



Kingdom Living: In the face of Opposition

Philippians 1:27-30

As we've already reflected, Philippians is a book which begins with a note of joy and thankfulness. However, we quickly realise that this does not mean Paul's own circumstances are easy or straightforward. As we discovered last week, this is a letter written from a man in prison, one who is 'in chains for Christ' (1:13).

Philippians 1 concludes with a few verses which indicate that those who are receiving Paul's letter are themselves confronted with a difficult situation. We can't be sure exactly what the Apostle means when he writes that, 'you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have' (1:30), but there is plenty of material in both the Bible and in other sources which helps us make an educated guess. In Acts 16 we read the story not only of Paul's conversion but also of an incident when he and Silas are imprisoned. Having exorcised an unclean spirit from a slave girl whose capacity for fortune telling earned income for her owners, they are dragged before magistrates by those who are angry at the loss of income they now face. Paul and Silas are thrown into prison with no right to reply. This story ends with the remarkable escape made possible by an earthquake which throws open the doors of the prison. Wonderful as this one-off event was, it seems safe to assume that not all Philippian Christians were spared suffering in such a miraculous way.

It's believed that Paul first visited Philippi around the year 49AD. The history of the city in the century leading up to this event was shaped by conflict caused by the Roman Empire. In 42BC, there were major battles at Philippi between the factions which emerged in Rome after the assassination of Julius Caesar (when Octavian and Mark Antony defeated the armies of Cassius and Brutus). Then in 30BC, there was another battle when Octavian turned on the forces of Mark Antony. On both occasions, large numbers of Roman veterans remained and retired in Philippi.

These events had an important impact on the culture of Philippi. Gordon Fee writes that Philippi was a city where, 'every public event (the assembly, public performances in the theatre etc) and much else within its boundaries would have taken place in the context of giving honour to the emperor, with the acknowledgement that (in this case) Nero was "lord and saviour."¹ All of this meant that Christians, who believed that one day every tongue will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord (2:11) found themselves at odds with the dominant belief of those around them. Because of its status as a Roman colony, those who lived in Philippi were allowed the legal privileges of Roman citizenship. Later in this book, however, Paul reminds the Philippian Christians that, 'our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ' (3:20).

Philippians 1 ends with Paul urging the early believers – 'whatever happens!' (1:27) – to live in a way which is honouring to Christ and the gospel. When he writes of conduct which is 'worthy of the gospel,' he explains that he has in mind a church which is standing firm and which is united, 'without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you' (1:28).

¹ Gordon Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 1995, 31

The second half of 1:28 contains a phrase which seems strange, and on which commentators have offered a range of interpretations. What does Paul mean which he suggests that the unity and courage of the Philippians will be a sign that warns their opponents of the Christians' eventual victory? Daniel Migliore suggests that this an example of the way in which faith can help us to see things differently from those around us: 'As far as the opponents are concerned, the Philippians' refusal to conform would seem foolish and deserving of the destruction they were bringing on themselves. Paul, however, encourages the Philippian Christians to see God's hand at work in what they are going through. "This is God's doing," he assures them (1:28b). Their steadfastness in the faith in the face of persecution is a sign not of their coming destruction, as their opponents think, but of their coming salvation.'²

This does not, however, negate the difficulties which the Philippian Christians will be confronted with. Reading 1:29, with its reminder of a call that is not just about belief but also suffering, the words of Jesus himself come to mind: 'Remember what I told you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also' (John 15:20).

For discussion

1. Can you think of an occasion recently when you experienced resistance or opposition from someone because of your faith? How did it make you feel?
2. In 1:27, Paul urges the Philippians to 'conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.' Can you think of times when you've seen Christians respond to criticism in a defensive or self-justifying way? Are there any lessons you've learned from that experience?
3. What sort of behaviour do you think Paul has in mind when he encourages the Philippians to 'stand firm in the one Spirit'? How would you describe the difference between unity in a church and the teamwork we might find in any other organisation?
4. How do you make sense of the apparently strange comments of Paul in 1:28? In what ways might our conduct in the face of suffering be a sign to our opponents of the victory which will eventually be ours?
5. In 1:29, Paul writes about the way in which suffering for Christ goes hand-in-hand with a belief in him. Do you think our modern presentations of Christianity are too quick to gloss over the harder aspects of what it means to follow Jesus?
6. Philippians 1:27-30 is a passage which makes more sense when read in the wider context of the whole book. If time allows, you might find it helpful to look back over Chapter 1 and read ahead to Chapter 2. In what ways do these chapters help us understand more about what Paul means when he writes of the 'struggle' he is going through, and the sort of attitudes he has in mind when he encourages the church to be united?

² Daniel Migliore, *Belief: Philippians and Philemon*, 2014, 70