

Monday, December 9, 2019—Philippians 1-4

Thank-you notes are no longer common. A few, however, remain steadfast. While still a simple formality for some of those rare writers, others find the task a true act of gratitude for the gift.

Paul wrote a thank-you letter to the church at Philippi after they sent him a monetary gift while he was imprisoned in Rome. In those circumstances, few would likely have written a letter at all. Very few would have communicated the joy and worship Paul relayed with his words.

Having been in prison for some time, Paul had reflected on what truly mattered. He wanted the Philippians to grow in their love for Christ and one another and to live pure and blameless lives until the return of Christ (1:10). He could have lamented his imprisonment but instead rejoiced because his circumstances gave him the opportunity to share the gospel in a space he would not normally have accessed. Living gave him ministry avenues. Dying sent him home to Christ. This was a win-win situation, and he wanted the Philippians to live with such joy.

He wanted them to serve one another (2:1-4), having the attitude of Jesus Himself (2:5-11). Jesus laid aside all the privileges of being God and made himself a servant. Epaphroditus was serving Paul and the church. The life of joy is the life that lays aside self and serves others. Paul warned them not to think legalistic practices were the sacrifice he was describing (3:2-7). He was talking of the power of laying aside self to know Jesus.

Worry about nothing, Pray about everything (4:6). Live in joy.

Sunday, December 8, 2019—Ephesians 4-6

God never planned for believers to be inactive. Paul told the Ephesians that God had given apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers to the church in order to help the members of the church discover their gifting. Then, everyone would be able to serve God and build one another up, growing more and more mature, united, and loving (4:1-16).

The church ought to be a source of love and accountability. They love one another deeply, so the challenges to walk away from sin and toward righteousness are not empty, abrasive remarks but meaningful, convicting calls to bring glory to Christ and

richness to life.

The life Christ empowers is one of light—walking away from the darkness of the world and living in His warmth and holiness. This changes the way the believer talks, reacts, plans, and relates. This life is possible only when the believer surrenders daily control to the Spirit (5:18). Marriages, families, and work relationships are richer because Jesus is Lord.

Paul knew that spiritual warfare was a reality, so believers needed to understand the way God equipped them to walk in victory (6:10-18). Prayer would be the foundational activity for their flourishing and Paul's, and prayer would then position them for sharing the gospel and walking in peace and truth. If they did not, Satan would disable them and take away their joy and effectiveness. Paul wanted them to stand firm.

Thank God for the purity and unity He gives to His people. Pray for awareness and effectiveness in spiritual warfare for His glory.

Saturday, December 7, 2019—Ephesians 1-3

While sitting in prison, countless thoughts run through the prisoner's mind. More often than not the prisoner is thinking of his own needs and his opportunities to be free. Few prisoners were like Paul. While he was under house arrest, Paul shared the gospel with those who came to see him, and he wrote letters of encouragement to several churches and individuals. Paul was consumed with sharing the good news.

Paul spent more time with the Ephesians than with any other. Just as he was thinking of others rather than himself, Paul wanted the Ephesians to think of others. He wanted them to grow in unity and self-sacrifice. They lived in a city that thrived on the worship of idols and money. He wanted them to be different, having all things centered around Jesus. What God had done in Jesus was foundational and worthy of praise (1:3-14).

The power God used to raise Jesus from the dead was the power residing inside each believer (1:20), and He had assembled these believers into a body. He had saved them by grace, not by their works, but He saved them in order to do good works for the glory of Jesus (2:8-10). In Jesus, He had united Jew and Gentile into the temple for the Lord (2:11-21). What had been a mystery was now being revealed through His transforming work in Jew and Gentile alike (3:1-13).

Praise God for His great wisdom and enduring love. Pray for unity and obedience in your church family and the churches in your community.

Friday, December 6, 2019—Acts 26-28

After being in jail for over two years in Caesarea, Paul had the opportunity to give his story to King Agrippa. Rather than being bitter about being imprisoned, Paul gladly used the opportunity to share the gospel. He told the king he had received the best Jewish training, so he understood what the Jews believed and hoped. The promise God had made long ago He had fulfilled in Jesus—raising the dead to life (26:8).

When Jesus changed Paul's life, Jesus told Paul to preach this good news and to bring people to faith and forgiveness. Paul had been faithful to that work—preaching in Damascus and Jerusalem and to the Gentiles as well that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their good works (26:20). This was why he was in jail—being faithful to share how God was fulfilling His word.

The officials agreed Paul had done nothing worthy of imprisonment, but his appeal to Caesar meant he had to go to Rome to stand before the Roman leader. Acts 27 and 28 share the harrowing details of that lengthy trip. A storm, a shipwreck, and a snake were just a few of the hardships that could have made Paul doubt God's goodness or sovereignty, yet Paul never wavered. He trusted God, and he shared His faithfulness with those who were with him. When he finally arrived in Rome, he continued proclaiming the kingdom and teaching about Jesus.

Pray for faith in God's goodness and faithfulness in sharing.

Thursday, December 5, 2019—Acts 23-25

Paul stood to testify before the religious high council in Jerusalem. They thought he was wrong, yet Paul realized they themselves were a flawed bunch. They agreed on putting Paul on trial, but they did not agree on the resurrection. The Pharisees believed in its possibility. The Sadducees did not. Paul exposed their weakness when he proclaimed his hope in the resurrection of the dead. Another riot broke out, but this time it was between the members of the council and not specifically about Paul.

God assured Paul he would share the gospel in Rome just as he had shared in Jerusalem (23:11), and God directed conversations and actions so that the plot to kill Paul was thwarted. In fact, the Romans admitted there was no reason to imprison Paul

or execute him. They became his protectors and, to a certain extent, his defenders (23:23-35).

The Jews stood before the governor Felix in Caesarea and presented false evidence. Paul defended himself and declared the Jews could prove none of their accusations against him (24:13). He then briefly shared his hope in what God was doing through Jesus. A few days later he shared the gospel with Felix and his wife—speaking of righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come (24:25). Paul then spent two years in prison, waiting for someone to decide his fate.

Though unjustly imprisoned and falsely accused, Paul used every opportunity to share his hope in Jesus. Pray for the same opportunities to see the glory of Jesus in every circumstance.

Wednesday, December 4, 2019—Acts 20:3-22:30

The heart of the gospel is relationships. God establishes a relationship with people through Jesus, and He connects new believers into relationships with one another in the church. Because of his itinerant calling, Paul had to make extra effort to establish long-term relationships as he moved from place to place. He obviously accomplished that as he had a number of disciples traveling with him from various places (20:4).

One church with which Paul had an especially deep relationship was the Ephesians. On his final journey, he met with them and charged them to live well their walk with Christ (20:13-32). He knew he would never see them again and wanted to leave them with a clear calling.

Those who knew Paul well loved him deeply. They did not want him to make his planned trip to Jerusalem because they knew he faced danger. Paul knew it as well, but he did not let that deter him. His life was worth nothing if he did not complete the task of sharing the gospel (20:24).

Paul soon had that opportunity like never before. A mob in Jerusalem falsely accused him of blasphemy and stirred a riot. After saving Paul, the Romans allowed Paul to address the Jews assembled against him. Paul took the opportunity to share how Jesus changed his life (22:1-21). When Paul mentioned sharing with the Gentiles, the crowd erupted. Many had grown to love Paul, but these people wanted him dead.

Pray for opportunities to share Christ and to shape disciples.

Tuesday, December 3, 2019—Romans 12-16

Paul was one of the most gifted believers who ever lived. He started churches. He wrote Scripture. He saw the resurrected Christ, but he knew he could not walk with Jesus alone. He described believers as the body of Christ. Each person is a member with unique, important gifts that work together to benefit the whole and glorify Christ (12:1-8). Paul hoped this awareness would spur love, unity, and humility among them (12:9-21).

Though the Roman government was often harsh to Christians, Paul told the Romans to obey the government because God had put it there to protect the innocent and punish the guilty (13:1-6). Christians had responsibility, then, to do their part in promoting civil order as well. They were to pay their taxes and be good citizens. This would be possible if they kept their eyes on Jesus' return and lived with sacrificial love (13:7-14).

Each believer would one day stand before God to give account for how he lived in Christ (14:12), so each was to consider how he glorified God and influenced others—especially those believers who had differing cultural backgrounds and practices. Their Christ-like thinking would lead them to think of others first. Their willingness to consider the doubts and fears of others would lead them to sacrifice self (15:1-4). It was this spirit that stirred the Grecian believers to give an offering to the Jerusalem believers. They were very different but united in Christ.

Praise God for the good news, the government, and your church.