

THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

This letter is a tender one, for Paul had a warm friendship with the group at Philippi. It is another letter from prison, probably written towards the end of the “*two whole years*” he spent in Rome, for he is confident of release. It is a thank you letter. The Philippians knew the apostle was deprived of liberty and everyday comforts. They had put their heads together and made up a present for him, carried to Rome by **Epaphroditus**, one of their members. Now he was returning, and Paul writes a letter for him to take back. We must imagine it being read aloud to a packed assembly of the congregation, probably on a Sunday, and their keen faces as they listened to the news from Paul’s prison cell.

He tells them that good had come, even out of his imprisonment. Every soldier turning up for duty to guard the apostle had come to know he was in chains for the sake of Jesus of Nazareth. Some of the Imperial Guard had actually become Christians as a result. Paul’s energy in preaching in prison had rubbed off onto the Roman brothers and sisters, who had been stirred up by his example. We cannot help feeling shamed, too, when we see this amazing man, so dedicated to his Lord that even when he has to stop his journeys through the machinations of his enemies, he refuses to sit in a corner and mope. Every person that came through the door of his cell was a potential disciple. He must save them from eternal death.

The second chapter draws a brilliant analogy between Adam and Christ. Paul is teaching us to submerge our natural pride, and do always what will help others. Jesus, he tells us, must be our example. Like Adam, he had the physical form of the Creator. But unlike Adam, who grasped at the forbidden fruit in the hope it could make him like God, Jesus did not break God’s law. Though born to be

King of kings, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but accepted the humble role of servant to his fellow men. Adam found himself condemned to death. Jesus, in contrast, will for his humility be blessed with a name above every name.

Paul informs the Philippians he will send Timothy to them as soon as he hears the outcome of his case, hoping he himself will follow. But now he must return to them their messenger Epaphroditus. At this point a little drama appears. Evidently this poor brother had been taken ill in Rome, and came close to death, causing Paul grave concern. But God had mercifully granted him recovery, and now he was coming back, bearing the letter.

From a human point of view Paul the ambitious young lawyer had wasted his life, enduring years of persecution as a Christian, and now shut up in jail. But he had cheerfully abandoned his past career in exchange for the tremendous reward of coming to know Jesus his master. His goal was no longer fame and fortune, but the resurrection from the dead. He felt as dedicated as an athlete in a race, determined to win the wreath of victory:

“But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”. (Philippians 3:13,14)

Finally, in the last chapter he gets round to the reason for his letter. It was really kind of them to think of him, he says. He had learned to accept privations and discomfort. But their gift was appreciated, and he was sure God would reward them for their thoughtfulness. We do not know what they sent him. Was it blankets, and fruit cake, or hand knitted jumpers and writing paper? We cannot know. But his reaction shows

what a difference a thoughtful gesture can
make to someone who is in trouble.

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