

To All the Saints

Philippians 1:1-11

Alexander the Great was the famous king of Macedonia and conqueror of Greece, the ruler of the Persian Empire during the 300s BC. When his father, Philip II, seized the throne of Macedonia in 359 BC, that empire was about the size of the state of Maryland or Vermont. But under his leadership, and military strength, the empire grew. And in a place that is now called Greece, he annexed an area known for its gold, then enlarged and rebuilt a city there which he named after himself. Philippi.

Two centuries later, Rome conquered Macedonia, and Philippi became a Roman colony. It was at Philippi that Mark Antony and Octavian avenged the death of Julius Ceasar by defeating and killing Brutus and Cassius. In 29 BC, Octavian became the sole head of the Roman Empire by defeating Mark Antony, who was hopelessly infatuated with the woman who was his undoing, namely Cleopatra. Both Cleopatra and Mark Antony committed suicide. And Octavian became known as Casear Augustus.

Thus the great city of Philippi was in miniature, a reproduction on a small scale of the imperial city of Rome. Its inhabitants were primarily Romans. And in Acts 16, we read of the beginning of the church of Jesus Christ at Philippi.

Act 16:9 “And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ 10 Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. 11 Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days. 13 And on the

Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there.”

We then read of the conversion of a woman named Lydia, and after Paul and Silas were thrown in jail following the conversion of a slave girl, we read of that great conversion of the jailor at Philippi.

Paul did not forget the Philippians, nor did they forget him. They supported his ministry, and Paul returned again to Philippi on his third missionary journey, according to Acts 20. His love for the Philippians continued as their appreciation of him grew in return.

Later, as we read at the end of the book of Acts, Paul was imprisoned and sent to Rome, for he himself appealed to Caesar. The year was now about AD 60. And the Philippians, alarmed by the seriousness of his situation, sent him a generous gift by the hand of one of their own members, Epaphroditus. He had become seriously ill and almost died, but when he was well enough to travel, Paul sent him back to Philippi with a message, the pastoral counsel and encouragement of a personal letter which we begin to study together this evening.

We read of that in,
2:25-30

Many Christians find Philippians the most attractive of all Paul’s letters, and the easiest of his writings to read. It is a genuine letter from the Apostle to his beloved church at Philippi. It’s a thank you letter, expressing thanksgiving for their gift. And it’s a pastoral letter, written to dear friends, full of the joy of genuine, Christian friendship. James Boice describes this letter

as “one of the most joyous books in the Bible.”

With that, we’ll begin our study of this great book by looking at this bond between Paul and the people of Phillippi, whom he calls “the saints.

v.1-2

Let’s look more closely at,

I. THE CONNECTION WITH ALL THE SAINTS.

First of all, Paul finds no necessity to proclaim his authority, no need to defend himself with his official position, such as he does when writing to the Corinthians, a letter which begins with these words, “Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God.”

With the more gentle and supportive Philippians, he identifies himself and Timothy as bondservants. He was certainly the apostle of Jesus Christ called through the will of God. He surely wrote with that authority, and the letter he wrote bears the authority of God as a letter written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It’s infallible and authoritative. But Paul has no need here to proclaim that authority, for he is deeply loved and honored. So he calls himself a servant, a bond-servant, expressing such loving humility to the ones he calls the saints. Those words give us,

A. The personal identification of author and recipients.

And much is to be learned from that description. How warm and tender is the relationship between apostle and church, when there is such mutual love and honor. And what great dignity the Apostle gives the people when he calls them “the saints.”

Unfortunately, that expression ‘the saints’ has been captured by those who would use it wrongly, as a way of describing only a

certain group of Christians, in the best sense, those who have excelled in personal holiness or spiritual achievement. And so the Church of Rome specifically identifies certain people by designating them “saints.” And we need to stay clear of that idea, for “the saints” is a description of the whole congregation of God’s people. We are “the saints,” but not because of anything particularly noteworthy about us, but because God has set us apart to be his own. We are “saints”, or holy ones, not because of our own actual practice of holiness, but because of the holiness and righteousness of Jesus Christ that is imputed to us and received by faith alone.

All of God’s people are rightly identified and described by this title, the saints. And to them, Paul wishes the greatest of all possible blessings, “grace and peace.”

It’s with that same affection with which Paul wrote those words that I often use them in greeting you as a congregation before our worship services.

v.2

One quick note, also, that I won’t dwell upon but mention in passing now. Note that Paul makes specific mention of the officers of the church in verse 1, referring to both bishops and deacons. Bishops, or overseers, fill the same office as those called Elders, and Paul seems to be clear about identifying two offices within the church, one of spiritual oversight and shepherding, and the other an office of ministry and service. Elders and Deacons. And among the saints, among the congregation, there would certainly be such men to be greeting personally.

But more importantly for the context of the book of Philippians, I want you to see Paul’s depth of,

B. Personal affection for beloved friends.

v.8

Those are anything but empty words. In fact, Paul is effectively taking a vow. He is sincerely and consciously calling God to be his witness, thus swearing to the truthfulness of what he declares. And what he declares is his love. What he calls the “affection of Jesus Christ.”

The original King James translation keeps the literal sense of the Greek words, “how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ.” It is the bowels, the inward, internal organs that are used in Greek to describe the seat of the deepest emotion and affection. And the point is simply that Paul is writing from the depth of what we might call the “heart.” From the depth of his soul. From his innermost being, from the innermost point of his whole existence and personality. He writes with personal affection, such great affection that he would dare to describe it as “the affection of Jesus Christ.”

He is expressing love for this church on the order of the love which Jesus has for his church. This is a touching and affectionate greeting, one that reveals how trivial our expressions often are that we use in communicating with one another.

Even in our deepest and closest relationships, we hesitate to express such genuine emotion, don't we? In an age when e-mail has even further informalized our communication, we are not often given to such formal, intimate and tender expressions of the sweetness of Christian love for one another. But we ought to try to restore something of what we read about here in the relationship between Paul and his dear friends. Paul clearly describes his personal connection with all the saints.

Then he moves immediately to thanksgiving. As I said, this is a thank-you note. Written with great joy. Paul expresses,

II. JOYFUL THANKSGIVING FOR ALL THE SAINTS.

v.3

I should note immediately that Paul is referring to prayer. “Every remembrance of you” means “every time I remembered you as I prayed to God.”

v.3-4

Strictly speaking, Paul is not thanking the Philippians, nor is he praising them. Rather, in a much greater sense, he is thanking God for them. He is praising God for them.

There is such value for us in that pattern, both in giving and receiving of praise. We are taught in the psychological insecurity of our age, that we need to receive praise. We are taught in our culture that we need to be thanked. Otherwise, if you are not appreciated, then you don't have to do things for people.

So we are taught to praise people even as we are taught to crave the praise of others. And that is really quite misguided. And dangerously man-centered. What we ought to do is praise God for people, and express that to them. Likewise, what we ought to crave is for the glory of God to be advanced by the praise and thanksgiving others offer to him for us!

Let me urge you to practice this. When you want to praise or thank someone, express it as Paul does.

v.3

There is a specific focus to Paul's praise, specific things he is thankful for. Most especially, he expresses,

A. Thankfulness for those who share in the work and ministry of the church.

What he calls, “your fellowship in the gospel.”

v.3-5

Fellowship means holding something common, sharing together in a particular work. And the meaning here is obvious. Paul is thanking the people for sharing in the work of the church. They didn’t see Paul as someone to come and do the work of ministry for them, but with them! They were eager to be involved. Eager to take part. They weren’t spectators, but participants, and what a delight that brings to the apostle. That sense of fellowship is, of course, that which has the hardest to preserve during these past six months of COVID related shut down. And that is the thing we need to be diligent to preserve.

We read in verse 27, that this fellowship means that Paul and the church were “with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” What a good thing that is. Paul is a bit more specific in,

v.7

“The defense and confirmation of the gospel.” Defense of the gospel is the word we use for apologetics, which is the branch of theology given to defending the truths of the faith, the proclamation of the gospel that would silence the objections of unbelievers, humbling them unto salvation.

The confirmation of the gospel, proving and declaring its truth for the whole world to hear.

The Philippians were, of course, involving themselves with money, also, though the money was not a token of their unwillingness to be involved personally, but as a demonstration of

their personal involvement. So it should be for us, particularly when you think of giving money for things like missions.

The specific mention of the gift is found in,

Phil. 4:10 “But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity...¹⁴ Nevertheless you have done well that you shared in my distress. ¹⁵ Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. ¹⁶ For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account. ¹⁸ Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.”

What a sweet thank you note! What rich fellowship between apostle and the saints in the work of the gospel.

Paul describes the basis of that fellowship when he says at the end of verse 7, when he says,

v.7 “...you all are partakers with me of grace.”

Partakers with me of grace. Indeed, is there any other sense of fellowship that matters! There is no sense of superiority and inferiority. No sense that any one person is more important than any other. Certainly no sense of the apostle lording it over the people. Rather, together, they are all partakers of grace. And the God of grace receives all the glory. This is not an example of superficial flattery. Not in the least. Instead, Paul is expressing deep,

B. Thankfulness to God for the evidence of his grace in

the lives of the saints.

That's what sets apart the people of God to be saints. The evidence of God's grace. The evidence that God is at work. The evidence that God has worked to enable and equip every one for some function or task within the body.

Paul describes that evidence of God's grace with these words to the church at Corinth,

1 Cor. 12:4 "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. 6 And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. 7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all."

"For the common good," as the NIV translates it.

So, within the church especially, don't ever let pride lead you to a sense of jealousy when you see what some else is enable to do, nor let that pride cause you to be intimidated or insecure in the presence of someone else, nor let it puff you up in your own achievements. Rather view yourselves, as individuals within a group, as partakers together of the grace of God. And give God the thanks for that grace, as it is evident in your own life and in the lives of others around you.

Learn to express thanksgiving this way, as you communicate with one another. And more importantly, as you pray to God.

v.3-7

Up to now, though, I've not referred to verse 6. This is one of the most clear and plain verses in all of the Bible which demonstrates and teaches the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

v.6

Paul is expressing,

III. CONFIDENT ASSURANCE REGARDING ALL THE SAINTS.

Confidence, in the work of God. Confidence that is based upon that fellowship of grace that we have just described. Therefore, Paul has such confidence about the people of Philippi because,

A. God has worked a work of grace in his saints.

And it is a work of grace. Paul knows it. A work of God. Paul does praise the people of Philippi because they are such good people. Rather, he praises God who has done such a good work of grace in their lives.

And there is such a profound difference between those two things. Never miss that distinction. Never underestimate it, nor lessen its importance. God has worked a work of grace.

v.7 "...you all are partakers with me of grace."

I hope you realize my intentional and repetitive emphasis upon grace, for the moment you start thinking about your own efforts, the moment you start thinking that there is any ground for confidence in yourself, you are on dangerous ground.

It is all of grace. It is all a work of grace. And that great statement of the perseverance of the saints is so easy to understand, isn't it?

B. God will finish the work he has begun in his saints.

God will finish what he has started.

That is very often not true of us! We lack perseverance. We start things and then drop them, failing to complete what we've

begun. Sometimes it is because of events outside our control, or due to a lack of time or opportunity. Sometimes it is a matter of laziness, revealing a serious, serious character flaw.

But God has none of those limitations. And what God starts, he completes. That doctrine is, of course, tied in with the doctrine of his decrees and predestination. Because everything God does, he determined to do before the foundation of the world. So everything that he determined to do in the counsel of his own will, he does. And everything he does, he finishes!

Think about that, as you consider all of your own unfinished projects around the house, and all the unfinished business in your own lives. There is no room in this doctrine for complacency, for taking for granted the gift of God's grace. For if there is no evidence that God began that good work, if there is no evidence that God is at work at all, then there is no ground to claim the assurance of eternal life. In other words, there is no assurance of salvation given to a person who says, "Fifteen years ago I went forward during an altar call and accepted Christ, so I know I'll go to heaven no matter what I do. After all, once saved, always saved."

That's foolishness. There is no ground of hope for those with no evidence of being partakers of grace. But to you who have that evidence, to you who have evidence in your life of the work of the grace of God, there is great hope. And great confidence. And great assurance. And none of it depends upon you! God will finish the work he has started.

I know my own heart well enough to know that there still is a depth of the presence of sin that terrifies me. And if I thought for one moment that my salvation was a work of my own, or that I was the determining element in my salvation, and that the

continuing of my salvation depended upon me, I would be terrified of falling away. Because, in my own flesh, I am capable of that. That is a horrifying realization. In my flesh, I am capable of falling away.

But that won't happen. It won't happen because my salvation is a work of God's grace. And I read in Philippians 1:6 that God will finish that work. He will complete that work. He will bring to a conclusion what he intended to do all along. And he will do all of that faithfully until Jesus Christ returns, when I will be made perfect in holiness along with all the rest of God's elect.

There is no sense that we might thwart God's purposes by our own sinfulness and weaknesses. There is no sense that we might fall into great sin and, despite God's promptings, remain in that sin and die in that sin to face eternal condemnation.

NO. God is God, and God who is at work in us will continue to be at work in us. And so when we sin, he will draw us back, even, if necessary, in the graphic and painful experiences of repentance for sin.

Thus Paul is thankful to God for the people of Philippi,
v.6

And with that confidence, Paul continues to describe his prayers for the church,
v.9

There, again, it is God's work. Paul's confidence, even as he prays for it, is that,

C. God will bring an increase of love in the minds of the saints.

He prays for an increase of love. What a glorious thing to pray for. Paul prays similarly for the saints in Ephesus this way,

Eph. 3:14 “For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height-- 19 to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Learn to pray this way for one another!! Pray for an increase of love, with the confidence that God is at work to do it! Pray for one another, that God would increase our love for him, and our knowledge of his love for us. Those two things really do become one and the same, in the Christian of great maturity. Knowledge of God’s love for us and extent of our love for God.

Note that it is a love in the minds of the saints.
v.9

Love abounds, love expresses itself in real knowledge, in intimate and personal knowledge of God, and discernment, which is the wisdom to understand and do what is pleasing to him.

When God is at work, such things ought to increase. And when you sense that in your life, when you sense that God is stirring up your heart and mind to greater love, then be confidently assured of this great promise, “that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

There is still a further purpose for such increase of love, and

that is that

D. God will bring growth in godliness in the lives of his saints.

v.10-11

Again, this is expressed as a prayer, Paul’s prayer for the people. And it is such a marvelous demonstration of godly prayer. And confident prayer.

Because God is faithful to complete the good work which he has begun in the people, because of that, Paul prays confidently for such increase of godliness and righteousness.

I fear, all too often, we have too low expectations of Christians. Granted, we will all fall and stumble, and all need to depend upon the blood of Christ to cleanse us from our sin, but my people, we need to raise the bar. We need to pray for one another to be able to approve the things that are excellent. We need to pray for one another for sincerity, godliness and faithfulness without impurities and wicked motives. We must pray for the strength and ability to live our lives without offense. Until Jesus Christ returns.

Let’s raise the bar. With every confidence that God will continue to work in us, let’s pray for that work to be increasingly evident! FOR THE GLORY AND PRAISE OF GOD.

As you pray, have high expectations for the work of God in the lives of his people. Have high expectations for the work of God in your own life, and press on, as Paul will write in chapter 3. Knowing that God will complete the good work which he has begun, press on “toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

v.9-11