

Today, you will hear some of the richest words in the New Testament, words of the humility of Jesus Christ and words of his exaltation as the true Lord of heaven and earth.

04 Phil – Great Words from the Great Letter

Paul started the church in Philippi on his second missionary journey. The year was about 49-50 AD and Philippians was written 10-12 years later. Much happened between those years, and Paul and the Philippians stayed in contact with one another.

Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. ⁴ Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, ⁵ for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now.

Such are Paul's words in Philippians 1:3-5. When Paul speaks of their being partners in spreading the Good News, he is speaking of many things but primarily he is talking about the gifts they sent to help him in his mission. Listen to his words in 4:15-16.

As you know, you Philippians were the only ones who gave me financial help when I first brought you the Good News and then traveled on from Macedonia. No other church did this. ¹⁶ Even when I was in Thessalonica you sent help more than once.

Now that Paul is in prison in Rome they have sent him another gift at the hands of Epaphroditus that we read about in 2:25. This church also gave money for the relief of the saints in Jerusalem and you can read about the generosity of all the Macedonian church in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.

Epaphroditus, one of Paul's disciples, was most likely the man who carried Paul's letter to the church in Philippi and who brought back the money that would assist Paul while he was in prison. It is important to know that in the ancient world, the prisons did not have money budgeted by the state to feed and clothe prisoners. Prisoners would be dependent upon family members or friends to help them with their basic needs. Paul thanks them for their gift and speaks of it as an offering to God, an act of worship to God, and he says that God will repay them for their generosity.

The letter to Philippi, then, is really a letter of thanks although Paul never specifically says "thank you" but instead speaks of frequent giving and receiving between the two. This was the style in the ancient world when letters of friendship would stress such reciprocity and express how absence in the body did not mean absence in the heart. Paul used this kind of language in 1:27 and 2:12 where he exhorted them to maintain Christ-glorifying behavior in his absence.

But there is another theme Paul addresses. One that is much more serious. Remember our opening messages about Paul's trials in the city. The Philippians Christians are facing the same kinds of trials and this is how Paul speaks to them in 1:28-30.

Don't be intimidated in any way by your enemies. This will be a sign to them that they are going to be destroyed, but that you are going to be saved, even by God himself. ²⁹ For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him. ³⁰ We are in this struggle together. You have seen my struggle in the past, and you know that I am still in the midst of it.

We have to remember this, the gospel that Paul preached undermined the absolute claims of the Roman empire. It did not undermine the empire as revolutionaries would. But it undermined it in the fact it proclaimed that Caesar was not lord, but that there was another Lord, Jesus and that one day every knee would bow to him.

Paul's message also undermined the idolatry of the day. The idols that people worshipped were false gods, really, they were "nothings" that only deceived people and brought them into bondage. My wife and I saw statues of some of these gods when we were in Philippi, and we saw the niches in the cliff walls that were devoted to the false Roman god Silvanus. Philippi also worshipped Jupiter, Apollos, and Artemis. As the Christians stood firm in their opposition to the idolatry of their day, they would receive persecution from the pagan majority that expected them to follow them in their practices.

Trouble came from other sources as well. Philippians records the actions of Jewish agitators in chapter 3. These were men who were trying to turn the Philippian Christians into Jewish proselytes, demanding that they be circumcised to be right with God and that they adhere to Jewish dietary practices. Paul gave very strong warning in the early part of Chapter 3 about them when he said:

² Watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved.

He may have also had these men in mind when later in the chapter he said:

For I have told you often before, and I say it again with tears in my eyes, that there are many whose conduct shows they are really enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ They are headed for destruction. Their god is their appetite, they brag about shameful things, and they think only about this life here on earth.

With such persecution and agitation coming from Gentile and Jewish sources, it is no wonder that Paul wrote to them to follow his example and the pattern that he had set for them. Paul set this pattern and told them in 3:14 "I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us."

We would do well to follow this example. There are so many voices today that are calling us to follow them, but if there is any human we should follow outside of Jesus Christ it is the example of Paul. As we read this epistle we will learn more about his example and especially the example that Jesus Christ set for us.

But there is even more. There are not only external problems. There are internal problems as well. These problems are not nearly as severe as the ones experienced by the churches in Galatia or by the church in Corinth. Yet, it was serious enough that Paul had to bring it up. There was conflict between

two leading women – Euodia and Synthyce and Paul exhorts them to live in harmony in the Lord. Perhaps this is also why he exhorts the whole church to be united in 1:27 and 2:1-4 as their personal conflict may have threatened to become a larger, church-wide issue. These were good women and they had stood by Paul’s side in the spread of the Gospel, and he did not want to see this degenerate into something that could be calamitous for the church.

Well as you can see, these were normal people with normal problems and with dangers from the outside. And although Paul had some concerns, mostly, he was filled with joy. Twelve times in his letter he mentions joy and for good cause as this church was a model church in many ways of how all churches should conduct themselves internally and how all churches should unite with leaders to spread the Gospel through finances and through their own evangelism. Such was the church in Philippi.

I cannot finish this overview of this great letter without mentioning the great words right in the center of the book. I am referring to Philippians 2:5-11 which says this:

5 You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

6 Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.

7 Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.

When he appeared in human form,
8 he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal’s death on a cross.

9 Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,

10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Here are some of the richest words in the New Testament as they tell us about the humility of Jesus Christ, humility that led to his death and his subsequent exaltation by means of his resurrection and enthronement. I can’t wait to get into these words in detail with you.

As I have prepared these messages I have been reminded how counter-cultural this is and how counter this is to our human tendencies of selfishness. Gary Burge, who is a professor of New Testament at the Wheaton College graduate school has written a book called *The New Testament in Antiquity*. I want to give credit to him and his book for helping me to find many of the historical insights I have shared with you. One insight that he shares is that in the ancient Roman world, humility was to be avoided at all costs. A humble person was considered socially inferior. To be humble was to be weak and to voluntarily humble oneself was to degrade oneself.

What a contrast this is to the Lord of glory, Jesus the Messiah who emptied himself by becoming a man, then humbled himself by becoming a servant, and then humbled himself all the way to dying the death of a criminal upon a Roman cross even though he was innocent. Yet, we know that was not the end of the story. We know that God raised him up and then enthroned him. God highly exalted him and gave him the name above all names so that at the name of Jesus every knee would bow and every tongue would confess that Jesus is Lord.

That happened to the godly Jewish woman Lydia when she and her household bowed the knee and confessed Jesus as Lord. That happened to the harsh, pagan jailer of Philippi when he and his household bowed the knee and confessed Jesus as Lord and were baptized. That's how the church in Philippi started and it was to this group and to many others who had come to believe in Jesus that Paul wrote his letter.

Well, those are some of the highlights in this great book and in our next broadcast we will start with Chapter 1 and Verse 1 as we start digging deep in this book.

But as we bring this to an end today I ask, “have you confessed Jesus as your Lord”? Have you turned away from your false gods and embraced him the only true God, Savior, and Lord?