

Philippians 4:21-23

Introduction

So we come to the very end of Philippians. Paul wrote this letter when he was in prison in Rome. He has thanked the Philippians for the gifts they sent him via Epaphroditus. He has taken the opportunity to urge them to stop petty quarrels and to watch out for troublemakers. He has urged them to live the Christian life properly, to be humble, worthy of God, caring, to shine as lights in the world, to rejoice in the Lord (in fact he has mentioned joy and rejoicing 16 times).

At the same time he has reminded them of the wonderful resources available to them. God is at work in their lives, bringing peace, strength and provision. Also they have a glorious future. They need not fear death for they will be with Christ, and it will be far better than this life. They would be changed to have new bodies like His, and will be with Him forever.

Right at the end we have these final greetings and a parting benediction. They are worth studying, for this is not a formal ending. Paul means every word. These people meant everything to him, and even in his closing words we are given yet another picture of the life of the Christian and our resources in Christ Jesus.

Final Greetings

Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me (fellow Christians like Timothy in prison with him, or those who visited him in prison) **send greetings. All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household** (Philippians 4:21,22).

The Roman Emperor had a vast civil service – secretaries, administrators, finance officers, and many officials. By the time Paul was writing, the Gospel had reached the heart of the Roman government. The civil service was one of the hardest places to be a Christian. There would not have been many of them, and they would have been watched carefully. They were perhaps in danger, and yet there were Christians among the officers in Roman government departments.

We may feel we are in a similar position, in the minority in the workplace, closely watched. It is important that we are not ashamed of the Gospel, do not compromise on the things of Christ, and pray for wisdom to act and speak wisely. Be awake to special opportunities to influence the situation for the Gospel. Ensure that we do not fail the Lord, that we work efficiently and hard, as unto the Lord.

Words of greeting like these are found at the end of nearly all Paul's letters. They are important, because they are Christian greetings, i.e. for every saint in Christ Jesus, expressing the bond of love and fellowship and warmth that there is among all Christians everywhere. They give us a very beautiful insight into the church – its loving concern, anxiety to express affection for other Christians and show an interest.

They were loved by the same Lord, serving the same God, and so they feel at one, even though they have never seen each other.

Can we claim to see the same spirit in every church today? Too often the emphasis is on the building, the ceremony, the ritual, the hierarchy, the office and the dignity. Church can be a cold and starchy place. Some people hurry in and hurry out again, uncaring and uninterested in the other people there, so long as they have done their duty till same time next week.

The thing that stands out about the New Testament church is that they did not just meet for worship and to hear the Word. They also met for fellowship, to show love, understanding, and concern. They were real brothers and sisters, members of the body of Christ. Everyone felt needed and of significance. If one person suffered, they all suffered together. When one part was honoured, they all rejoiced.

The Philippian Christians were interested in the Roman Christians. That is why they had sent gifts to Paul, 800 miles away. And the Roman Christians were interested in the Philippian Christians, sending their greetings via Paul.

Earlier Paul took up a collection from the churches in Galatia, Greece and Asia for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, though they were thousands of miles from them, had never seen them, nor were likely to ever see them (see Acts 20:1ff; 1 Corinthians 16:1ff; Romans 15:24ff; 2 Corinthians 8:1ff; 9:1ff).

This picture of the church challenges us. We should have concern for all, but especially for fellow Christians everywhere. Is it evident in the fellowship of the local church and the wider fellowship of the Christian church? Do you ever spare a thought for Christians suffering in various countries? Those in Muslim countries who are not free to worship? Those who know nothing of the affluence and luxuries we know? Those who have no Bibles or the resources we have? Those who are in prison for Christ's sake? Those who have lost jobs and been separated from their loved ones because of their faith? Those who never see another Christian from one week to the next? Even in this country there are lonely Christians, housebound, or in the forces. Do we ever think of these people, show concern for them, or pray for them? Where we are aware of particular need, do we give to these people? They are brothers and sisters in Christ. They know the same salvation, new birth, looking forward to the same Second Coming, accept the same Bible, going to the same home. One day we will meet them around the throne, mingle with them, and spend eternity with them. Our fellowship with them can begin on earth, just by being aware of them and remembering them before the Lord. All fellow believers form one body in Christ. We should believe it, let it influence us, and act on it.

Closing benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit (Philippians 4:23). So in one verse Paul sums up the whole message to the Philippians. What is grace? It is one of the great Christian words, occurring frequently in our Bibles, prayers and benedictions. It is God's free undeserved favour towards us. The blessing of God which is the very reverse of what we deserve.

We deserve nothing good from Him at all. Because of our sinful nature, we all stand completely opposed to God, and want our own way, rather than what God wills. We live for ourselves, to please ourselves, and to glorify and honour ourselves. We have rejected God and rebelled against Him. Because of our sinful nature we constantly sin and break the commandments, in deeds, words, thoughts and desires. We do so daily, indeed hourly, and very deliberately, defiantly, happily and repeatedly. The sins we have committed are incalculable. We deserve only one thing – utter, complete and total rejection from the presence of a holy God, our Creator and Judge. We deserve condemnation and damnation.

For some amazing and astonishing reason, this God whom we have defied and whose law we have broken, loves us. We do not know why. He desires to deliver us, to save us, and bring us back to Himself. Yet there is the barrier of our sin. This has to be dealt with. And what can we do about it? It has been done for us. This God has sent His Son, placed on Him our sin, punished our sin when, on the Cross, He bore the wages of sin, which is death. And on that ground alone God can forgive, cleanse, bring us back, adopt and give us eternal life. The total cost was borne by God, when we should have rightly received eternal damnation.

Grace sums up this astonishing act. It was undeserved, unmerited love and mercy, when we deserved the opposite. Grace shows the heart of God towards sinners like nothing else. He blesses us in spite of ourselves. Grace comes to us in a person – the eternal Son of God. When we put our trust in Him, the blessing of salvation becomes ours.

And grace does not finish with us once we are saved. God never says, “Now over to you”. There are so many other things God wants us to have all the way through our Christian lives. But always they come to us from the same source – grace. We can never deserve them. We have no right to demand a blessing from God, to demand an answer to prayer. He owes us nothing. As long as we live we shall remain unworthy and unprofitable servants. So from first to last, God’s dealings with us are only on the basis of grace.

We need all sorts of things in our Christian lives, and they all come from grace. Help comes from grace. Peace comes from grace. Comfort comes from grace. Guidance comes from grace. Strength comes from grace. Wisdom comes from grace. Deliverance from difficulties comes from grace. Temporal mercies such as food, clothes and health come from grace. Blessings on our family come from grace. Companionship comes from grace. Answers to prayer come from grace. **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all. How will he not also, along with him, graciously give all things?** (Romans 8:32).

The gift of Christ for our salvation was because of grace. Everything He gives us with Him is because of grace. The beginning, continuing and end of the Christian life are also from grace. We all need that grace, and we need it all the time. Babies in Christ and young Christians need it. So do the weak and the frail. Growing Christians need grace, else they will soon stumble and fall. Even mature Christians need it for they are still attacked by the Devil, and will never reach a point when they can do without God. Indeed experienced Christians often testify to the fact that they need God’s grace more than ever. The battle does not get easier, but harder.

Philip Doddridge (1702-1751) was a congregational minister who wrote many hymns, including “O God of Bethel” and “O happy day”. One of his hymns, which was a particular favourite of Spurgeon, was “Grace, tis a charming sound”.

*“Grace first contrived a way
To save rebellious man”
“Grace first inscribed my name
In God’s eternal book.”
“Grace turned my wandering feet
To tread the heavenly road,
And new supplies each hour I meet
While pressing on to God”
“Grace taught my soul to pray
And make my eyes o’erflow.
Tis grace that kept me to this day
And will not let me go.”
“Grace all the work shall crown
Through everlasting days!”*

So in this closing benediction, Paul expresses his desire for the Philippians to receive all of this. The results of receiving grace in their spirit, the highest part of their nature, would be marvellous and glorious. If God’s grace is with us, we shall make rapid and outstanding growth spiritually. We will be filled with God’s fullness, delivered from a fearful spirit and frequent distance from Christ. We will pray more often and with more confidence. We will enjoy closer and less interrupted communion with God. We will walk obediently with Him. We will love one another with genuine Christian love, and be delivered from much which spoils our lives – envy, jealousy, and spite. The blessings will spread to our families and neighbourhood. We will be able to strengthen and encourage others in their Christian walk. We shall be restrained from making mistakes and talking unwisely. We will be calm and at peace in the midst of the storm and daily problems and trials. We will live with praise and confidence in an uncertain world. Whatever happens in life or death, we shall be held and taken through, and brought safely to the Father’s home at last.

The effects will be seen – in private and in public, in church, at home and work, and in our hearts and lives. This is what Paul prays for his readers, and what we should pray for one another.

This sounds marvellous. Why do we not experience it more? Perhaps it is because we do not want more, or we do not feel the need for more. We are too content with our feeble spiritual life. Consciousness of weakness is the key to strength in the Lord. We are our own worst enemies. We need to believe what the Bible says about weakness. Pray for a deep conviction of our utter weakness and helplessness. Ask God to write it on our hearts. It is a humbling work; it brings us low, and empties us of pride. But it leads us deeper into Christ.