

The Epistle to the Philippians

The interesting account of the Apostle's first visit to Philippi and the beginning of the ecclesia in that city is given in Acts xvi. Philippi, named after himself by Philip of Macedon, was the first city in Europe to receive the gospel by the preaching of Paul, who stayed there on the occasion of his second missionary journey. It was a city of considerable importance, through which many travellers passed.

In obedience to the call, "*Come over into Macedonia, and help us*" (Acts xvi. 9), Paul, in company with Timothy and Silas, journeyed thither, and arriving at Philippi, abode there certain days, and on the Sabbath day visiting "a place of prayer" (a *Proseucha*), by the river side, "*sat down and spake unto the women which resorted thither*"; these were evidently women of the Jewish community of the city. A certain woman of the number, Lydia, readily received Paul's proclamation of the Truth, and was baptized with her household, and immediately opened her house to the apostles, whose labours in this city soon brought them into conflict with the authorities; a damsel possessed with a spirit of divination, being restored by Paul, excites the anger of her masters, and resulted in Paul and Silas appearing before the magistrates, when charges of "troubling the city, and teaching unlawful customs" are brought against them. After being cruelly and unjustly beaten they are cast into prison, and their feet made fast in the stocks. Their troubles, however, did not daunt their spirit in the service of God, for "*at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God; and the prisoners heard them.*" And then an earthquake occurs; the foundations of the prison are shaken by God, and the doors are opened. We are all familiar with the record of the conversion of the jailer, and his baptism with his household (Acts. xvi. 25-34). Next day, the magistrates having learned that the Apostles were Roman citizens, besought them to leave the city, and after visiting the house of Lydia, they departed. Although, for a time, the work of the Apostles had come to this abrupt end in Philippi, an ecclesia had been established there, to which, some ten or twelve years later, Paul addressed the epistle we are now considering.

When Paul wrote this letter to the saints at Philippi he was at Rome, whither he had been taken as a prisoner on account of his faithful service to the Lord Jesus Christ, and we can, therefore, to some extent, imagine the feelings of our first century brethren to whom the letter was addressed. How the word would go round that a letter had been received from Paul whilst he is a prisoner in Rome, a prisoner there for the truth's sake, a prisoner because of his faithfulness in regard to the things of the truth. Yes, to some extent we can imagine the excitement, and the eagerness with which the contents of the letter would be anticipated, and, perhaps, we can go a little further, and endeavour to realise that Paul would have wished that we should be included also amongst those who would be eager and anxious to know what were the contents of this letter. Paul intended the letter to apply to us just as much as to those to whom it was addressed; he would take a long view of the time which would elapse between his own day and the coming of Christ, and would wish that this letter should be eagerly read by all of like precious faith in all ages and all countries. He would remind those believers of the fact that he and they were in fellowship, that they had fellowship one with the other. Fellowship is communion as a result of possessing unity of mind in regard to the things of God, and that was the condition which existed between Paul and these Philippian believers to whom he addressed this letter. We claim, in reverence and thankfulness, to have fellowship with God and with His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. We make that claim because by the Truth we are in the happy position of possessing the mind of God and the mind of the Lord Jesus Christ. These Philippian believers enjoyed that same fellowship; they were not only in fellowship with Paul, —their fellowship embraced the Lord Jesus Christ and God himself, and we enjoy the same fellowship, and it takes in the Apostle Paul as we see, although he is now dead yet in a very real sense we have fellowship with the Apostle; although dead, he speaks to us in this letter. If Paul were present he could but speak to us the same things as he addressed in this letter to the Philippians; he could say no new thing. There might be a new relationship of it to ourselves as applicable to our own peculiar circumstances, but in principle he would say exactly the same things to us; and what does he say?

First of all he speaks of himself, not with the object of emphasising his own importance or of extolling his virtues or of impressing the Philippians with the fact that Paul was a very great man, and had written to them. No, there was nothing of that sort about the Apostle Paul. He merely introduced himself as a servant. "*Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ.*" What a great difference is here to be seen between Paul and those men who falsely claim to be his successors. If a letter were sent to-day from one of those pretended successors to a so-called church, we know how it would open. It would be a letter from His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, or the Right Rev. Lord Bishop of somewhere. Nothing of that sort in regard to Paul, none of that empty nonsense; a realisation of facts, that Paul as Paul was nothing, Paul was a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ; he deals with facts and realities. A servant of Jesus Christ, —and what form of service is that? It is the highest honour that mortal man can attain to. The world bestows its empty honours upon its own, —a Freeman of the City of London, or the Order of Merit, or whatnot. Those are the honours which the world can bestow, but these are merely empty honours, mere phrases, compared with the honour of being in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ, of being associated with God's only begotten Son, in upholding the things which belong to his Father, the great and eternal God. Yes, that is the highest honour which man can attain to, to be called in truth and in sincerity a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not seen in its true light yet; it is despised now, but the day is coming when it will be seen in its true light, when it will be realised that that was indeed the greatest honour to which mortal man could attain. In the day of Christ's coming in power and great glory, men will give anything to have been included amongst that class of servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so that is how Paul speaks of himself, and then he proceeds to define those to whom the letter was addressed, "the saints in Philippi," the called-out ones, those who had been separated or sanctified by belief and obedience of the gospel; and so manifestly, we are in this number, for we have all believed and obeyed the gospel, we have all been separated and called out, sanctified by the word of the gospel. We are saints if we are walking truly in harmony with our profession; we are of this class, the saints, not at Philippi, it just happens to be in London or somewhere else, it might be anywhere, it does not matter, —there are no geographical limits; but those in any part, who are called and separated by the gospel, are the saints. The only thing that matters is that we are walking in harmony with that profession.

Having thus introduced himself and greeted them in the truth, it is very interesting to note the uppermost thought in the mind of this Apostle. It is one of thankfulness, of deep gratitude, for these brethren and sisters in Philippi. We think it must have been a very exemplary ecclesia for Paul thus to have spoken to them—the very first thought, thankfulness for them. Here is Paul a prisoner at Caesar's court, in much tribulation, in much suffering, much anxiety, and in those circumstances, he is able to look across into Macedonia, at Philippi, and think of those Philippians with thoughts of great thankfulness and gratitude for their fellowship in the gospel; and he, furthermore, expresses his love for them because of the fruit which their faith had brought forth. Here was a source of true comfort, of true satisfaction to Paul, for he it was who established this ecclesia. The ecclesia at Philippi was, humanly speaking, created by Paul; he had gone there and he had sown the seed of the gospel, letting drop, as it were, the word of the Truth; and here he is now in his tribulation rejoicing in the fact that the seed which was then sown had brought forth fruit to the honour and praise of God's Name in that part of the earth. And so he says in verse 3: "*I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy;*" and then at the 9th verse he continues: "*And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.*"

In Proverbs xi. 24, we read: "*There is that scattereth and yet increaseth,*" and here is a very practical illustration of the truth of those words. Paul scattered the good seed of the Kingdom amongst these Philippians; the seed is the Word of God. Paul proclaimed that word faithfully, a faithful sowing or scattering of that seed, and what is the result? Fruit was brought forth abundantly unto God, that which was scattered increased, and Paul's prayer was that they might go on increasing, being filled

with the fruits of righteousness, that their love might abound yet more and increase; and so in the second chapter and the first verse he appeals to them: "*If there be, therefore, any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy*"—fill it to the full, that is the idea, abounding more and more, increasing, bringing forth more and more fruit, and fill to the full his cup of joy, by being as he says, truly of one mind with Christ. Here was Paul's mind and his desire not only towards the Philippians but also towards us. Paul would have us, if he were here—he would exhort us, we feel sure, to also bring forth this fruit, and it can only be done by letting the word of Christ dwell richly in our hearts. We have to sow the word, to let it sink down, and if we care for it, it will spring up and bring forth much fruit. If we are of the same class as these brethren for whom Paul was lifting up his voice in thanksgiving, we shall be engaged in this work. Our efforts in the ecclesia in which God has been pleased to place us, will be to help each other to receive that word, to receive that good seed; we shall be found trying to encourage one another to walk according to the will of God. Our efforts will be to exhort one another to take this Word and to walk in harmony with its precepts. We shall be endeavouring to build one another up in the things which belong to our most holy faith, and the more we sow that seed, the more we speak to each other concerning these things of the truth, the more fruit will abound to the honour and glory of God and our own salvation in the day of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the second chapter and the fifteenth verse the Apostle prays that we may "*be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain.*" There is the hope of the Apostle Paul, there is his desire, that the Philippians and the saints everywhere, may bring forth such fruit that he may realise when he steps forth again upon the earth in the presence of Christ, that he has not run in vain, nor laboured in vain; that the things that he endured, the tribulations, the anxieties and the perplexities on account of the Truth, were not in vain, but that they brought forth fruit unto the honour and glory of God.

And so there is a practical illustration of the words of Solomon—"*There is that scattereth and yet increaseth*"; but we can frequently invert the order of these wonderful little Proverbs and then again they express a further truth; and so we read: "*There is that increaseth and yet scattereth,*" and it is equally true and instructive, for the Apostle in chapter II. and the third verse says: "*Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.*" Verse fourteen: "*Do all things without murmurings and disputings.*" Here are evil characteristics in an ecclesia, which, if allowed to increase, will very quickly scatter to the winds all those good fruits which the Apostle so ardently desired should be brought forth by the heirs of salvation. Let discord amongst brethren be sown in an ecclesia, let there be an increase of murmurings and of strivings and of vain glory—let those things increase, and the fruits of the Spirit will, as we have said, be scattered to the winds. There will be an end of fruit bearing. We shall be trees bringing forth merely leaves with no fruit, and we all know what happened to that tree in the past which brought forth only leaves and no fruit—it was cursed and withered away.

Again we say, if Paul were actually here these are the things we feel sure he would impress upon our minds; they are not our thoughts but Paul's; he addressed them to the Philippians and through them to us; and so we turn for a moment from the Philippians and from Paul, and we think of ourselves, and we ask ourselves the question—if Paul were here, would he be able to say: "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, brethren at Clapham and elsewhere." We earnestly hope he would; I am sure each one is filled with the desire that Paul would be able to say that. It entirely depends upon ourselves whether he would. It depends whether we are filled with the fruits of righteousness; or speaking by the Spirit, would he complain that there is something of strife, there is some little manifestation of vain glorying in our midst, a little manifestation of murmurings and of disputings in the ecclesia. We hope not. Paul would know, and we all know too, whether it would be true if he were here and said those things.

And so what is the practical exhortation? We turn to chapter III. and the seventeenth verse where the Apostle says, "Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample." *"Followers of me,"* even, as he said elsewhere, *"I also am of Jesus Christ."* Yes, Paul was a true follower of Jesus Christ. He had a love for the brethren, but Christ had a greater love for them even than the Apostle, and so from Paul we step easily to the Lord Jesus Christ. We think of Christ's love in laying down his life for us, and his earnest desire for the eternal good and everlasting salvation of those who should come unto God through him. We think of his example of perfect obedience to the will of God in all things; we think of his sacrifice on our account. Paul sacrificed himself for the brethren, but there again we easily step from the example of Paul to the case of Christ, who rendered that greater sacrifice, who laid down his life in order that we might attain unto eternal life; and with these thoughts in mind we look forward with much hope and confidence to the day of the coming of Christ Jesus; Paul says in the twentieth verse of the third chapter: *"For our conversation is in heaven: from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself."* Is not that our hope? We know it is. We believe those very things, looking forward to the coming of Christ, and it will mean that if faithful he will change our present bodies, and will fashion them like unto his own glorious unending Spirit body. We believe these things; we know they are true, and that Christ will come, and if we are faithful we shall be made like him when he appears; and, therefore, following on to the fourth chapter we can take to ourselves the words of Paul's exhortation: *"Therefore"*—because of this fact that Christ is coming—*"Therefore, my brethren dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved."* Verse four: *"Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God, and the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."*

----- W.J.W.