

## Prayer

God Almighty, powerful Lord and Saviour, You have given us life and You sustain our every breath. Lift the burden of our sins, comfort our hurting souls and bring peace to our lives as we live and work for You. For You are the source of all things, You are the foundation of all that is good, and You are our beginning and end. We give You praise and glory, powerful Lord of life! AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Spend some time on the internet and research something you are concerned about. Use this to inform your prayers.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray about worship.** Ask the Lord to help you explore how other people worship God in different churches and historic traditions
- Pray for the people of Haiti who are still struggling to survive
- Give thanks to God for the way He works through forgiveness to free people from guilt and shame

## Meditation

By the power of God's Spirit,

May we give more of our time to spend with our Lord in prayer;  
May we clarify the direction of our mission within the world;  
May we face up to our obligations within the body of Christ;  
May we enliven our worship by accepting the leading of the Spirit;  
May we take the Word of God seriously and study it daily.

And inspired by Christ's love,

May we take our eyes away from ourselves to look at others;  
May we see Christ in all around us and show our faith in action;  
May we receive God's healing in our souls, minds and bodies;  
May we give testimony to the work of God throughout our lives;  
May we praise the Lord within each moment of our living.

Thanks be to God; Father, Son and Spirit!

---

## Bible passage - Philippians 1:12-18

<sup>12</sup> I want you to know, dear friends, that in reality, what has happened to me has helped to further the cause of the gospel, <sup>13</sup> with the result that the whole Imperial Guard knows that my imprisonment is for Christ, as well as everyone else! <sup>14</sup> Most of our friends in the Lord have grown in confidence because of my imprisonment and are more bold and fearless in speaking the Word of God!

<sup>15</sup> Now, some of these preach Christ through envy or rivalry, but others do so with goodwill <sup>16</sup> and out of love for me, knowing that I have the task of defending the gospel. <sup>17</sup> The former preach Christ because of self-centred ambition, without sincerity and with the intent of increasing the difficulties caused by my imprisonment. <sup>18</sup> What really matters, then? Only this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, and for that I rejoice.

---

# Bible Study

## Review

***Paul rejoices that his imprisonment means that the Gospel has become known amongst Roman soldiers, even if some other preachers are envious of his work.***

This is a fascinating passage, and it offers us a glimpse of Paul's thoughts about imprisonment and the proclamation of the Gospel. Remarkably, we read that Paul was able to rejoice in his captivity, for just like every circumstance of life, he was able to use this as an opportunity to preach about Jesus. Paul goes on to comment on the motives of those who preach, and he questions the integrity of some of his followers who he accuses of preaching '*through envy or rivalry*' (1:15). Yet Paul brushes aside all personal animosity to give thanks for the supreme value of the Gospel (1:18). This passage is a powerful example of the teaching of Scripture, which tells us that nothing is more important than the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and nothing is more important for the individual than receiving it, and proclaiming it.

The starting point for what Paul says here is his comment about being held captive by the 'Imperial Guard'. Now this strongly suggests that he wrote this letter while awaiting a hearing before the Emperor in Rome. Towards the end of his life, Paul was charged by some Jews in Jerusalem with subverting the authority of the Emperor, and the story at the end of Acts suggests that there was some delay before this hearing was held (Acts 28:16-31). However, Paul does not mention the Imperial Guard here just so that we might be able to date his letter! He wrote about them in order to encourage his readers to rejoice in the opportunity he had been given to make the Gospel known to these elite professional soldiers of the Roman army!

It seems that Paul was a little self-conscious when boasting about spreading the Gospel through the Imperial Guard. Perhaps he felt that some who read his letter would accuse him of pride. Certainly, it seems as if Paul had some enemies who opposed his ministry, and they even made his circumstances in prison more difficult (1:17). We can only guess at who such people might be, but it is possible that he is speaking about Jewish Christian preachers. They would have preached the Gospel of Jesus but opposed Paul openly, thus giving fuel to the accusation for which he was being imprisoned, which was that Paul was someone who created division and dissent.

Paul cuts to the chase, and he identifies the sins of those who opposed him as envy, rivalry (1:15), self-centred ambition, insincerity and devious intent (1:17). This is a dire list of sins, and they are worth thinking about, even now. Normally, we might expect Paul to condemn these sins out of hand, but he does not do this. Instead, he stands back from any harsh judgement of his opponents and says, '*what really matters? Only this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way*' (1:18). So why does Paul stand back from condemning sin here? His point is that the Gospel becomes known when it is preached, whoever does the preaching, and the Gospel is more important than its messenger.

Nevertheless, the teaching here in this passage tells us that a preacher's motives are of less importance than the Gospel itself. Now this principle may sound strange to our ears because we are used to Scripture's dire warnings about the perils of sin, but it strikes a careful balance. While the Gospel is spread in a sinful world by sinful but redeemed people, we cannot expect that those who preach the Gospel are sinless, otherwise our pulpits will be empty!

Altogether, this passage is a remarkable example of the priority of the Gospel in all things, and Paul says that even the sins of the preacher are of secondary importance. Of course, every preacher knows that Christ uses a sinful vessel to proclaim the Good News, and without such humility the Gospel is compromised. For this reason, all of us who read Paul's words must consider the challenge to stand with him and rejoice in the proclamation of the Gospel, however God chooses to do this, and through whoever He uses.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Imprisonment ... Rome? Ephesus? Caesarea?
- Paul's welfare and the preaching of the Word
- Paul's opponents, and his response

### Going Deeper

### ***Going Deeper***

The preaching of the Word of God always takes place in some 'context'. By looking further into the text, we can learn more about how and why Paul preached and wrote as he did. He was intent on exposing falsehood and believed in the purity of the Gospel. His example has much to teach us.

### ***Imprisonment ... Rome? Ephesus? Caesarea?***

The first interesting issue that arises from this text is the circumstances of imprisonment that could have led to what Paul described in his letter. Paul faced imprisonment many times, not least when he first came to Philippi (Acts 16:19ff, but see also 2 Cor 6:5ff). Arguments have gone on for a long time as to whether Paul wrote this letter from Rome, where he was confined towards the end of his life (see Acts 28:16ff), or some other location at an earlier time. Some have suggested that Paul was imprisoned in some other city of the Roman Empire during his travels such as Ephesus (where Paul appears to be in prison as he writes – see Ephesians 3:1, 4:1).

Most of the debates centre around our understanding of the work of the Praetorian or Imperial Guard specifically mentioned by Paul in this letter (1:13). Their duties were centred around the court of the Emperor of Rome on Palatine Hill, and the Guard numbered several thousand senior and experienced soldiers. This is enough for some to conclude that this letter was written from Rome, and this remains the most likely explanation of what Paul says here.

However, we should at least consider one other possibility. The last six chapters of Acts contain the story of Paul's captivity for several years in and around Caesarea before being taken to Rome, in which time he was guarded by members of the Praetorian Guard whose responsibility was to look after Paul, a Roman citizen, after his legal appeal to the Emperor (Acts 25:10ff). During these years, Paul had an unprecedented opportunity to speak about the Gospel to senior Roman soldiers (Acts 23:16ff), the Jewish authorities and the Roman governor Felix (Acts 24), then Festus and King Agrippa (Acts 25,26). It does seem as if Acts gives us a sufficient description of the circumstances surrounding this letter for us to consider that Paul may have written the letter not at Rome itself, but in the years of imprisonment just before he went there. This is as far as anyone can go with the matter!

### ***Paul's welfare and the preaching of the Word***

The world in which these events took place was a far more dangerous one than we know today. Journeys were more hazardous and disease was more deadly. One has the feeling from scripture that life was therefore valued more highly in those days because it could not be taken for granted. Later on in Philippians, Paul mentions the travels of one of his fellow-workers, Epaphroditus (2:25, 4:18) who appears to have recently brought a gift to Paul from Philippi and whose life was in danger during recent journeys. Certainly, someone had brought Paul a message that the people at Philippi were divided and there was difficulty within the Church. It is possible that the church had heard of the imprisonment of Paul, and this allowed those within the congregation who had problems with him and his teaching the opportunity to make their voices heard. Certainly, Paul writes later in his letter about some who were trying to teach the still young church that all Christians should be circumcised (Phil 3:2ff). Perhaps they felt emboldened to speak because Paul was 'behind bars' and more loyal Christians were disturbed. We can imagine the situation.

The main thrust of Paul's letter was therefore to offer reassurance to the loyal believers at Philippi. Paul had already spoken to them with the warmest possible affection as he opened his letter (1:1-11), and now he urged them not to lose heart but to rejoice and be confident in the Gospel! His first encouragement came by asking them to look not at their own situation, but at the global implications of what was happening. They had begun by being worried that the Gospel was compromised at Philippi, but Paul was eager to inform them that everything was in God's hands, for the Good News of Jesus was being discussed by all manner of people who would never have heard the Gospel had Paul not gone to prison (1:12-14).

There was one other matter for rejoicing. It may seem odd to us that Paul's imprisonment should give other preachers confidence (see 1:14), for would they not also fear being placed in jail for preaching as openly as Paul had done? We should remember that all this was happening only a few years after Jesus himself had been executed for preaching the Gospel and living a life of love. There must have been an on-going concern amongst some that any brush with the authorities might lead to instant death, as had happened to Jesus. By comparison, Paul's imprisonment was indeed far less severe, and Paul had obtained a stay of execution by appealing to the Emperor, something that would have given hope to the whole Christian church; hope that the Emperor might allow the Church to become legal after Paul's appeal! This is only a realistic argument if you accept my point about Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea, but it does seem to fit the situation.

The consequence of all this was an increase in '*speaking the Word of God*' (1:14). In different Bibles you will see that the words '*of God*' are sometimes missing; there was clearly an ancient difference of opinion about the original text of Paul's letter, but it is nevertheless quite clear that the '*Word of God*' spoken of here was not scripture, but the activity of declaring the Gospel (1:14). It is unhelpful for us to think of this as

'preaching', for the verse refers to any means of communication of the 'Word of God', and is closer to what we mean by 'evangelism'.

### **Paul's opponents, and his response**

It is not easy to see within the way Paul has written his letter, but he was obviously responding to information about people in the church who were teaching 'against' him and seeking to add to or alter the Gospel he had brought to Philippi. Paul makes a comparison between his opponents (1:15) and those who remained loyal to him, even though he was absent and had probably not preached at Philippi for many years. He speaks of those who preach '*out of love for me knowing that I have the task of defending the Gospel*' (1:16). Paul encapsulates within this phrase everything he had said about loyalty to both the fellowship of believers and the Gospel of Jesus Christ; for although the loyalty was indeed personal, God had used Paul to bring the Gospel to the wider world through his commissioning as an apostle by vision (Gal 1:1). Paul's '*defending the Gospel*' (1:16) refers not just to his tireless ministry to countless churches which effectively founded the church on European and Oriental soil, but also to his forthcoming 'defence' (a legal term) of the Gospel before the Emperor.

It is strongly implied within this text that the Gospel as preached by Paul was something that was unique and was unchangeable, and the opponents that he had within the church were seeking to add to or deviate from what Paul had already taught, and this is what Paul spoke so vehemently against. This is something that should cause us to think. Over the centuries, the Gospel has been preached in thousands of places and circumstances, and the different churches of our own day have a massive variety of doctrines covering every conceivable aspect of Christian faith. Surely there is room within all this for a wide variety of different interpretations of what God has done for us in Jesus, and how it effects us all?

The answer that Paul would give I believe, is 'no'. There is at the heart of Christian faith a truth about the love of God found uniquely in Jesus Christ which transcends all human interpretations, and without it, our churches are little more than religious sects offering different and competing spiritualities. Whilst this may be what some people want, it is not the Gospel that scripture speaks of, or that Paul defends in his letter to the Philippians. When Paul declares at the end of this passage '*what really matters? Only this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, and for that I rejoice.*' (1:18), he is not condoning any alternative Gospel. He is showing his confidence that in the midst of the turmoil of the church at Philippi, the one and only Gospel is unique and God is in control of all things, even if it appears that rivalry and envy has split the church apart. In the midst of the turmoil of our own churches today, some of Paul's confidence in God and the Gospel, and his incisive dismissal of human divisive activity through ambition and envy, is sorely needed.

## Application

The letters of Paul are all deeply challenging because they present us with claims about the truth of the Gospel which come from times far distant, and some of the details about the stories behind them are hidden from our view by the passing of time. Scripture asks us to accept that the Gospel spoken of by Paul in his letters is singular and unique, and there is a core to its message which is not a religious system subject to human interpretation and cultural change, but is universally true for all times and in all places. Paul writes as he does because of his conviction that God has called him to preach and live for this unique Gospel, and we must either agree with him or dismiss him as deluded.

If we agree with Paul, then we must face the challenge of these verses to accept that the Gospel is supremely important for all people, and that it is the same Gospel now as it was 2000 years ago. From the rest of Paul's writings, we know it is a Gospel through which God and His Kingdom is revealed to the world through the life and death of Jesus Christ, and is demonstrated in this world through the fellowship of all believers, the Church. It is hardly possible to identify with this Gospel or be part of this Church in a casual way, because its demands on us are total; and if we attempt to make demands on it, or make it fit into our own cultural or personal agendas, then we add nothing to the Gospel, we only display our human sinfulness. Those who did this in Philippi showed envy, rivalry, self-centredness and ambition, for example, and they probably did this believing they were right. This attitude, however, is what Paul so roundly dismisses in this text. The Gospel is not ours to meddle with; it is ours to accept or reject.

---

## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Read some of the stories in the last six chapters of Acts and familiarise yourself with the stories of Paul's captivity. To what extent do they help us understand this text?
2. What do you think that this passage says to us about the Gospel, and what Gospel principles do you find within it?
3. Should we accept any preacher in our pulpits providing they say they proclaim Christ? Should there be any 'checks', and what should they be?

### **Personal comments by author**

*I find it hard to imagine the circumstances under which Paul was able to both endure prison, and also write in such glowing terms about the Gospel. Surely imprisonment was a difficult and harsh punishment, especially in Roman times. However, this was the extraordinary outcome of the extraordinary life of an extraordinary man. What I have to accept is that the Lord Jesus Christ is able to make my life just as relevant and important for the Kingdom, but in quite different ways, which may well not include any kind of fame or public acknowledgement. Each of us must accept our calling.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *It may be helpful to face the challenge of this text head on and try to write down what you understand the Gospel to be.*
- *Having done this, ask yourself whether Paul would recognise what you have written as the same faith for which he was imprisoned. In order to do this, read through one of the other letters of Paul and check out what you have written against this.*

---

## Final Prayer

Your warmth, Lord Jesus, is like the sun that bursts through the clouds on an overcast day, bringing not only light and warmth, but colour, vitality and new life. May we always be open to receive Your energy and Your love, because it is Your unconditional gift. Thank You Jesus; AMEN

---