

Philippians #5 - Be encouraged

Bible Reading

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

Philippians 2:19-30

In the previous message we learned...

- How we are to remember that Jesus is the perfect example of how we are to live our lives, putting God first, then others, then ourselves.
- That the ‘me, me, me’ culture we live in is hostile to the mindset and lifestyle Jesus lived and taught.
- That asking and allowing God to empower us to live his way will result in lives that are guilt-free and rewarding, working as part of a team

with other believers to make the message of Jesus known to our family, friends and neighbours, through our words and actions.

Today's reading sees Paul continuing to encourage the Philippian Christians to live lives that reflect the gospel message.

Having used Jesus as the ultimate example of how we should live, he moves on to choosing two believers for them to emulate.

In doing this he is following a very biblical theme. The Bible is filled with accounts of ordinary people who live inspiring lives. The books of the Bible are often named after them...

— Joshua, successor to Moses as leader of the Israelites, and the man who led Israel into the land of Canaan.

— Ruth, a Moabite widow who puts her faith in the God of the Israelites.

— Samuel, repeatedly pointing Israel back to their God.

— Job, refusing to give up on God, and refusing to stop questioning God, during a time of immense suffering.

— Ezra and Nehemiah, working to rebuild Jerusalem and the faith of its community during the Babylonian exile.

— Daniel, bearing witness to God's power while serving in the idol worshipping Babylonian and Persian courts.

And these are just a few of the 'major players'.

As we read through the scriptures, we find thousands of people, frequently only mentioned in passing, sometimes not even named, who put their trust in the God of Israel.

— In the book of Exodus, Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives who refused to obey Pharaoh's order to kill the Hebrew male babies.

— In the book of Samuel, Abigail, cleverly averting a bloody battle between David and her ungrateful husband's people.

— In the second book of Kings, Jehosheba, bravely preventing her infant nephew Jehoash from being murdered by Athalia the Queen Mother, hiding him in a castle room for 6 years, and in doing so preserving the line of David into which Jesus was eventually born.

And so on, and so forth...

And now Paul continues this tradition, starting with Timothy.

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

Philippians 2:19-24

Timothy was mentioned at the beginning of the letter to the Philippians as being Paul's fellow-servant (slave) of Christ Jesus.

Compared to many other Bible characters, we know quite a lot about Timothy. His father was Greek, his mother Jewish, and both his mother and grandmother were Christian believers.

Timothy met Paul when visiting Lystra (now Turkey), and eventually became one of his most trusted travelling companions. Two books of the Bible were written primarily for him (can you guess which two?), and he is mentioned in many of Paul's letters, and in the book of Acts.

Paul starts by writing that he hopes to send Timothy to Philippi soon, probably to make sure that his letter had got to them safely (I wonder if he gave Timothy a copy of the letter just in case?), and for Timothy then to return to Paul to bring him news about how the Philippians are doing.

Paul emphasises his high regard for Timothy, and assures them that Timothy is also concerned for the Philippians.

Timothy is somebody who embodies the qualities of humility and servanthood that Paul has been encouraging the Philippians to adopt, and he contrasts these with the selfishness that he knows is the default for most people.

He is probably contrasting Timothy's attitude to the people mentioned earlier in the letter who were unsettling the church in Rome by trying to promote their teaching above Paul's in an effort to raise their personal status in the congregation.

Paul concludes his recommendation by reminding the Philippians that they have personal knowledge of Timothy's integrity and hard work in the proclaiming of the gospel, and repeats his determination to send Timothy to Philippi as soon as possible.

The 'how things go with me' bit is probably referring to Paul's imminent trial, and depending on how that goes, Paul repeats his earlier hope that he will also be able to visit the Philippians in the not too distant future.

Paul now moves on to Epaphroditus...

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

Philippians 2:25-30

Epaphroditus is named here for the first time, although he has previously been inferred as the person who has brought the letter to the Philippians, and who read and explained it to them.

Paul has referred to Timothy as being like his 'son'. Paul calls Epaphroditus his 'brother', a co-worker and fellow-soldier in their proclamation of the gospel.

Like Timothy, Epaphroditus is an exemplary Christian, one who travelled to Rome on behalf of his Philippian brothers and sisters to help provide for Paul in prison (we'll learn more about the specifics of this in a later talk), and who has now returned to Philippi as the messenger of Paul's letter to them.

While in Rome, Epaphroditus contracted a life-threatening illness. We sometimes forget that this was not an unusual thing in the 1st century, there were many illnesses that they would have considered potentially fatal that we would not consider serious at all.

It would seem that there were people other than Epaphroditus going to and from Rome and Philippi, because the Philippian church had previously been informed of Epaphroditus being unwell.

The thought of the distress this had caused the Philippian believers had deeply upset Epaphroditus (the Greek word for 'distressed' is the same one used to describe Jesus' distress while praying at Gethsemane before his crucifixion).

This is probably because his friends in Philippi would have been worried that he had died, and having recovered he would be eager to let them know he is OK.

Again, we sometimes forget what a different world we live in, where we can instantly communicate across thousands of miles.

This helps to explain the following verses, with Paul being 'all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad'.

The Apostle Paul is often portrayed as a cold, intellectual man. The letter to the Philippians shows this to be a misleading caricature.

Paul clearly enjoys a deep and loving relationship with many of the Philippian believers. Timothy is like a son to him. And the end of many of his letters include the names of people that he is deeply grateful to for their work in spreading the good news of Jesus.

When it looks like Epaphroditus may die, Paul does not think, 'Oh well, that means he will be with Jesus'. Epaphroditus' death would have brought Paul 'sorrow upon sorrow'.

And this human element is very important. Especially for people like me who tend to approach life as a series of problems to be solved, usually by thinking up ways to reduce the negatives and increase the positives.

Which is all well and good. The world needs problem solvers. Where would we be without scientists, engineers and plumbers? And me!

But when God created humans, he made us 'in his image'. And because God is love, and because God is pure relationship, it means that each one of us has the capacity and need for love and friendship.

And here is where I want to spend some time encouraging you, us, the believers at Northolt Park Baptist Church.

During a very messy divorce in the 1990s, it was decided by the leaders of Ruislip Baptist Church that I should resign my membership and find another place to worship.

I visited a number of congregations, some small, some large, some in between. When I visited this church, one of the things that distinguished it from most of the other churches is that I was made to feel welcome.

Not just a smiling, 'Welcome to Northolt Park Baptist Church' but a genuine awareness that I was accepted as someone loved by Jesus. And at a time when I wasn't feeling very welcome in a lot of places, that was something I valued very much.

And I'm not the only one, I've heard similar stories from other people in the congregation.

For all its many failings, God's love is present here.

When I hear you praying for one another, there is a genuine concern that is heart-warming, and spirit-strengthening.

But I am also aware that there are times when we get discouraged by the empty seats, and dear friends like Janet getting ill.

I was recently reading a story written by an American pastor called Justin Rossow, he's the guy who wrote the 'Delight' book that I spoke on last year.

He tells a story about driving his teenage daughter to the dentist. The satnav directed them to a location with no dentist in sight, and they spent ages driving around before parking to search for the place on foot.

By this time they were running late for the appointment and Justin was getting frustrated and anxious. He turned to his daughter and said,

"I'm sorry darling (actually, he said 'honey', but I couldn't bring myself to say 'honey') I really wanted us to get there on time, but I'm not sure where to look next."

To which his daughter looked at him, smiled and said:

"Oooo, an adventure!"

Apparently this is his daughter's standard response to situations like this. And Justin writes that her tendency to stay open and curious to the situation was contagious. Rather than be irritated by her optimism, he went with it, smiled back at her and said,

"OK, let's see what happens next..."

And what happened is that they found the dentist, were on time for the appointment, and his daughter's teeth were fixed.

End of story.

So, why am I telling you this?

If you have learned anything from this series on Philippians, it is that Paul is convinced that God is in control. Because God is God. He doesn't make mistakes. He is never 'caught out' by circumstances.

Paul is not convinced of this because everything in his life goes smoothly, remember his 'boasting' to the Corinthian congregation? (2 Corinthians 11:23-27)

Since becoming a Christian, Paul has been whipped, beaten, pelted with stones, shipwrecked, and constantly under threat from just about everyone he encounters!

Paul realises that often the reason things are not going well is because he is part of a war against the forces of darkness and evil.

And while we live in comparative peace and security, every news bulletin, and even an honest look at our lives and those around us, reminds us that we are all weak and vulnerable.

But rather than retreat into self pity and gloom, Paul sets his sights on doing what he can, where he is, to be a part of the adventure that God has equipped him for.

Is that the way we approach life? Or do we surrender to the negativity of so much of the media channels we read, listen to and watch?

Do we face each day saying, 'Hi Jesus, how are we going to make this world a little bit better today?' Or have we become resigned to life being less exciting than we had hoped it would be?

How about we adopt an attitude of adventure in our lives? Let's leave the service today asking Jesus to help us see things the way he sees things.

Rather than being scared of what is around the corner, let's become curious as to what the Spirit can achieve in the circumstances he has placed us.

If you can't quite manage, 'Oooo, an adventure!', why not at least ask God to help you to face difficulties, challenges, even failure, with a heart and mind that says, "I wonder what Jesus is going to do next?"

Remember, one of the most common phrases in the Bible is 'do not be afraid'. Not because there is nothing to be afraid of, but because we know someone who is bigger than fear, who has defeated fear, and who will one day remove fear forever!

So, let's keep at it. Let's keep praying for one another. Encouraging one another. Loving one another. We won't do it perfectly, we will sin, we will fail. But as I said in the previous talk, let's keep failing better!