to split the church (4:2-3; 2:2).² Since Paul, like Jesus (Luke 8:1-3), depended on the generosity of prosperous and independent women, what the Apostle least wanted was a church debilitated by division and thus unable to support his mission work financially (Phil. 4:10-19; cf. Romans 15:22-29, with tensions between Gentiles and Jews).

4. The Oppressed Poor, Physically Challenged, and Ill. Explicit words for poverty do not appear in Philippians, but the letter abounds in other expressions that refer to such realities, reflecting especially Paul's experience: "loss," zemía, 3:7-8; "lack," 4:11-12; "be humbled," 4:12; "to hunger," 4:12; "needs," chreías, 2:25; 4:16, 19.³ Paul himself was not of the poor class, and in addition to his elitist religious education with Gamaliel he had a respectable secular trade as a tent-maker (Acts 18:3). But the circumstances of his itinerant life and the persecution he suffered repeatedly left him impoverished (--> 2 Cor. 11:21b-29). The church in Philippi, directed in part by women, repeatedly had demonstrated economic solidarity to alleviate Paul's needs (Phil. 4:10-19). With such solidarity the church embodied anew the paradigm of Jesus, who was not poor but out of love became poor (2:5-11: cf. 2 Cor. 8:9). The oft-cited promise, "My God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (4:19), is thus not a universal truth ("dogmatic theology") but an assurance addressed to a specific community that had demonstrated solidarity with the Apostle in his need.

The only case of a sick person in Philippians is Epaphroditus, the church's emissary ("apostle") to Paul (2:25-30; 4:18), whom God had healed. However, as happened with the --> Galatians (5:12), Paul's fury against "those of the circumcision" carries him to the point of interpreting circumcision as a type of mutilation and disability that the Apostle felt the false teachers deserved to suffer (3:2).

5. God's Liberating Justice. In Philippians Paul emphasizes his prisoner status (1:7, 13-14, 17) and explicitly recognizes his imprisonment for the Gospel as an experience of "oppression" (thípsis, 1:17), so given his keen awareness of his Jewish heritage (3:4-6; see the Exodus and Jesus' promise to liberate prisoners and heal the sick--> Luke 4:18-19), it is not surprising that the Apostle confidently expected that God would faithfully save/liberate him from prison (1:19). Like Jesus (--> Mark 2:17), Paul, of course, recognized that the term "justice"

when used by the self-righteous and oppressors (Phil. 3:6, 9a) could mean virtually the opposite of God's liberating justice as experienced by the oppressed poor and others who share their faith-commitment (3:9b). The latter is what should characterize Jesus' followers (1:7, 11; 4:8).

6. Sexual Minorities and Anti-Judaism. As in Galatians (and later in Romans), for the church community of the marginalized in Philippi, Paul made the Good News resound with the justification and vindication that God gives, not through the law but by Jesus' faithfulness until death and by the faith that unites us with him (3:9-10). Therefore (also as in Galatians), Paul fiercely opposed rival missionaries who sought to impose circumcision and the law on Gentile believers. The Apostle even classified these rivals as "dogs...evil workmen...those who mutilate the flesh [by circumcision]" (3:2) and as "enemies of the cross of Christ," (3:18-19). Paul's outburst of "political incorrectness," however, was not anti-Semitic, since Paul, ever a Jew himself, circumcised Timothy (whose mother was Jewish) and never opposed circumcision as a ritual for the Jews (Romans 2:25-29). However, by rejecting the circumcision of male Gentiles and by accepting the baptism of both sexes as a new sign and the entry point to the people of God (Galatians 3:26-29; Colossians 2:11, 12), Paul also subverted the entire patriarchal system, which took male superiority for granted, as well as the male right to dominate the woman, and the value of maximum fertility. Especially noteworthy is Lydia's decision (as an unmarried professional woman) to submit to baptism along with the members of her household, without seeking the approval of any man. Circumcision signified not only the patriarchal dominance by males but also the goal of maximizing the propagation of the nation: Abraham's circumcision in Genesis 17 concerns the promise of innumerable descendants (cf. "uncircumcised" fruit trees producing little fruit, Leviticus 19:23-25).

When Paul rejected circumcision for Gentile converts and recognized the equality of baptized women leaders in the new people of God, he liberated both genders from viewing

sexuality as having only procreative ends (see similarly Jesus: God prunes vine branches [disciples] that do not bear the “fruit” of mutual love --> John 15:1-17). In the new inclusive community the norm is no longer the married couple that procreates (Philippians does not contain a single example) but Jesus and his disciples (such as Paul and Timothy, Clement, Epaphroditus, Lydia, Euodia, and Syntyche)--men and women whose “fruit” was not procreated physically, but consisted of new disciples characterized by mutual love. Circumcision, as a sign of patriarchal control of human sexuality, is thus forever rendered null and void.

Instead of Moses’ external law, with its commandments to circumcise and be fruitful, Paul exhorts Christians to manifest love with discernment, which come from the Spirit (Phil. 1:9-11). Such love with discernment, which in Galatians represents the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23), Philippians prefers to describe as virtues, things “worthy of praise” and of reflection:

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just (dikaia), whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (4:8; cf. 2 Peter 1:5-8).

However, according to Acts, when Paul first met the young Timothy (of a Jewish mother and Greek father) and decided to take him with him as his missionary companion, he immediately proceeded to circumcise him to make him acceptable to the Jews (Acts 16:1-5; cf. Philippians 2:19-24)!

For several centuries it has been common to find in the praxis and the teachings of Paul what appear to be “contradictions” (as in the entire Bible). The Apostle is exposed to such an accusation in Philippians, where he expresses this paradox in two verses:

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (2:12b-13).

Jesus similarly expressed himself in paradoxical language: “For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined [divine omnipotence], but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed [Judas’ guilt]!” (Luke 22:22). Furthermore, quite early the Hebrew Scriptures describe the paradox between the omnipotent God who “hardened Pharaoh’s heart” and Pharaoh who “hardened his own heart” (Exodus 5--11; cf. Genesis 45:5; 50:20). In Romans 9--11 Paul proclaims divine sovereignty in three sections (9:1-29; 11:1-16, 25-32); but he intersperses two other sections affirming human responsibility and faith (9:30--10:21; 11:17-24), concluding with a doxology to the infinite God whom no finite human being can comprehend (11:33-36).

Consequently, French theologian Jacques Ellul concluded that “dialectical” thinking is not a creation of Marx, nor of Hegel and Kierkegaard, nor of the Greek philosophers, but of the Biblical authors (Ellul cited Phil. 2:12b-13 as the exemplary text).⁴ Discerning this dialectical characteristic of Paul, together with his priorities and pragmatism in specific contexts, enables us to understand how the Apostle (and the Bible) has been cited both in favor of and against such diverse elements in modern ideologies--both for/against: monarchies, slavery, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, liberation/submission of women, etc.

Discerning the dialectical character of Paul’s thought also enables us to better appreciate the moving affirmation of the Apostle, unjustly imprisoned and threatened with death, yet always hoping to be liberated in order to be able to fulfill his calling:

“For to me, living is Christ [human/God, paradox par excellence] and dying is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

Only in his young companion Timothy did Paul find someone who shared his total dedication and sacrificial love:

“I have no one like him [Timothy] who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.

All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 2:20-21).

This paradigmatic, intimate friendship, however, was but one in the new multicultural, international network of communities--communities of friends that were beginning to subvert and supplant the old orders of patriarchal households and empire (“Caesar’s household,” Phil. 4:22). Luke Timothy Johnson shows how Paul appropriated the language of friendship from his Greco-Roman cultural context, but then used it to develop a particularly Christian understanding of friendship expressed in self-sacrifice and self-emptying love toward others.⁵ However, for friends in an elitist male circle to “have all things in common” (share books?) is one thing; friendship in communities that are quite diverse, with prosperous and poor sharing a common weekly meal, commonly result in much more radical challenges! (--> 3 John; Acts 2 and 4; 1 Corinthians 11; Jude; 1 Timothy).

Bibliography

- Bruce, F. F. Philippians. IBC 11. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1983/89.
- Fee, Gordon D. Paul's Letter to the Philippians. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Fitzgerald, John T. "Philippians, Epistle to the." In The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman, 5:318-326. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Hawthorne, Gerald F. Philippians. WBC 27. Waco, Texas: Word, 1983.
- O'Brian, Peter T. Philippians. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Osiek, Carolyn. "Philippians." In Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 2:238-249. New York: Crossroad, 1994.
- Perkins, Pheme. "Philippians." In The Women's Bible Commentary, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, 343-345. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992.
- Portefaix, L. Sisters Rejoice. Paul's Letter to the Philippians and Luke-Acts as Received by First-Century Philippian Women. CBNTS 20. Uppsala/Stockholm: Almqvist, 1988.
- Witherington, Ben, III. Friendship and Finances in Philippi: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians. Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1994.