

Paul's Letter to the Philippians



Daily notes for reflection and prayer

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THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND



Introduction

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Paul's letter to the church in Philippi was written when he was in prison, and its context of enforced separation and care for those who are at a distance has some similarities with our current situation. It is thought that his imprisonment was in Ephesus (on the coast of what is now Turkey), and the journey between there and Philippi (in modern Greece) would have taken a little over a week (see map below). Paul had founded the church in Philippi (read Acts chapter 16 if you want to know more) and had great affection for them. They had often been generous in giving money and material help to support Paul and other churches, and on this occasion they had sent one of their members, Epaphroditus, with material gifts to Paul in prison and also to stay with Paul to help him for a while. Epaphroditus had fallen ill while with Paul. Paul was now sending him back to Philippi to reunite him with his church, taking with him this letter in which Paul thanks them for their care and gives some Christian teaching and encouragement.

Day 1

'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.'

Philippians 1^{:3-5}

Read **Philippians 1, verses 1-11**

Heather A. writes:

Paul writes from prison, and writes to the Philippians full of thankfulness. In those days prisoners were dependent on outside help to get food, or money for food. The Philippians have sent him a gift. He is thankful to them for this practical sharing in his needs and for their sharing with him in faith in Jesus.

Today I am thankful for many things. For the NHS and carers and all those working to keep us going in terms of food supplies and essentials.

I'm thankful for my house. I don't always like my house. It's a bit small for 5 of us, and I long for somewhere separate to put the laundry! However as we all have to stay at home, I find it is holding up well as a place of refuge.

I'm thankful for my family and for you, my church family. We're trying our best to be in this together.

Have a think about something you are thankful for in these difficult times. Take time to thank God for it.

Day 2

'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.' **Philippians 1:12-13**

Read **Philippians 1, verses 12 to 18**

Heather A. writes

While Paul is in prison for his faith, he has found that people are talking about his faith in Jesus. Some are full of praise to God for his willingness to suffer for the gospel, others perhaps speak of him as a religious maniac who has got himself into trouble for his devotion to Jesus. But as far as Paul and the Gospel are concerned, all publicity is good publicity. Jesus is being talked about.

At the moment we are experiencing a sort of "imprisonment" although this one is for our own good. We might feel we are less able to live out our faith because we are restricted in what we can do. Perhaps the opposite is true. Perhaps this is the time when our faith becomes real to us and those around us, that our families and friends realise we are serious about this, and its not just that we like going to church.

Is there some new way you could live out or share your faith while you are at home? Perhaps something really small or simple. Pray about this now.

Day 3

'Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or death.

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.' **Philippians 1:^{18b-21}**

Read Philippians 1, verses 18b to 26

Heather A. writes

For all that Paul is reflecting on his possible death, this passage is very upbeat. In some other parts of his writings he seems in more sombre mood. However here, he expresses great confidence in God, and great hope in being with Jesus if he should die.

At this time, I find I go through a range of emotions, sometimes I am feeling positive, sometimes anxious, sometimes down. I am a mixture of faith and doubt. Sometimes I can get on with doing things, sometimes I can't settle to anything. Sometimes tiredness creeps up anyway. Perhaps you can identify with some of this. Feelings are just feelings, they are not a barometer for our spiritual state. I believe God accepts our ups and our downs and wants us to share all of this with him.

Bring how you are feeling today to God.

Day 4

'Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.' **Philippians 1^{:27-28a}**

Read **Philippians 1, verses 27 to 30**

Heather A. writes

Paul wants to hear good news about how the Philippians are living for God. Separated from his friends in Christ, he longs to know that they are keeping on in the life of faith. He doesn't want them to give up under pressure from others. He wants to know they are striving side by side.

While we are apart and facing this challenge of living through this horrible pandemic, we too need to know that we are striving together. An image that seems appropriate is a team in an athletic contest, maybe a team rowing a boat, or playing in a team sport. We are all encouraged to know that everyone is playing their part. We can't see each other, but we can still cheer each other on.

Think of someone you work together with for the gospel who you can't see at the moment, maybe a friend from Church or another Christian friend. Pray for them, that they will be encouraged today. If it is easy for you to do from home, you could also send an encouraging message, or make a call.

Day 5

'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...' **Philippians 2:3-5**

Read **Philippians 2, verses 1 to 11**

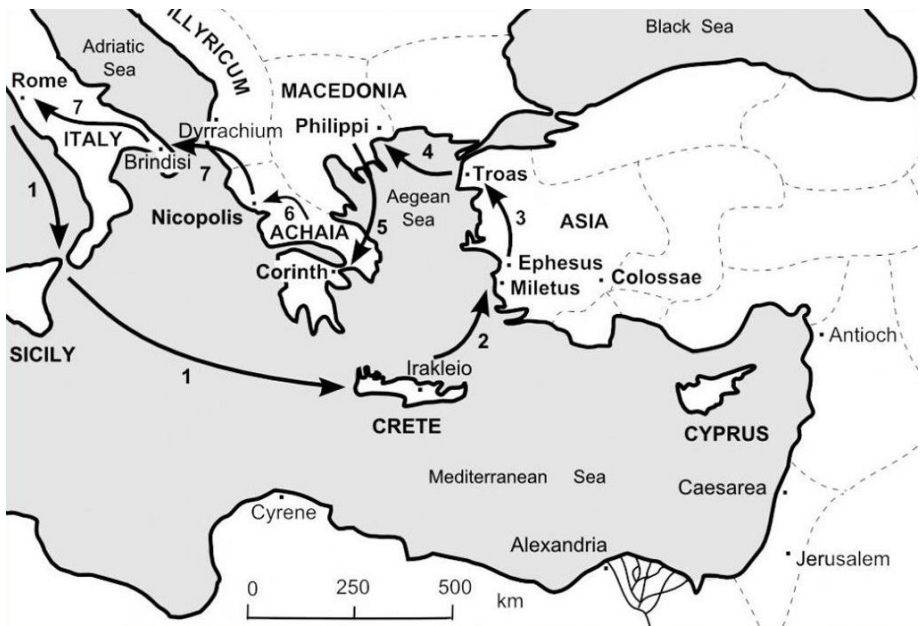
Mike writes:

In chapter 2 of his letter Paul begins by urging the church members to be of one mind and in full accord with one another, and then writes the words quoted above. What follows on after that is the great passage about Jesus who humbled himself, became obedient to the point of death, but is now exalted and has a name above every name. This may well have been an early Christian hymn, going back to the beginnings of the church, which Paul is quoting. We sometimes use it as a creed in our services.

It's not difficult to regard others as better than ourselves. We are very aware of our own failings, especially if we have too much time on our hands in which to muse over our previous mistakes and misjudgements. Even so it's not easy to turn that into the positive action of putting the interests of others before our own. If we're feeling a bit low or sorry for ourselves we can lack the energy for thinking of others. Also in our present situation we might feel at a loss for what we can do. I've been encouraged by all the messages from members of our church family who want to express our continuing togetherness as a church. The messages are warm and cheerful, even though the senders might not feel like that all the time.

Think of ways in which you can help others at present. That may be by practical help, but if you're on your own and isolated it may only be by a message of friendship and encouragement to someone, by phone, by email, or by letter.

Pray for people too. Prayer may not feel like doing something practical, but we are assured that it really is.



Day 6

'Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.' **Philippians 2:¹⁴⁻¹⁵**

Read **Philippians 2, verses 12 to 18**

Mike writes:

Is Paul addressing some unrest in the Philippian church in writing these lines? He has just previously urged the church members to be of one mind and not to act out of selfish ambition. It would not be surprising if that was the case, since we know that churches are not immune from such things. In telling them how to behave 'so that you may be... children of God', I think he is not telling them how to gain that status; rather he is reminding them that their membership of God's family should be seen in every aspect of their lives. Paul's view of the rest of the world might seem a bit bleak. It's how we might feel about things when we hear of corruption, exploitation, and violence, but not when we come across many examples of kind-ness and selflessness. Although we are not blind to the evil in the world, we are also to rejoice in what is good, and to pray for all.

Do you shine like a star in the world? No? Me neither. But we should not underestimate what God calls us to, nor what we already achieve, even if we don't feel it amounts to much.

Say sorry to God for the ways in which you have fallen short of what you are called to, and ask for his help in the future. Thank him that you are called to shine, and that you do shine (fitfully perhaps), as a star in the world. Pray for the world around us, that honesty and kindness might triumph over crookedness and perversity.

Day 7

'I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus - my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.' **Philippians 2^{:25-26}**

Read **Philippians 2, verses 19 to 30**

Mike writes:

This part of the letter is about comings and goings, and separation. Paul is concerned for the church at Philippi but can't go to them because of his imprisonment. He is hoping to send Timothy to them soon, who will have a genuine interest in their welfare, and then to come himself, but all that is in doubt for the moment. Meanwhile he will send back to them Epaphroditus, the messenger who brought much needed supplies from the Philippian church to Paul. Epaphroditus is missing his own church family, and they are anxious about him because they have heard he is ill.

If Paul's imprisonment was in Ephesus, the journey between there and Philippi would have been just over a week. Our travel times are much quicker now, and we have immediate communication by phone or computer, but even so we are getting to know the experience of separation more completely than before. It is frustrating to be concerned for someone but to be unable to go to them. We miss the warmth of human contact with those we care for.

Has this time of isolation caused you to re-evaluate how you relate to other people? Pray about, and discuss with others if you can, good that can be drawn from the present situation.

Day 8

'Yet what ever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.'

Philippians 3^{:7-8a}

Read **Philippians 3, verses 1 to 9**

Heather A. writes

Paul's whole life and value system has been turned upside down by meeting Jesus. Before he knew Jesus he was already confident in his place in religious life; his zeal for God led him even to persecute the Church. Paul's personal meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus changed everything. Paul met his God in the person of Jesus, and every assumption and every judgement he had made up to that point had to be re-evaluated.

At the moment, I am conscious of the great value of some things I often take for granted. Access to fresh and healthy food, fresh air-dare I say it, toilet rolls! Basic things that we need for life. Paul found what he needed for life was less religion, more Jesus. Only a personal encounter brought this home to him.

Ask God that, like Paul, you will know the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.

Day 9

'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.' **Philippians 3:¹⁰⁻¹²**

Read **Philippians 3, verses 10 to 16**

Heather A. writes

Paul reflects on how Jesus has made him his own. This reminds me of when in a baptism service, the priest says "Christ claims you for his own, receive the sign of his cross." It's a thing of such emotional importance to us to be wanted- to have people who are pleased to see us or to speak to us, to be needed, to matter to someone, to belong. Did you hear about the guy who planned to propose to his girlfriend on an overseas trip to Iceland- when the trip was cancelled due to the pandemic, he proposed instead in the aisle of Iceland the supermarket! It is the relationship that matters, not the circumstances. Even in prison, Paul knows that he belongs to Jesus.

Reflect that Christ claims you for his own today. I don't know what circumstances you will be in when you read this and what difficulties you may be facing- whatever they are, you matter, you belong to Jesus.

Day 10

'But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.' **Philippians 3:20-4:1**

Read **Philippians 3 verse 17 through to 4 verse 1**

Heather A. writes

Paul has set an example for the Philippian Christians, in terms of his humility, his faith in time of suffering and his rejoicing which is counter to what we might expect. Some are opposed to the cross of Christ, and this causes Paul grief. Paul reflects on our citizenship in heaven –in expectancy of the Saviour Christ coming to us from heaven. He comes to transform. I have heard that some see in the current crisis signs of the end times and are saying that Christ will soon return– but the Bible warns against such speculation. Nevertheless, our Saviour does come to us. We can look ahead to his eventual return in glory – and we can receive him now as a gentle Saviour who comes alongside us in our troubles.

Reflect on these words from a well known hymn:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds

in a believer's ear!

**It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds,
and drives away our fear.**

Day 11

'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' **Philippians 4⁴⁻⁷**

Read **Philippians 4, verses 2 to 7**

Mike writes:

Paul begins chapter 4 by urging two women in the church who have had a disagreement to be of one mind. He values them highly because they have been faithful workers for the gospel, and he does not want the unity of the church to be marred by minor arguments. **Can you think of times when disagreements over small matters have got in the way of what is really important?**

He moves on to the passage given above. "Do not worry about anything" - easily said, but not so easily done. I notice how often thanksgiving, or thankfulness, is mentioned in the New Testament as an important factor in achieving a calm mind. It involves looking outward rather than inward. **Remember to include thankfulness in your prayers, particularly when you are anxious.**

Day 12

'Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.'

Philippians 4⁸⁻⁹

Read **Philippians 4, verses 8 to 9**

Mike writes:

Problems can sometimes loom so large that we can't free our mind from them. Similarly bad things that happen, close at hand or in the world at large, can make the world seem a very dark place. Such things can make us lose sight of all the goodness that surrounds us. Paul's recommendation is to concentrate not on what is wrong or problematical, but on what is wholesome. We will get problems into a proper perspective if we can look away from them and allow our attention to dwell on what is good and uplifting.

What things can you think of that are examples of what Paul recommends? It could be a long list. Perhaps write some of them down and re-read it when you feel low.

Remember in your prayers people suffering from OCD who find it hard to rid themselves of obsessive thoughts.

Day 13

'I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty... I can do all things through him who strengthens me.' **Philippians 4^{:11-13}**

Read **Philippians 4, verses 10 to 14**

Mike writes:

Living on my own, I have found that I tend to get restless if I have nowhere to go out to. If I'm reading a book I soon get fidgety, with the feeling I should be doing something. The present restrictions are helping me to feel more at ease with my own company, more able to spend time calmly without feeling restless. More widely, smartphones have created a febrile society where many are addicted to constant interruption and distraction.

Paul has learnt to be content with what he has, be it little or be it plenty. His statement that he can do all things in God's strength is not a superman sort of claim, but the assurance that God's grace will enable him to accept whatever circumstances he is subjected to. It's something we admire but find it hard to imitate.

Is the current situation helping to detox you from the restlessness of modern life? Are you finding it easier to settle to daily prayer and devotion? Not yet? There's plenty of time yet.

Day 14

'And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.' **Philippians 4**¹⁹⁻²⁰

Read **Philippians 4, verses 15 to 23**

Mike writes:

Paul ends his letter by repeating his thanks for the help they have sent him, and then turns his thoughts to the riches that God has in store to meet our needs. However difficult our situation, however limited our human resources, Christians have another perspective, and greater resources to draw on. Inevitably, we go through many ups and downs, physically, emotionally, and in our conditions of life. We are subject to 'the changes and chances of this mortal life', as the Prayer Book puts it – something we are perhaps particularly aware of at the moment. It is important that we keep in mind (even if we forget it occasionally) that we are members of God's family and God's kingdom, and that we have a sure and certain hope in Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.