

Encouragements to Continued Unity
Philippians 1
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On the night in which He was betrayed, Jesus prayed concerning those who would believe because of the words of the apostles; He prayed for future generations of Christians by saying, “That they may all be one, even as though, Father, art in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us, that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me.” (John 17:21)

Jesus prayed that His followers of future generations be united because the world would see that characteristic as a proof that Jesus is the Messiah, because unity among human beings is so rare and so fragile that any group that maintains it will attract attention.

But, the very energy of the Christian faith tends to produce energetic personalities. And a bunch of energetic personalities tend to fly apart like boiling water. The water level in the pot keeps getting lower and lower as the energetic molecules fly off in their own directions.

So, Paul wrote about unity, a whole letter on the theme of unity, to the church at Philippi to assist them in developing the love which produces unity, a love which allows those differing energies to pull together instead of apart without sacrificing truth or liberty.

Philippi, it seems, was a church with few if any problems. So the question comes up, “Why write to a church about unity when there is no disunity?” Because of its importance.

Paul thought unity was extremely important. In Ephesians 4, Paul wrote that unity should be the first result of grace, that unity of the faith will produce a maturity and resistance to false teachers. Alone, we are deceived relatively easily. Together, someone will see the flaw in the argument. In Colossians 3, he wrote that love is the perfect bond of unity. When our first instincts are for the needs of others, unity works.

The history of the beginning of the church in Philippi is recorded in Acts 16, about Lydia, the first convert; about a slave girl possessed by a demon whom Paul cast out; about being thrown in prison for depriving the owners of the slave girl of the profit they derived from her predictions; and about the earthquake that resulted in the conversion of the jailer. Paul, Silas, and Timothy left town after the release of Silas and Paul to avoid further embarrassment to the city officials, but Luke remained behind. He stayed in Philippi for a goodly length of time to help foster the church

There was no synagogue in Philippi, so there must have been few if any Jews, so persecution and strife from that quarter were not in Philippi.

This congregation began sending funds to Paul and company almost immediately, when Paul was working in Thessalonika. It is likely that Paul and the brethren in Philippi kept up a lively correspondence over the years, at least lively considering the speed of communication of that time. This letter that we call Philippians was written about seven years after the church was established there. The letter was written from Rome while Paul was awaiting trial. It seems that only Timothy and Epaphroditus (who was from Philippi) were with him at the time. Paul sent this letter back to Philippi with Epaphroditus.

Paul began with his first encouragement to continued unity: to keep on going

(Philippians 1:1 – 8) Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in

the gospel from the first day until now. For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Paul's first encouragement is, "Look what you've done right!" "I have confidence in you."

This is Paul's pep talk, and it feels good to have nice things said about you. These were not empty compliments, either. Paul was not the eternal optimist who was always overflowing with compliments. When things went wrong, he said so, pointedly. If you read only 1 Corinthians and Galatians, you might think that Paul fancied himself the church enforcer, always harping about something. But here is the other side. Paul had balance. IF things were bad, he told the church what was wrong and how to fix it. When things were good, he told them he was proud of them and reminded them of how they had been able to accomplish so much.

If Paul were alive today and had established this congregation, what would he write to us? I like to think that we, too, would receive such statements of confidence. Nothing makes you persevere more than being a part of something that is going right.

And notice that Paul did not single out certain people for praise, although I am sure there are those who carried most of the load and others who could do more. He complimented the whole body, not just the hands or the mouth.

And Paul continued, as he did in every message, positive or negative, with a call to action, an encouragement to "keep up the good work."

Philippians 1:9 – 11) And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

There is an unfortunate reflex to lavish compliments. In the backs of our minds is a little suspicion. "When is he going to give me another job to do." There was a cartoon character who was popular during World War II by the name of Sad Sack, a GI for whom everything imaginable went wrong. One day, Sack and another GI were given the job of cleaning garbage cans. Sack went after his cans with hard work and produced a row of shiny, clean garbage cans. The other GI loafed, did a lousy job, and produced little. The lazy GI got a tongue lashing from his sergeant, and was removed from that odious task. Sack was rewarded with a new set of smelly, dirty garbage cans. Doing a good job just got him more dirty work.

I wonder if the Philippian Christians were waiting for the other shoe to drop. Paul wanted them to push onward and upward, to grow in knowledge and wisdom and righteousness. And if they looked at doing the will of God in the same light as cleaning smelly, dirty garbage cans, they would neither enjoy a godly compliment nor enjoy their stay in the Kingdom.

Have you known people who were miserable in the Kingdom? Perhaps they were of the legalistic sort, those who have ceased to grow because they were consumed in trying to keep the rules. At the other extreme are those who are "overly" happy in the Kingdom, who have never grown at all. Their happiness is self-deception. Paul gives the only true path to happiness: continued real growth.

But it is only the one-eyed optimist who sees only the good and not the bad. Not everything goes right. It has been that way in every age, so Paul addressed it. His next step in encouragement to continued unity was to show them that even the bad times turn out for good. First, examples from Paul's own situation:

(Philippians 1:12 – 18) Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice,

Paul's path is obvious; he is going to present his own example of bad times turning out well in order to keep them from falling apart when things go badly. Remember Paul's situation. He has been in prison nearly four years, unjustly. Some people were using that fact to talk against him. "You believe that Paul? Why, the authorities have kept him locked up four years now. Where there's smoke, there's fire, you know."

But, Paul writes, this imprisonment has had a good result. The gospel has been preached by more people as a result. Perhaps some were motivated to begin preaching because they observed that Paul no longer could travel about freely. When someone is doing a job well, very few volunteer to pitch in and do it, too. But now that Paul's traveling days were over, others saw the need for them to step up. Paul's imprisonment caused some to take their responsibilities as Christians more seriously.

Paul also reports that not all of those who started preaching due to his imprisonment had pure motives, but even when not, at least Christ was proclaimed. He does not close his eyes to problems, but he can find something positive even in bad times.

That is quite an example for us, so see the good in everything. Not that seeing the good makes the bad go away, that that it justifies the bad. Paul does not like prison and would much rather be out preaching. He does not like people preaching from bad motives. But, he points out, after the bad happens, you can't go back and change it. Balance it with good. Seeing the good never makes the bad any better, but after the initial shock wears off, it gives a way to climb back up.

And notice how Paul measures what is good: evangelism. If Christ is preached, everything will be OK. That's a big lesson for us. The measure of our maturity is our evangelism. The source of our happiness in the kingdom is our evangelism. The rest is just a means to get there. Bad times can get us side-tracked from the real objective. So, Paul used his own imprisonment to remind them of what is most important.

Next, Paul will take this thought one step further. He is going to ask the question, "What's the worst that could happen?" He does this to illustrate the idea, "Pray that bad times produce some good; don't just expect bad times to go away."

(Philippians 1:19 – 26) For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and

hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.

Paul takes the extreme: life or death. The point of his example is to say, “What’s the worst that could happen? They could kill me and I’d have to go on to heaven. But (sigh), I guess, since my job is not done yet, I’ll have to stay here a while longer.”

Is that our attitude?

Paul wrote, “For me, to live is Christ, to die is gain.” Most people look at that as a great statement about not being afraid to die. That is only the hem of the garment. Loyalty to the point of death, while somewhat rare, is not unknown in the world. Down through history, many groups of soldiers have been known for that level of dedication. In our time, suicide bombers, no matter how wrong they are, have demonstrated an extreme level of commitment.

Paul takes it one step further. It is not that we should not be afraid to die. We cannot be afraid to live. There is something harder than dying for Christ, and that is living for Christ. Paul’s desire for life is because “it is more necessary for your sake.” He would rather die and go on to heaven, but he knows why he lives, not just waiting, but serving.

Having used himself as an example, Paul goes on to apply the same principles to the Philippian Christians: how to find good in bad times.

(Philippians 1:27 – 30) Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents--which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

“Striving together,” he wrote, like soldiers fighting a common enemy. History is littered with stories of comradeship and heroism brought on by war. That is the picture Paul paints. You become unified by striving together, not individually.

Hard times will come, just as they did to Paul and as he said they would come to Philippi. Our choice is either to strive together for the good result, or fall apart. Hanging together (not overcoming individually but collectively) through adversity is a sign of maturity and salvation.

The people of the New Testament were not superheroes, neither were they particularly fond of hard times. They just had the right perspective. They did not see bad times as they affected themselves, because they only lived for each other with the goal of taking the message to the lost.