

JOY WAY

An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul

TO THE PHILIPPIANS

by

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CHAPTER ONE

SALUT D'AMOUR - PHILIPPIANS 1:1-2

THE opening of this Epistle is different from that of most in one very interesting particular. It is a difference shared by all three of the Macedonian Epistles - this, and the two to the Thessalonians - and by the little personal note to Philemon.

It consists in the somewhat noteworthy absence of the word "**Epistle**". **In all his other letters, Paul feels it incumbent upon him to remind his readers that he writes with all the weight that his sublime position gives him; he will have occasion to administer rebuke, and, sometimes, rather bluntly, to give directions - and lest, because he was their friend, they might treat his words not too seriously, he takes care to let them understand that he speaks with an authority, and that they must give due and proper heed to what he says.**

But his case is otherwise when he writes to his beloved Philippians. "**The church at Philippi**", says Dr. Graham Scroggie, "**was almost quite free from those errors which beset so many of the churches of that day**"; and he goes on to quote Professor Findlay as saying, "**This is an Epistle of the heart, a true love letter, full of friendship, gratitude, and confidence.**"

There is, we feel, no need to obtrude his apostleship here; and so his opening greetings are not inappropriately described as a "salut d'amour" - his letter will be found to be full of, and his heart to be full of, Love. As we turn, then, to examine the inspired sentences which introduce this moving document, we are likely to be arrested at the outset by

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE CHRISTIANS

It is given in terms of their relationship to the Lord JESUS CHRIST: and that must, of course, ever be remembered to be the true starting-point of all Christian experience, and all Christian instruction. We do well, in taking up the study of any of the Epistles, to enquire carefully into that matter of where we stand in reference to Him.

The Epistles are, in a fundamental sense, the property of believers - they have, except

incidentally, nothing to say to the people of the world - their message is addressed to the Church, the members of His body - their teaching is to be grasped and enjoyed only by those who have been truly "born again" of the same SPIRIT who inspired the writing of the Epistles. We are, therefore, not wasting time if we pause to ask ourselves about our relationship to CHRIST - have we, indeed, received Him into our hearts and lives, as our own personal SAVIOUR? Only so, have we legitimate entrance to this Treasure House; if so, we have undisputed access to all its Treasure Trove. Our relationship to Him then determines both how we get into it, and what we get out of it.

Note what is said here concerning that relationship, for the terms employed are applicable to all believers - both to Paul and Timothy who send forth the Epistle, and to the original, and all subsequent, readers of it: you and me amongst them.

"The Servants."

Let it be said at once that the word here is the same as "bond-slaves" - a conception which would be vividly familiar to every reader of this Letter. Quite a number of them were, or had been, slaves themselves - and the word would catch their attention at once. I say "had been" of some, because the law of manumission would have operated in their case - a price would have been paid, and the slave set free.

In his fascinating *Light from the Ancient East*, Dr. Deissmann, pp. 319 ff., has some most interesting paragraphs on this releasing of slaves; and, with his quick and ready mind, the late Archbishop Harrington Lees, in his *CHRIST and His Slaves*, made use of the learned Doctor's discoveries to point many a moral concerning spiritual servitude and release.

Paul's writings abound in allusions to this last phenomenon. The material and the spiritual are found together in such a passage as I Corinthians 7:22, **"He that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freedman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant".** **When a man becomes a Christian, though materially bound as a slave, he is spiritually freed from bondage to Satan and sin; on the other hand, such a man, though materially set at liberty, is, in the spiritual sense, bound hand and foot to CHRIST.**

How Paul himself rejoiced - and even gloried - in this New Slavery. In his letters he so constantly uses the word as indicating his relationship to JESUS CHRIST. He would so readily enter into the attitude of the well-satisfied slave of Exodus 21:5, **"I love my Master . . . I will not go out free."**

From the bondage of sin, the believer has, by the manumission price of **"the precious Blood"**, I Peter 1:18-19, been set free-only to find himself thereby committed to a bondage more binding than ever. Yet, this time the "service is perfect freedom", the bonds are honourable and sweet.

And, for our encouragement, let us remember that

(i) *The Master is responsible for His slaves' needs* - feeding, housing, clothing, and all else is the slaveowner's concern. It is because we are GOD'S servants (slaves) that our Lord says **"Therefore . . . take no thought . . ."**, Matthew 6:24-25, for the ordinary needs of life. Our

apostle will say later in this very Epistle, 4:19, "**My GOD shall supply all your need.**"

Also

(ii) *The Master is responsible for His slaves' duties* - they will not choose their own task, or their own sphere. Whether ours is to be the more menial, or the more genial, work is in His plan, not ours. It is the Christian's wisdom to stand before Him as those in II Samuel 15:15, "**Thy servants are ready to do whatsoever my Lord the King shall appoint**", or as Gabriel in Luke 1:19, "**I . . . stand . . . and am sent . . .**".

Then, too

(iii) *The Master is responsible for His slaves' supplies* - "**Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges?**" asks I Corinthians 9:7: the soldier has all his military equipment provided; and likewise, the slave is supplied with everything needful for the adequate discharge of all his duties. Whatever He tells us to do, we can do - "**If . . . God command thee . . . thou shalt be able to . . .**" Exodus 18:23 - because all supplies are at our disposal. And as Paul records, in II Corinthians 12:9, "**My grace is sufficient for thee.**"

"**The Saints.**"

All GOD'S people are thus designated - the sense of the word being "set apart", or "consecrated"; and this quite irrespective of personal character. As Lightfoot points out, "Even the irregularities and profligacies of the Corinthian Church do not forfeit it this title". Yet, be it said that those who are positionally holy are expected to be practically holy.

I am always intrigued by the way it is put in Romans 1:7, and in I Corinthians 1:2, "**called to be saints**" - where the "to be" is printed in italics, as indicating that those words are not in the Greek but are introduced by the translators to give what they deem to be the sense. But just "**called saints**" would be accurate, wouldn't it?

In this very Epistle they are called "**saints**", and in others; it is one of GOD'S names for His own.

Yes, but as soon as we are "**called saints**" we are "**called to be saints**"! To be what we are.

There would be something wrong about a prince living like a pauper, about an Englishman masquerading as an alien, about a grown-up person behaving like a child - no. Let's be what we are. If, by GOD'S mercy and grace, we are Christians, let us in all things comport ourselves as such: if we are "**called saints**", we are most assuredly "**called to be saints**": let our conduct, then, be "**as becometh saints**", Ephesians 5:3, in all respects.

What a tremendous impression would be made upon the world if only we Christians were what we are. It is one of the world's most damaging accusations against us that we do not act up to our profession. A Christian is a "CHRIST'S one": let him, then, be Christly - to use the word that W. Y. Fullerton was so fond of.

Come now, how much of this true saintliness is there about us? Never mind about considering,

or criticising, others - what about ourselves, you and me: do Name and Nature coincide? Whether we be "**bishops**", "presbyters", (Lightfoot), or "**deacons**", or members of the rank and file, we are all to be saints.

Here, then, in these two great words, "**servants**" and "**saints**", we have the apostle's description of Christians everywhere.

Let us pass on to observe:

THE DWELLING-PLACE OF THE CHRISTIANS

The particular believers addressed in this letter are said to live

(i) *At Philippi.*

It was an interesting city.

(a) Geographically - it was situated on the great high road between Europe and Asia, and so possessed great strategic importance. Let it be noted that Paul, with astute generalship, always, for the spread of the Gospel, had his eye upon the big centres of population, trade, learning, or government. Hence his purposeful longing

"**I must . . . see Rome**", Acts 19:21, and his "**good cheer**" in the assurance, "**thou [must] bear witness also at Rome**", Acts 23:2.

(b) Naturally - its surrounding land was favoured with a particularly fertile soil, and nearby were gold and silver mines. In Paul's eye, just the spot for the sowing of the Gospel seed of the Word, and the mining of precious souls for the Kingdom.

(c) Historically - it ran back to the ancient times of the Phoenicians. Subsequently, Philip of Macedon re-established it, giving it his own name. In its neighbourhood, in 42 B.C., Octavian defeated the republican forces, and in honour of his victory made it a Roman "colony". Acts 16 has a number of allusions which reflect the pride of the inhabitants in their Roman citizenship, a privilege which, as we know, Paul also enjoyed and prized.

Lightfoot has this delightful note respecting our present Epistle, "Addressing a Roman colony from the Roman metropolis, writing as a citizen to citizens, he recurs to the political franchise as an apt symbol of the higher privileges of their heavenly calling, to the political life as a suggestive metaphor for the duties of their Christian profession."

(d) Biblically - it is the place where the Gospel was first preached in Europe.

Paul, seemingly to his surprise (for he had quite different plans, Acts 16:6-7) found himself at Troas, where he had his vision calling him to Macedonia. And now he knew why his own programme had been summarily brushed aside, for he was actually at the seaport whence he could travel direct to Europe. Imagine his excited zeal when he set forth.

Even the elements seemed to speed him on his journey (as "**the stars in their courses**" helped

forward another project, Judges 5:20) for his boat accomplished in two days (Acts 16:11), a journey which, in other conditions, took five days (Acts 20:6).

What a great sequence of conquests we find in this city - amongst them, those two converts: the one, that of the capable business woman, so quiet - Lydia's heart was opened; the other, that of the gaoler, so catastrophic - his whole being was shaken.

Thus Paul was used to the winning of these two hearts, and became ever welcome to their two houses. They were the first-fruits of the Gospel, the nucleus of the Church that grew up around them: a Church that never forgot what they owed to the apostle, a Church that begat in him an undying affection, as this Epistle he wrote them abundantly reveals.

If we may, as many think, include that soothsaying damsel as also a convert, we have here, as Lightfoot points out, the gaining for CHRIST of a Jewish proselytess, a Greek slave, and a Roman gaoler - female, as well as male; bond, as well as free; Gentile, as well as Jew, as Galatians 3:28 would lead us to expect. Or, as it thrilled me to recall - "Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin," as His kingly title, in John 19:20, prophesied.

But - while these believers were resident in Philippi, let it be noted that they enjoyed a more intimate environment and dwelling-place

(ii) "**In Christ.**" Herein lay

(a) Their protection from evil life. The moral condition of a heathen city would be a constant peril to any new converts, especially as they themselves had but just recently come out of that very heathenism. Philippi may not have been so utterly debased as Corinth, or Rome, but its atmosphere must have been a subversive influence threatening any who would live pure and true. Yet, they could be kept safe. Christians must, of course, remain in such hostile surroundings, for CHRIST must have there, as Matthew 5:13-14 teaches, the salt, the light, and the testimony.

So He Himself prays "**not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil**", John 17:15.

That keeping, that protection, is ministered to us in the fact of our being, not only "**in the world**", but more closely, "**in Christ.**"

A shipwrecked man writes a message, and throws it into the sea, in the hope that it may reach some shore. But will not the water damage and destroy it? No; for, while it is cast into the sea, it is first sealed in a bottle - and so it arrives. Yes; in Philippi, with all its destructive influences, but "**in Christ**" - so they are secure, and so, in spite of all antagonistic forces, they arrive at "the haven where they would be." Herein lay also:

(b) Their possibility of holy life. We are called not only to a negative but to a positive life - "**eschew evil, and do good**", as I Peter 3:11 says. But how can a holy life be lived in such unholy surroundings?

Mark that little water-spider going down to the bottom of that pond. It doesn't really belong

there, even as we believers are: "**in the world**" . . . but not of it, John 17:11, 16. The little creature has the queer, and amazing, ability of weaving a bubble of air around itself, and hidden in that it is able to pursue its way even amid such inimical conditions - in the water, but in the bubble!

So we come back to our glorious truth - in Philippi, but "**in Christ**"; then even in the midst of the most uncongenial surroundings, the Christ-life can be lived.

As we study this Epistle, reading between the lines, we shall see how splendidly these first European believers learned the lesson, and practised the art. We, too, in our dual dwelling, shall find all our needed protection, and realise all our great possibility.

And now let us turn to a third main thought of this introductory section:

THE DESIRES FOR THE CHRISTIANS

"**Grace and peace**" - just the customary greeting:

- "**grace**", the Western,
- "**peace**", the Eastern;

but when the HOLY SPIRIT led Paul to combine them here, we may be sure that He intended their use to be something so much more than formal and usual; both writer and readers would be led to see in them very deep and rich meaning.

Wilson Cash makes the interesting suggestion that "Paul combines both Jewish '**peace**' and Gentile '**grace**' in one salutation as a pledge of unity between East and West, between Jew and Gentile, in the one Saviour, who unites all in the one fellowship of His Body".

Dr. Hugh Michael, in the Moffatt Commentary, speaks of "the enrichment of the commonplace by the new faith of CHRIST, which elevates a salutation into a benediction".

How arrestingly that is seen in the transmutation of everything, however lowly, that He touched - a common Name, a despised City, a humble workshop, even a felon's Cross.

Dr. Johnson said of Oliver Goldsmith, "He touched nothing that he did not adorn: how infinitely truer of the Master. So here the common greeting is invested with uncommon beauty."

What are these things that the apostle desires for his friends, and which are no less desirable for ourselves?

(a) "**Grace**" - a quality which is, at once

- (i) *an Attitude*, which He adopts towards us, as in Ephesians 2:8;
- (ii) *an Activity*, which He exerts for our help, as in I Corinthians 15:10; and
- (iii) *an Accomplishment*, which He works in, and out from, us, as in Acts 4:33.

Paul ardently, and prayerfully, desires for his converts everywhere - for he uses the words in all his church letters - that they may experience to the full this "**grace**", which the late Bishop Handley Moule describes as "love in action".

Then comes:

(b) "**Peace**" - the "**God of all grace**" is the "**God of peace**", I Peter 5:10; Romans 15:33; and it is only by, and after, His grace that we can enjoy His peace.

- Peace of heart - no condemnation before GOD;
- Peace of conscience - no controversy with GOD;
- Peace of mind - no anxiety about life;
- Peace of action - no grit in the machinery.

This gift is an immensely precious boon; and it may be the possession, should be the possession, of every believer. Paul will have some deep things to say about this later.

These two joys come, says our passage, "**from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ**" - the Father is the Source, from whom they come; the Saviour is the Medium, through whom they come. Not from the world arise such blessings, nor from our circumstances, however affluent and pleasant, nor from our own inner being, however much we strive, but only from Him, through Him, and "**all the fulness of the Godhead . . . and ye are complete in Him**", Colossians 2:9-10.

So runs the Love Greeting with which this glorious Letter opens - Salut d'amour.

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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