

An Epidemic of Good News #2

Hello, this is Pastor Curtis Aguirre of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Penticton, British Columbia with the second instalment of “An Epidemic of Good News”, a Bible study on Paul’s letter to the Philippians. If you missed the first instalment, find that video and watch it, or just stick around for this one.

Before we begin, let us remind ourselves of God’s presence by offering a prayer. Let us pray...

Almighty and eternal God, you show perpetual lovingkindness to us your servants. Because we cannot rely on our own abilities, grant us your merciful judgment, and train us to embody the generosity of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

(Source: Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 48)

I want to make a correction to what I said in the last video. I said that Paul’s letter to the Philippians was written sometime in the AD 50’s, but it is more likely that it was written in the early AD 60’s, a good dozen years after Paul, Silas, and Timothy first went to Philippi and helped get that congregation off the ground. Sorry for the error.

On to the study.

In the previous episode, I emphasized that Philippians is a letter. It is not a theological treatise or a doctrinal proclamation. But why is Paul writing this letter? In the briefest terms: it is a thank you letter because the Philippians sent Paul a gift. But why did they send him a gift?

Let’s look at two passages in the letter that give us some of this context. If you have a Bible, please turn to Philippians 1:12-14.

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the Gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorium and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Paul is writing from prison. There is some debate among scholars just where he was being held when he wrote this, whether in Rome, Caesarea Maritima, or even Ephesus. I favour the theory that it was in Rome, which would mean that the praetorium referred to in the text would be the garrison of the Praetorian Guard, the Emperor’s personal guard. This makes more sense to me given that at the end of the letter Paul sends greetings from members of the emperor’s household.

Be that as it may, in the previous episode when I told about how Paul and his two companions, Silas and Timothy, were imprisoned in Philippi, we saw them using the opportunity to proclaim Christ to the other prisoners. Here in Rome, Paul seems to be doing the same: chatting up the guards posted to keep him from escaping, and they, of course, going and telling their buddies about this fellow Paul and his strange ideas—ideas that for some of them may not seem so

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strange. Maybe some of them are receiving what Paul has to say as Good News of a new way of relating to the Divine and to other people.

So, the people back in Philippi found out that two of the three men who had gotten their congregation going—Paul and Timothy—are in Rome, and that Paul is under arrest. In response, they send Paul a care package. Please turn to Philippians 4:10-14.

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

We have to remember that in those days communication and travel were, by our standards, painfully slow. There *was* a kind of imperial postal and stagecoach system called the *cursus publicus*, but it was only for use by government officials. For ordinary people, the way you got a package or money to someone far away was by giving it to someone you knew who happened to be going there, or by hiring someone to do it. In the case of this gift from Philippi, the people of that congregation sent a man—a member of the congregation it seems—named Epaphroditos (Philippians 4:18)—maybe one of the deacons in the congregation.

The people in Philippi would have been very concerned for Paul, because in those days you did not get fed by the prison authorities. You either had to have relatives or friends come and bring you food, or if you had money, you could pay someone to get food for you, or you starved. For this reason, there were all kinds of rules protecting the property that prisoners brought with them into prison to keep guards from abusing their power. A guard caught stealing a prisoner's property would be severely punished.

Imprisonment was not a happy thing, and Jesus had talked about the importance visiting the prisoners. In the Parable of the Sheep and Goats he says:

...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and in prison, and you visited me... (Matthew 25:35-36)

In this spirit—in the Spirit of Jesus—the people in Philippi want to help. They send someone to bring stuff to Paul. You can see their commitment to him—not least of all, Epaphroditos' commitment—because it would have taken him weeks to make the trip. Besides the gift itself, there would have been the cost of travel, food, and lodging. We don't know what Epaphroditos brought with him, but for practical purposes, it was probably money.

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If we read a little further in chapter 4, we discover that this is not the first time that the congregation in Philippi has exhibited generosity. Let's look at Philippians 4:15-16.

You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the Gospel, when I left Macedonia [remember, Philippi was the main city of the Roman province of Macedonia], no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once.

And they were not only generous in helping Paul for his own needs. If we look at Paul's Second letter to the Corinthians, we find that the Philippians were giving to a relief effort that Paul was organizing for the persecuted mother church in Jerusalem, and this letter to the congregation in Corinth, Paul is holding the Philippians (or Macedonians) up as an example to try to get them to open their hearts and purses to help their fellow Christians in Jerusalem. Here is 2 Corinthians 8:1-4:

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry of the saints.

Now Corinth was a much larger city than Philippi. While Philippi was a quiet Roman colony of about 2,000 people, Corinth, which had also been rebuilt as a Roman colony about 100 years earlier, had developed into a cosmopolitan metropolis of over 50,000 people (large by ancient world standards), with Romans, Greeks, Jews, and others living and working there. What Paul is pointing out here to the Corinthians is that the little congregation in Philippi, even in a time of affliction (which might have been a plague, or some natural disaster, or maybe even a local persecution—remember the mob that beat Paul, Silas, and Timothy and threw them in prison) even in a time of affliction, they gave above and beyond what might be expected. So, says Paul to the Christians in wealthy Corinth, you should be able to give at least as much.

So here we see the first key characteristic of the congregation in Philippi that puts a smile on Paul's stern face: they embody the generosity of Christ. As I quoted earlier, Jesus said:

...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and in prison, and you visited me... (Matthew 25:35-36)

And this is exactly what the congregation in Philippi did.

Now that we've established the general context of the writing of Paul's letter to the Philippians, we'll start working our way through letter from the beginning, beginning in the next installment of "An Epidemic of Good News."

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Let's close with the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And for give us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.