

Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Session Six April 29, 2020
Philippians 2:12-18

Paul encouraged the Christians at Philippi to develop a personal faith and a community fellowship that reflected a life of unity (Chapter 1 and the beginning of Chapter 2), modeled by the life of Jesus Christ (poem in Chapter 2), and was lived out in holiness (end of Chapter 2).

Using imagery of the Exodus, the Temple, and knowledge of their Roman history, Paul reminded the Philippians to own their faith, that God was working in and through them, and challenged them to be a “new light” in this new world!

Opening Question...

(1) What is your favorite Old Testament story and why?

Last week we studied what is considered the “heart of the Philippians letter”, a Christ-centric poem that Paul included to the Philippians church that sets the theological center for all Christians and for all early churches (and all modern churches as well)! In doing so, Paul was establishing a balance for the Philippians as he prefaced this poem with a lesson on the importance of unity, encouraging the church to stay united in this midst of a very open Roman culture. These two lessons by Paul – Christian unity and understanding of the Messiah – flows into tonight’s focus on how the Philippians were called to live this faith out, both personally and as an early church. In one word, “holiness”. These three components – unity, Christ-centric understanding, and holiness – are the foundation pieces for a Messianic mindset!

So according to Paul, how do we remain holy? How do we live out “holiness”? Paul uses understanding from the Old Testament – the Exodus story, imagery from the Temple, sacrificial analogies, and even dives into some Roman history understanding to help the Philippians capture this concept.

2:12 – “So then”, “work out”, “fear and trembling”

Paul uses these first two words to reconnect this passage to the poem before and unity passage before it. All three of these passages work

together. Paul is challenging the Philippians to each individually work these concepts (unity and especially the theology of Jesus Christ) on your own. Even if Paul was there teaching it to them, they still would not completely understand it. You have to think for yourselves! Romans 12 says you have to “renew your mind and then put it into practice”. I often use this idea with teenagers. Our parents often teach us about God, but we cannot live on our parent’s faith. We have to have – OWN – our own faith! This is what Paul is saying here.

Paul is also touching on some Roman history that the Philippians would understand. For a decade following the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BC, Rome went through a series of civil wars. Only until Augustus Caesar took control in 34 BC did he restore peace, and he said he “rescued” the empire – he became the savior! Rome touted him this way and when he went into surrounding areas, that is what he would say – he brought salvation. Paul may be referencing this in verse 12 when he talks about the Philippians “working out your salvation” (rather than the Roman Empire), recognizing true salvation comes through Jesus Christ.

2:13 – God is a work in you – Heaven and Earth meets!

Paul is telling the Philippians that God is at work in them. To us, this does not sound unusual. However, to early Christians, this may sound unusual. Paul touches on the Exodus and Old Testament imagery of the Temple – the location where heaven and earth overlap. God resided in the Temple (in Jerusalem, the Temple comprised the majority of the city – center of Jewish life), where people went to meet Him. Now, Paul is saying for Christians, God (the Spirit) lives in us – we are “the Temple” – where heaven and earth meet. So we should live our lives with SERIOUSNESS – “fear and trembling” (vs. 12) – living a life of holiness!

2:14-16 – A “New Exodus” Generation

When Paul was penning this letter, he was holding the image in his mind of the Israelites leaving Egypt being led by God towards the Promised Land. Even with God being with them, they grumbled and wanted to go back. Paul is challenging the Philippians as they are on this “journey of holiness” to not grumble or dispute. (This also reflects back to the unity section! We see this in Romans 8 and 1 Timothy 10 as well.) Paul is

saying do not do what the Israelites did! He also is challenging the Philippians to be different from the Roman culture around them.

“Be lights in the world!” Often times when we think of being “holy”, our minds jump to being moral. Morality is often attached to rules or restrictions – hindrances to keep people in line. That is not what Paul is saying here at all. He is saying shine bright into the world! Be different! Stand out! There is a new, better way to be human! This is how early Christianity spread so quickly. Individuals in the Roman culture started seeing there was a better way to treat each other – the Christian way. That’s why the Roman authorities started to try to snuff it out. Radiate a new light!

Paul encouraged the Philippians to “hold fast the word of life” – this is the gospel of Christ mentioned in chapter one and what was just echoed in the poem in the previous verses. Have a new civic pride – pride for THE KING – Jesus Christ! Paul wanted to be able to hold onto that pride he had for the Philippians (he was again quoting from Isaiah 49 – the Suffering Servant passage).

2:17-18 – Closing with Temple Imagery – “Drink Offering”

Paul still knew that death was a possibility and he did not want this to be a surprise for the Philippians. He did not want this to derail their faith. This is the reason he emphasized the importance for them to “own their faith” in verse 12 and 13. It was common for a “drink offering” to be used in the Temple to finish off a sacrifice – to be poured over the main offering. Paul is saying the work and faith of the Philippians is the main offering, and he is the drink offering that is finishing it off.

He concludes this section with the overarching emotions of this letter – REJOICE and JOY!

According to Paul in the letter to the Philippians, the foundational pieces to a Messianic mindset are...unity, Christ-centric faith, and holiness.

Paul used imagery from Exodus, the Temple, and Roman History to illustrate the importance of owning one’s faith and allowing God to live through and guide us to be beacons of light in this world!

Follow Up Questions...

Where do you need to experience the empowering presence of God in a fresh way?

In a culture that values vulnerability and honesty, how do we avoid falling into “grumbling and complaining”?

A drink offering was a gift given to God that was poured out but not wasted. What can you do this week to make your life that kind of a gift to God and others?