

Essays in Philippians- Striving Side by Side

Phil. 1:19-29

David Flatt

We can only imagine the anxiety Paul must have had while imprisoned. As he anxiously waited for a decision in his case, he was comforted by the saints and the Spirit. He knew the saints at Philippi were concerned for his well-being. They were praying for him. He was content to trust the Spirit to provide his needs and lead him in his work. But, where would the Spirit lead him? How would his case be decided? Would he be released? Would his life be taken by the Romans? Answers to these questions were beyond his control.

Yet, Paul did not lose his resolve. He wrote, “For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death” (Phil. 1:19-20).

While we cannot fully relate to Paul’s situation, he does articulate the dilemma of Christians. We strongly desire to be in Heaven with the Lord; yet, we have affection for our lives in this world. We want to be in Heaven, but we have families that we love and who need us. We want to be in Heaven, but we have work to do in preaching the Gospel.

How are we to balance these desires? If these desires are not properly balanced, we can become self-righteous and isolated. In other words, we can obsess about Heaven at the expense of those who need us in this world. Paul was struggling with isolation and confinement. He could have turned inward, but he did not. Instead, he found ways to be useful in the service of God and man.

But how was Paul able to do this? First of all, he recognized that dying and being with the Lord was beyond his control. He did not get to decide when this would happen, and neither do we. Once we recognize death is beyond our control, we can properly focus on life. To this end, Paul wrote, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again” (Phil. 1:21-26).

This perspective enabled Paul to find ways to be useful. While imprisoned, he was writing letters. He encouraged churches through his prison epistles. Also, Paul taught the Gospel to the prison guards. He was given opportunities to teach members of Caesar’s household. When we think of Paul being this active while imprisoned, we cannot help but consider our efforts to encourage and teach.

The pandemic has changed our lives. We are in the age of social distancing. Changing seasons will limit us further in the coming months. Yet, we can find opportunities to encourage each other and teach the Gospel. For example, at Fry Road, all of the sermons, bulletin articles, and YouTube videos are accessible on our website (www.fryroad.org). If you view content that would be helpful for someone you know, you can simply share the material. You can do this by text or email. It is easy, quick, and subtle. Give it a try sometime.

Striving Together

This letter was not just about Paul. While he informed the church of his condition, he did not focus on himself. Rather, he focused his writing on the Philippians. He wanted them to advance the Gospel and strengthen their faith. Paul concluded this section by writing, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (Phil. 1:27-30).

The Philippians did not have to worry about Paul. He would be fine. They needed to focus on their work. They needed to reflect the Gospel of Christ through transformed living and unity. They needed to remain committed to Christ and one another. Paul was not naïve to the dangers they faced in Philippi. He had experienced persecution at Philippi. They had adversaries and opponents. Yet, they could overcome together.

Like the Philippian saints, we have adversaries. There are people and influences in our lives which attempt to discourage us. Some seek to harm our faith. We may experience ridicule. Also, bearing the daily weight of living in a world filled with sin can be depressing. These issues are why we need each other. We must strive side by side in the fight for faith.

While the church at Philippi was relatively small, they had each other. They could relate to the struggles of life. They could encourage each other as they engaged their opponents. They could energize each other in the strenuous work of advancing the Gospel.

Today, we have each other. The saints of any local church are intended to encourage one another. Regrettably, this often does not happen to the extent it could or should. Too many saints view the local church as a place to go rather than people to encourage. Everyone leads busy lives. We are challenged to build and strengthen meaningful relationships as children in God’s family. With greater love, we can improve our devotion to one another.

Conclusion

By the end of reading the first chapter of this letter, the saints at Philippi could rest assured that Paul was alive and well. He was actively engaged in the advancement of the Gospel. He was hopeful about future opportunities to teach and a future in Heaven.

The first chapter of Philippians teaches us that we can thrive under difficult circumstances. Paul did not use his imprisonment as an excuse for bitterness or retreat. Likewise, he did not permit the Philippians to use their concerns as an excuse to retreat from their opponents. Instead, Paul expected their love, knowledge, and discernment to increase and abound. They were to live worthy of the Gospel. Together, they were to strive side by side to advance the Gospel. We must do the same.