

Essays in Philippians- Shining Lights

Philippians 2:12-16

David Flatt

In the second chapter of Philippians, Paul makes two points: 1. Churches must be united. 2. Churches must be holy. Unity and holiness are companions. If separated, there will be problems. Having considered unity in previous essays, we now turn our attention to the subject of holiness. Notice what Paul writes:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain (Phil. 2:12-16).

This series of instructions represents our response to God's exaltation of Jesus (Phil. 2:6-11). This text is often used to emphasize the personal responsibility each saint has regarding his or her salvation. Before analyzing these aspects, we need to understand the broader dynamic of this passage.

This paragraph uses imagery from the Israel's exodus to explain the responsibilities of saints. Texts like these are commonly referred to as "Exodus narratives." Israel's exodus from Egypt foreshadowed a new exodus that would be led by the Messiah. Consider how this works in Philippians 2.

Israel had been liberated from slavery in Egypt. God led them to the Promised Land. However, as they were traveling, they became unfaithful. They grumbled and complained to God about how He was providing for them. This happened several times (i.e. Red Sea; Mt. Sinai; Massah & Meribah; 12 Spies). Each time Israel displayed unfaithfulness, they were punished. Most severely, Israel's lack of faith was punished by forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Paul draws on this as he instructs the church at Philippi about being the light of the world. He goes so far as to warn them about complaining and disputing.

The Messiah offers us a new exodus. Enslaved to sin, He can liberate us and lead us to freedom. By faith, Jesus can rescue us from the present evil age (Gal. 1:3-4). This message, the Gospel, powerfully resonated with people in Philippi. Some obeyed the Gospel. By faith in Jesus, they were being led to eternal life. But, they needed to be warned. If they became like the unfaithful, disgruntled Israelites, they would lose their salvation.

Being Light in a Dark World

Israel was chosen by God to be the light of the world. Through idolatry, Israel failed to shine the light of the Creator into the world. Therefore, God sent the Messiah. He was the lone, faithful Israelite. He was everything Israel had failed to become: the light of the world.

By our obedience to Jesus, we come into the presence of His light. The light of the Savior exposes our sin and illuminates the path to eternal life (John 3:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:8-10). When we walk in the light of Jesus, we become the light of the world (1 John 1:7). The world needs the light of Jesus. The world needs its sin exposed and shown the path to eternal life.

As Paul describes, the world was crooked and perverse. When people turn to idolatry, they become broken and disjointed. Idolatry expressed by sin leads to death. The world enslaved to the idols of power, money, and sex is hopeless. Only through fundamental transformation of heart and mind can worldly people be rescued from eternal death.

The rescue of worldly people through faith in Jesus is to be promoted by saints. As the term "saint" signifies, they are to be different from worldly people. They do not worship idols. They worship the Creator by faith in the Messiah. They live in hope of eternal life. In Philippians 2, Paul describes the saints as blameless, innocent, children of God without blemish, and lights to the world.

These descriptions were not given by Paul to inflate the perception the saints at Philippi had of themselves. These descriptions were used to emphasize the responsibilities the saints had regarding their influence in the world. They needed to pursue holiness in their conduct. Holiness brightens our light. By being different, the world would take notice. As a result, some in the world would become willing to obey the Light of the world.

What about Us?

As Christians, we are to be the light of the world individually and collectively. The power of our influence is largely determined by our reputation. The terms Paul uses in this part of his letter describe reputation: blameless and innocent.

These terms do not relate to being sinless. None of us can claim to be sinless. Only the Messiah was sinless. Saints are forgiven, sinners. Our reputation as saints is partly determined by how we address our sin. Being blameless means that nothing can be held against our account. In other words, we have dealt with our sin with the Gospel. When we have wronged someone, we have sought reconciliation. Therefore, no one can make legitimate accusations against us.

The condition of our reputation is not intended to elevate us above other people. Both worldly people and Christians can fail to understand this point. Self-righteousness is a frequent problem that undermines both our holiness and reputation. Our reputation is intended to evidence the result of a life transformed by the Gospel.

For Paul, there was no greater asset in advancing the Gospel than the transformation he experienced personally. His reputation continues to give his testimony of the resurrected Jesus credibility. Likewise, a bad reputation can do irreparable damage to our influence in the world. Israel was called to be the light of the world; yet, their idolatrous lifestyle caused the pagans to blaspheme the Creator (Rom. 2:24).

Conclusion

As saints, we are to be the light of the world. While this is a simple point to make, we need to evaluate the condition of our influence. Aspiring to the holiness of God will strengthen unity and brighten our reputation in the world.

Since the sin of Adam and Eve, the world has been a broken place. We are easily deceived by sin. We are often overcome by lust. The only hope anyone has in this world is found in Jesus Christ. His light alone can overpower the dark forces of evil in the world. While the church at Philippi may have been small, their strength came from being united in Jesus and His power to change people.