

Partners in God's Grace  
Philippians 1:1-18  
Luke 9:46-48

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Doug Browne  
May 6, 2018 (Easter 6)

### Philippians 1:1-18

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.

### Luke 9:46-48

An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.'

For most of the past year, we have been reading stories from the Bible. Stories where things happened. A few times I have even compared it to episodes of a television show. You know, when you're done with *Game of Thrones*, read some of the Old Testament where Mister Martin got some of his ideas. Then read the New Testament, which explains and completes the story.

Well, this week we don't have one of those, we have a letter. So let me give you the background for what's happening here. Philippi is a prosperous port city in eastern Greece. It is a typical Greek city, in that it has been conquered multiple times. Philippi is not even the city's original name: it was renamed a few hundred years ago after Philip the Second, King of Macedonia and the father of Alexander the Great. The city has most recently been reorganized by Augustus Caesar to be a kind of "miniature Rome." The people here, like all Greeks and educated people across the Roman Empire, speak Greek.<sup>1</sup>

Paul visited here about AD 49 with Silas and Timothy. This may be where he preached for the first time in Europe. He founded a church here, and he visited that church again twice more.

Right now, it is a few years after the events we talked about last week, when Paul spoke in Athens. Paul's in prison, probably in the city of Ephesus.<sup>2</sup> In this letter, Paul thanks the people of the church in Philippi for the money and gifts that they have sent him to support his ministry.

Paul does not write his letter to a single leader in the city and tell him or her to distribute the information. No, this letter is addressed "to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons." The word that's being translated "bishops" here literally means supervisors, or overseers, or officers.<sup>3</sup> In this context, it refers to pastors and to the elders. But you notice, the letter is not sent to them alone. No, it's sent to all the saints, and it is written not in Hebrew, but in the Greek language that they understand.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philippi>.

<sup>2</sup> By the time Paul was in prison in Rome, my reading is that he did not believe he would be released soon (Philippians 1:19, 26). Therefore, in my opinion, Ephesus is most likely, and an earlier date.

<sup>3</sup> See the *Septuagint*, Numbers 31:14 and 2 Kings 11:15.

Saints. Now that's a word that causes us to pause. An effort has been made over the centuries to redefine that word to mean some kind of "Super Christians," but it's a simple word. It means people set aside, people who belong to God. In Greek, it's the same word by which we would call the bread and wine on the Table "holy." That's all the word means.

The Brief Statement of Faith, in our *Book of Confessions*, begins with the simple, yet world-changing, sentence, "In life and in death we belong to God."<sup>4</sup> That is every one of us, and all of us. Like it or not, there isn't some part of us that is separate, that does not belong to God.

I encourage you to claim that word, saint. I tell you, you are a saint, whether you feel like you are, or not. Yes, you may have a history. So what? Truly I tell you, nothing you have done and nothing you have left undone is more powerful than the grace of God. If you feel like you have done something so bad that God can never forgive you, then let me put your mind at rest. You, my dear one, are not that powerful.

Or you might feel like you are just an ordinary person. The bread that's there on the communion table is ordinary bread that was baked for the purpose, and a member of the Worship Committee bought the wine and the grape juice at the grocery store. They are ordinary things that God, through God's amazing grace, makes extraordinary.

So are you.

Paul wishes grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ to all the saints. It is God's grace in us that makes ordinary people like us extraordinary. It was God's amazing grace that allowed ordinary people to stand up to persecution in Roman arenas, and to spread the faith across the Roman world even while being Christian was still a capital crime. It

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Confessions*, 11.1, line 1.

was God's grace that allowed Christians to invent the very notion of a hospital as someplace you go to get better, and to found them all over the world. It was God's grace that allowed Christians to risk death by hiding those in danger during the Holocaust. It was God's grace that allowed the Civil Rights Movement to peacefully demand justice from those willing to commit violence to defend injustice. It was God's grace that allowed Peace and Reconciliation Commissions to work and to bring peace to South Africa after the end of the institutionalized racism and cruelty of apartheid. It was God's grace that allowed a Biblical scholar named Clarence Jordan to found an organization called Habitat for Humanity, that has built housing for nearly one million families around the world. These are just a few extraordinary things that God did through some ordinary people over the centuries, people whom God made extraordinary.

Paul explains to the saints that his being thrown in prison for preaching the good news of Jesus Christ has, counterintuitively, helped to spread the gospel, because people have heard about Christ who otherwise wouldn't have. He's had an opportunity to speak with members of the Imperial guard and with other officials. He has explained to them why he is in prison, and that Christ is worth going to prison for.

As a result, other brothers and sisters are being inspired to speak out. They know that Paul's in prison for preaching the good news of Jesus Christ.

Hold on a second. Why is Paul in prison? Why is preaching the good news of Jesus Christ a crime? It's very simple, and very dangerous. The first creed, the first universally accepted statement of faith, is one sentence. That one sentence is one that we still ask our members here to affirm.

“Jesus is Lord and Savior.”

That’s it.

Sounds simple, but there’s a lot packed in there.

If Jesus is Lord, then the man who calls himself Emperor Augustus Caesar, son of the gods, is, ultimately, not who and what he claims to be. If Jesus is Lord, then the man who calls himself Fuhrer Adolf Hitler, Supreme Leader of the German *Volk*, is not supreme at all. If Jesus is our Lord and Savior, then no contemporary politician of any stripe or flavor is, no matter what they say or what they promise. They do not have the power to save us from what we actually need saving from. They do not have the authority to tell us to say or do anything contrary to what Jesus Christ has told us. They have no right to claim our ultimate loyalty for themselves, their parties, policies, or programs.

This is why the Roman Empire and the Jewish leaders crucified Jesus. “Jesus did not get crucified because he was a nice man.”<sup>5</sup>

This is why Paul is in prison. He is not in prison because of his amazing personal skills, and certainly not because he’s so easy to deal with.

Being Lord and Savior is a unique position. There can be only one Lord and Savior.

If Jesus is your Lord and Savior, then no one else is. If you really believe that, then it changes how you hear claims from other people. If you really believe that, then it changes how you see the world, and how you act in the world.

So that’s why Paul is in prison. He is preaching something that is incredibly dangerous to the Roman Empire as it is currently organized. According to the law, Paul is preaching sedition.

---

<sup>5</sup> Thank you, Walter Brueggemann.

Other brothers and sisters, others of the saints, are being inspired to speak out. They know that Paul's in prison for preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, and they are speaking out anyway.

Paul knows that they are doing this out of a mixture of motives, some good and some bad. We've talked before about how we all have both good and bad thoughts. The line between the wheat and the tares<sup>6</sup> runs not between us and the outside world, but down the center of my heart. And your heart. And your neighbor's heart. Paul himself wrote about this in his letter to the Romans, how he himself was not perfect, but he did some things that he knew were wrong.<sup>7</sup>

So Paul understands these people, possibly better than they themselves do. He knows that some are primarily preaching that Jesus is Lord out of good motives, and others, not so much. But, because he knows that, ultimately, Jesus IS Lord, he can look at them and smile. And he can look at us and smile.

Why does it matter why they are proclaiming that Jesus is Lord? They are. Rejoice! God will find a way to use their proclamation and their service. And ours.

Saints of the Lord God, in life and in death we belong to God. God alone is worthy of our ultimate loyalty. That is the story we must tell the people in our lives. That is the story we must demonstrate with how we live our lives. We will never get it perfect, but that doesn't change anything.

We are the ordinary saints of God, who have been given God's grace to do extraordinary things in the world.

---

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43. "All Sown Together," sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church on July 25, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 7:14-25.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.