

Philippians

Part 12 – “Bright Lights in a Dark World”

Philippians 2:14-18

From the beginning God called his people Israel to be a light to the nations. Sadly, the Old Testament records their repeated failure to fulfill this calling. In this passage Paul calls the Philippian believers to be faithful to the calling which Israel had failed.



There is something profoundly unnatural when Christians do not shine in a world as dark as ours. Christians are, as Scripture says elsewhere, new creations in Christ; all has become new, the old has passed away. Those who are in Christ have become members of God's own family; his dearly loved children. As Paul has already explained, God is at work in his people both to will and to work according to his good pleasure (Phil 1:13). Is it conceivable that all of this change should have come to pass and yet remain invisible and undetectable? Of course not.

The point of this passage is not that Christians have the potential to shine in the world. Nor is this a command that God's people should make themselves shine. The point of the passages is that Christians *will* shine. Paul is not commanding the Philippian believers to shine; he is saying that they do [Silva, 127; O'Brien, 295, 296]. Verse 15 reads that Christians live, “in a crooked and depraved generation *in which you shine as lights* in the world.” His point is precisely that God's children will shine and must shine not only because the world around them is so dark but because that is what Christians are. They are bright lights in a dark world.

Main Idea: God's people are the light of Christ to the world.

Vv. 14-15 – The background is the grumbling of the Israelites in the Desert (Exodus 16). In Deut. 32:5 the Israelites in the wilderness are described as a “crooked and perverse generation.” Their grumbling was against God, to be sure, but it was also against their leader – Moses – and against one another. But here the crooked and depraved generation is not the church but the world around it. *It was as striking for Paul to identify unbelieving Israel with the wicked Greco-Roman world of his time as it was for the Old Testament prophets to liken unbelieving Israel to Sodom and Gomorrah.* But being in the church doesn't make one righteous if he doesn't have and live by faith in Christ.

Vs. 16 – Recollects our Lord's words where he stated that his followers are “the light of the world” (Matt 5:14). Similarly in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls his people to let their “light shine before others” (Matt 5:16). Holding out the word of life captures the idea of the ministry of the gospel to others. We are to be light bearers to a dark world. Paul spoke of this earlier in chapter 1.

Vv. 17-18 – Here Paul acknowledges the possibility that his current incarceration could end in his execution. He draws upon common Jewish sacrificial categories. He likens his own life to the swiftly evaporated libation simply accompanying the “main event” of the Philippian believer's sacrificial faith.

1. Live without grumbling and complaining.

Vs. 14 – “Do *all things* without grumbling and complaining.”

- Verses 14-16 make up one sentence in Greek. It consists of a command (vs. 14) with an extended purpose clause (vv. 15-16a) and a concluding result (vs. 16b). The command of verse 14 naturally extends from Paul's instruction to “work out your salvation” (vs. 12).
- Notice the comprehensiveness of the command (“all things”).

- The word for “grumbling” (*gongysmos*) refers to “an utterance made in a low tone of voice” or “behind the scenes talk” (Harmon, 250). Disputing (*dialogismos*) has a more neutral meaning. In this context it carries the idea of sinfully challenging or disputing with authority.
- Paul draws upon the sad history of Israel in her exodus wanderings (Num. 14:1-38; 16:1-17:13). Israel had a pattern of grumbling and disputing against God and his appointed leaders. This sin was so significant that it is cited as one of the reasons that an entire generation was denied entry into the Land of Promise. So Paul is admonishing the Philippian believers to be faithful where Israel had failed.

2. Live as befits the children of God.

Vs. 15 – “That you may be blameless and innocent, children of God, without blemish...”

- This is the purpose clause added to the command to not grumble and dispute. The Philippian Christians are to resist grumbling and disputing so that they may prove to be the children of God. In the exodus Israel bore all the outward marks of being God’s children and yet their sinful hearts exposed their apostasy. While outward marks serve an important role (God prescribed circumcision and baptism for instance) they matter only in connection to genuine faith.
- Blameless and innocent are adjectives which are meant to characterize the reputation of God’s people.
- “We are often taken back by the terms used to describe a faithful Christian life: *blameless*? – are we not all still profoundly sinful? – *Innocent*? – can anyone of us claim to be so? – *Without blemish*? – Why then do we all need to confess our sins? But remember: throughout the Bible these terms are applied to people who manifestly were not sinless and perfect. A faithful Christian life is what is meant, and that notwithstanding the fact that a great deal of sin remains in every Christian. There is a great deal of difference between a faithful Christian and a non-Christian and these strong terms emphasize the immensity of that difference.” – Robert Rayburn
- What is beyond the reach of all of us (genuine blamelessness and innocence) has been achieved by Jesus Christ and is now imputed to everyone who believes.

3. Live in contradiction to the world.

Vs. 15b – “...in which you shine as stars...”

- Our Lord compared his followers to lights in the world (Matt 15:4). This had always been God’s mandate for his people (Isa. 49:6). They have always been called to be a light to the nations; a light of truth and righteousness against the dark backdrop of the world’s rebellion against God. The lives of God’s people are to present a stark contrast to the world. Christians shine like stars in the darkness.
- Ultimately Christians are the light of the world insofar as they hold fast to and hold forth the gospel of Jesus Christ (the word of truth).

4. Live with joy forged in suffering.

Vv. 17-18 – “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”

- Once again Paul appeals to Old Testament categories. In this case Paul compares his life to the quickly vaporized libation which often accompanied the more significant sacrifice of a lamb or goat. Nevertheless as he faces the possibility of execution his joy is undiminished.