121.Ser

Prison and the Gospel

Philippians 1:12-26

12 I want you to know, brothers\*, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers (and sisters)\*, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. 15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, 20 as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

Introduction

In 30AD, Christianity was expanding in Jerusalem and Saul, a prominent Jewish Pharisee, *‘energetically’*[[1]](#footnote-1) opposed them to discourage their growth,[[2]](#footnote-2) however, Saul was to discover that Jesus was not dead but alive and had given His life so people could be *‘born again’*[[3]](#footnote-3) in this life and a preparation for the next.

The risen Christ confronted Saul on the Damascus road and in a theophany[[4]](#footnote-4) of extreme light he was temporarily blinded and about 4-7 years later he became the Apostle to the Gentiles[[5]](#footnote-5) and changed his name to the Latin ‘Paul’.

As an apostle, Paul had a close involvement with the church at Philippi[[6]](#footnote-6) which he visited in the years 49-51 and then some ongoing contact from Epaphroditus[[7]](#footnote-7) who visited him in the Roman jail and exchanged letters with each other.

After his conversion on the Damascus road in the year 36AD Jerusalem[[8]](#footnote-8) was unsafe for him to be near and so he spent three years preaching in Damascus[[9]](#footnote-9) about 135 miles away and when he did return to Jerusalem it lasted scarcely two weeks for some very angry Jews sought to kill him.

Paul returned to the city of his birth – Tarsus,[[10]](#footnote-10) and had a *‘silent period’* of up to four years. Barnabas, then requested Paul to go to Antioch[[11]](#footnote-11) to help in mission work there: then in 46AD they went on an evangelistic tour across Cyprus and South Galatia and it all went well.

He then spent three years preaching in Damascus, however, danger was still prevalent against him from hostile Jews in Jerusalem and to prevent him from being lynched, he went to Caesarea where Felix, the Roman governor (52-60), imprisoned him for two years (58-60).

In 49AD, Paul, Silas and Timothy[[12]](#footnote-12) founded the church in Phillipi[[13]](#footnote-13) and, later on, when in jail in Rome, Paul rejoiced to hear that christian ministry was going well and the gospel was bearing much fruit and they were generously supporting him.[[14]](#footnote-14)

One of Paul’s converts at Philippi was a widow, Lydia of Thyatira, an astute business-woman and generous of heart but an empty pagan until she came to Christ and then she used her spacious mansion, business accument and much love in Philippian church and was able to help others. As Rylands Professor Peake states, *“(Paul) loved his churches and prayed constantly for them.”*[[15]](#footnote-15)

Paul continued to encourage the Philippians with the assurance that *… “God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”*[[16]](#footnote-16)however, in these last six years of his life and still *‘in prison’* [[17]](#footnote-17) in Rome[[18]](#footnote-18) he was under *‘house arrest’*[[19]](#footnote-19) for his final years.

Rylands Professor of Biblical exegesis in the University of Manchester, Arthur Samuel Peake, writes, *“in Paul strength and sweetness met together. For he was not all sweetness. He had a virile character; he was a dominant and masterful personality … he had great moral courage … he did not shrink back …”*.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Generally, Roman prisons were filthy, underground and hot and prisoners were often tortured into revealing information which also served the ulterior motive of deterring crime. The ministers of the prisons were the *Tresviri Capitales* who were like Police Officers maintaining law and order by way of strict punishment.

Paul wrote[[21]](#footnote-21) to share some good news with his christian friends at Phillipi  *… “I want you to know brothers and sisters*[[22]](#footnote-22) *that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel… so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ ….”.* [[23]](#footnote-23)Paul maintained an active ministry in-house as a prisoner witness for Christ, however, did he receive others?

Whilst it *appears* Paul may not have had any contact with christians in Rome[[24]](#footnote-24) but they were there in numbers to dispute with non-christian Jews and Claudius ordered them to leave.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Peter, writing in his Acts of the Apostles, ends with the statement: *“and he abode two whole years at his own expense”*[[26]](#footnote-26) - some mss have, *“his own hired dwelling”* and received all that went unto him, preaching the Kingdom of God, and teaching the things of the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, none forbidding him.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

It appears more likely that *“at his own expense”* is the more logical if it means “he deserves this privilege … he earned it … his faithfulness is better than gold …”. These alternatives certainly fit the man Paul proved to be.

Paul lived with the Praetorian Guardsmen[[28]](#footnote-28) and they not only trusted him, they highly regarded his role of being the Ambassador for Christ.

And so, whatever is said of Paul, he was without doubt the right man for serving the Lord in these formative days of the spreading *‘the good news of Christ’s love’* to the world.

As Professor Peake put it, *“where principle was not at stake Paul himself was conciliatory. He displayed a sympathetic imagination in his attitude to views which he did not share; a tender consideration for the scruples of weaker brethren”*.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Prof. Peake also writes, *“these weak brethren for whom Christ died were very dear to Paul. At the time he did* ***flame-out*** *in indignation at the selfish and flippant lack of consideration shown to them by the strong and superior minded.*

Such was the love of the Phillipians they sent Epaphroditus to Rome with a letter from them for Paul - a trip of over 800 miles[[30]](#footnote-30) - took several weeks. Epaphroditus fell sick but received word the Philippians they were grieving over his condition.

This letter was lost long ago but clues in the book of Philippians suggest that these Christians were concerned about Paul's well-being whilst he was still under arrest in Rome - their affection for Paul, and their prayers, continued to the end.

Paul said his time in prison *“served to advance the gospel”*[[31]](#footnote-31) because it was well known throughout the Praetoriun guard (that) his imprisonment was for Christ and (that he was) more bold to speak having built goodwill with them.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Paul had also[[33]](#footnote-33), wrote[[34]](#footnote-34) a number of other letters from Rome, including **Philemon**[[35]](#footnote-35) due to concern for his slave, **Onesimus**[[36]](#footnote-36) who needed pastoral care[[37]](#footnote-37) and to the young churches at **Ephesus** and **Colosse** which he founded between 52-55 and, of course the **Philippians** who were such a blessings and encouragement to him.

Paul was also concerned about the christian church at **Ephesus** where a significant number of the Jewish community were now living and had unearthed buried Temples of Egyptian gods which the Exodus had led them away from in the days of Moses,[[38]](#footnote-38) whereas his letter to **Philippi** he wanted to express his ongoing gratitude for the affection and generous assistance given to him.[[39]](#footnote-39)

About a year later Paul wrote his last letterwhich was addressed to **Timothy**[[40]](#footnote-40) urging him to “*guard the good treasure entrusted”* to him*, “with the help of the Holy Spirit”* (1:14) and to accept his share of suffering *“like a good soldier of “Christ Jesus”.*

Paul’s remarkable witness for Christ was now coming to an end when in the years 67-70AD **Josephus** surrendered to the Romans. **Nero** committed suicide in 68.[[41]](#footnote-41) **Vespian** prevails as Emperor after a civil war in 69, and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple took place in 70AD causing untold death and destruction.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Paul[[43]](#footnote-43) the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles is said to have walked about 16,000[[44]](#footnote-44) klms[[45]](#footnote-45) - the circumfrence of Australia: often into hostile places such as outside the Jerusalem Temple[[46]](#footnote-46) where Roman soldiers saved him from certain death;

in Jerusalem where conspirators tried to lynch him but his sister Phoebe and nephew Barnabas saved him. He faced life-threatening hostilities at Ephesus and Corinth; suffered a *‘bodily ailment’* at Galatia.[[47]](#footnote-47)

He also suffered from his *“thorn in the flesh”*[[48]](#footnote-48) which Prof. T J Leary[[49]](#footnote-49) of Oxford University has found some evidence that may point to Paul having poor eyesight: **First:** Paul’s handwriting was larger than his scribe’s and **Two:** Paul’s *‘parchments’* were made for people with poor eyesight as it allowed them to write larger.[[50]](#footnote-50)

This could have been Paul’s *‘thorn in the flesh’* and while Professor Leary is not proposing such, it could have been caused by the blinding light in the *theophany* on the Damascus road. This loss had a particular meaning in the Greco-Roman world in those days as it was a statement that a ***manly-man*** had lost his ***manliness*** when he lost his eyesight.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Professor Peake writes, ‘if then we inquire wherein the greatness of Paul consisted and what he achieved there is one general consideration to be emphasised at the outset. He was not simply borne on the current of a movement which would have existed independently of him. To a large extent he created the current and controlled its direction. He cut the channel which the church was in a great measure to follow. The church would, no doubtr have continued to exist ifPaul had never become a christian.’

‘But without a leader of Paul’s penetrating insight, commanding intelligence, moral courage and depth of spiritual experience, it might have taken centuries to do what he did in a single generation.’

And so, we must all recognise that Paul’s impact on history has been tremendous … he struck with amazing force into universal history and has affected world-history on a very large scale.

**Summation**

In light of his many trials, tribulations and challenges, Paul was an outstanding leader in the early and formative days of christianity, especially when he was a prisoner in Rome facing daily discomforts, personal degradation and very limited resources etc.

Paul's life and ministry was an incessant call upon his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, to know His will with such assurance, he could give divine guidance and inspiration to others and to face uncertainty without doubt, to inspire without force and to give direction with clarity and inspiration from the love of Christ in his heart.

Then, as the lead apostle, theologian, and as powerful letter-writer, Paul expanded the church far and wide, opening the doors to God’s mercy, grace and love: strenuously putting-forward his full conviction that the gospel was for all people including the Gentiles and evil people.

History, even to this day 2022, is testimony to Paul’s enormous influence in shaping christianity in the will of Christ and the image of God with clarity and conviction; conveying the message of Christ to the world and a gracious channel of blessing in the miracles of the Holy Spirit in faith, hope and love.

Of the 27 books in the New Testament, Paul is confirmed as the author of 13 of them which, not only gave the truth of Christ to countless millions and the world many times over, these books have survived 2,000 years of history and are as relevant today as when first written two milleniums ago.

Saul glorified in the purity of his blood, he was a Hebrew and from the tribe of Benjamin – even after he had become a christian and received his commission as the Apostle to the gentiles, his patriotism was intense.[[52]](#footnote-52)

In his ministry as the Apostle to the gentiles: he was plotted against, shipwrecked, stoned, locked in jail, bashed and faced numerous death threats: lived daily in a prison for violent criminals, murderers and so on when he was nothing like that but the very opposite.

Rylands Professor **A S Peake** writes, “In any list of the world’s greatest men he must, whether we judge by intrinsic qualities or by depth and range of influence, be placed without hesitation in the foremost rank.

Paul’s favorite line comes from his own letter to the Galatians 6.9:

*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*

1. . A S Peake, Rylands Professor of Biblical exegesis in the University of Manchester. Lecture given at the University, Wednesday 14th December 1927. p365 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . He was more or less involved in the death of Stephen who was stoned to death. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . See Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, 4.7-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . Theophany is a personal encounter with a deity, that is an event where the manifestation of a deity occurs in an observable way. Specifically, it "refers to the temporal and spatial manifestation of God in some tangible form." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. . In his letter to the Galatians 1.13-14, Paul testifies: “For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. . Paul visited Philippi on his second missionary journey about AD 49-51.

Based on Luke’s ‘[Acts of the Apostles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acts_of_the_Apostles)’ and Paul’s [letter to the Philippians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistle_to_the_Philippians), it seems likely he founded their community. Accompanied by [Silas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silas), [Timothy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Timothy) and possibly [Luke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luke_the_Evangelist), Paul is believed to have preached for the first time on European soil at Philippi. Evidently, Paul visited the city on two other occasions, in 56 and 57. Paul’s letter to them dates near to 61–62 and is believedto show the immediate effects of Paul's ministry to them. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. . Epaphroditus was a leader in the church at Philippi mentioned in 2:25 and 4:18 and who delivered and/or sent gifts to Paul during his imprisonment at Rome and Ephesus. The return trip to Rome would have been 800 miles and 2 months or more. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. . To his pride of race was added the pride of possessing by birth a privilege, to which great advantage and prestige were attached and for which large sums were willingly paid. Peake, op.cit., p365. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. . Galatians 1:17 and Acts 9.19ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. . This was the place of Paul’s birth which Peake comments, “I find it difficult to believe that the rigid Pharisee, brought up by parents who belonged to that straitest of sects, can have studied at the University of Tarsus.” p365. He later suggest Paul’s Judaism was affected by its gentile environment in Tarsus, not Jerusalem. p369. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. . Festus, Felix’s successor indicated he might give Paul to the Jews for trial over his past, but as a Roman citizen, Paul appealed to Caesar and was sent to Rome where he remained under ‘house arrest’and where he preached Christ – Acts 28.31. Peake proposes that “as we come to know him, we realise more and more how thoroughly Jewish he was – a truth of which we ought not to lose sight of when we are reconstructing his theology. p369 He was a pioneer of the first rank. p370 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. . Epaphroditus had visit Paul in Rome and delivered gifts from the church. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. . The history of Phillipi was that of various invading forces colonizing and settling people into the area. What attracted people to Phillipi (named after Phillip the Conquering King) was the valuable silver mines in the mountains that created a border for the area to the north and north-eastern areas of the region. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. . In 58AD they set sail for Rome and arrived there in the spring of that year. Paul remained in custody for 2 more years (Acts 28:30) which brings it to 60AD. Paul was apparently freed shortly after this time as he predicted in his letter to the Philippians. It was penned while he was in prison - Rome or [Ephesus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ephesus), however, in its present [canonical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/canonical) form, some scholars believe the Philippians in the Bible is a later collection of fragments of the original correspondence of Paul with the congregation. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. . Peake, ibid, 1927, p371. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. . Philippians 2.13 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. . Probably in the ‘fortress of Antonia’ referred to as a ‘house’ [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. . When Herod put Peter in prison, it was probably in the ‘fortress of Antonia, where Paul was later lodged before his death. See Acts 21.34 & 23.30. Though referred to as ‘house’ the apostle was guarded coninually by four soldiers. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. . First, he lived under house arrest and wrote letters and preached. The Church of St. Paul alla Regola stands in Rome over the location where Paul ‘rented’ some accommodation to conduct his ministry. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. . Peake, p371 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. . Some commentators are divided over the origins of Paul’s lettersbeing written from Caesarea or Rome, however, the concensus generally points to Rome. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. . The greek word ‘adelphi’ means ‘brothers and sisters’ by association. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. . Philippians 1.12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. . In Acts 18.2. Emperor Claudius had commanded all the Jews who were not Roman Citizens to leave Rome but also, this is believed to have come about because of ongoing disputes between christians and non-christians in Rome. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. . Mark did not write his gospel until 70AD. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. . Some MSS has the alternative, “his own hired dwelling”. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. . Acts 28.30-31 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. . The Praetorian Guard was the main unit of the Emperors Guards and the Imperial Guard and/or Palace Guard had specific duties. Imperial Roman army that served as personal bodyguards and intelligence agents for the Roman Empire. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. . p372 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. . About 1,288 kilometers. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. . Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians (1.12-26) “Now I want you to know, brothers\*and sisters,that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.”  [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. . This favour perhaps because he was a Roman citizen still on an uncompleted trial and he had also saved the lived of Roman soldiers and a centurion through God’s grace. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. . For two years Paul lived in a rented accommodation and at the end of his life in the Cacere Mamertine Jail as did Peter at a different time. It was the old prison of Rome and was next to the [Roman Forum](https://romesite.com/roman-forum.html). According to legend, the apostles Peter and Paul were imprisoned there – no real evidence for this. It is said that from this prison they started their journey to martyrdom: Peter towards the Circus of Nero, near the [Vatican](https://romesite.com/vatican-museums-sistine-chapel.html), and Paul towards the Aquae Salviae. In memory of Peter, a small altar has been placed to commemorate Peter. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. . Seven letters in the New Testament initially were credited to Paul on the assumption that he wrote them while a prisoner in Rome. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. . No specific year given but generally thought to have been written about 50AD .

He also wrote to Timothy, Titus and to key churches at Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, Galatia, Thessalonici, Philippi. Onesimus found his way to the site of Paul's imprisonment in Rome to escape punishment for a theft of which he was accused. After hearing the Gospel from Paul, Onesimus converted to Christianity. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. . His name means ‘useful’ which was frequently given to slaves in those days. He was the fugitive slave of Onesimus who had robbed his master Philemon and fled to Rome where he could easily hide but encountered Paul in Rome. ([Philemon 1:10](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Philem%201.10)). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. . Donald Guthrie, The Pastoral Epistles, Tyndale, London, 1957 p11, writes, the apostle must have written many such letters in the course of his missionary journeys, maintaining … an interchange of … active direction of many christian projects …”. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. . The Exodus was the founding change to the way Israelites understood God, morally, spiritually and ethically and the profound narrative which is spread over four books of the Old Testament called the Torah, namely Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The majority of modern scholars date the composition of the Torah to the Middle Persian Period of 350-950BC Profound in its preparation of the coming and the way of the Lord. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. . Paul also wrote a number of encouraging letters to Timothy and Titus about the time of his release from his imprisonment in Rome about 62-64AD.  [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. . In 68 AD, after a turbulent 13-year reign, the Roman senate ran out of patience and declared Nero a public enemy. Nero then fled, and on June 9, 68 AD, at the age of 30, he committed suicide. His death ended the Julio-Claudian dynasty. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. . The gospels reflect two opposing attitudes on the part of Jesus to the Temple of Jerusalem – he respected it but he attached relatively little importance to it. Priscilla and Aquilla were and Mark wrote his gospel in [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. . Who was an especially potent-imperial “manly man” who perpetuated imperial virtues of masculinity in his opposition to the ‘christians’ has now be confronted. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. . To walk the entire coastline of Australia is 17,000 kilometers. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. . Including, Cyprus, Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, Asia, Jerusalem, Ephesus, Antioch (in Syria), Appolonia, Israel, Syria and many more places. Estimated to be approximately 16,000 kilometres. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. . He was saved by the Roman Soldiers on duty there. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. . Paul wrote, **“You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me … but you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me”**Galatians 4:13-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. . A range of conditions have been put forward: epilepsy, estatic seizures and neuralgia. It was painful whatever it was. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. . Prof T J Leary of Oxford University has not proposed this as conclusive evidence to arrive at such a conclusion [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. . No evidence is provided and given that parchments could be re-written over, it could be that as Paul aged, he needed to write larger for his own failing eyesight. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. . The Blinding of Paul and the Power of God: Masculinity, Sight, and Self-Control in Acts 9. Brittany E Wilson – Journal of Biblical Literature, Vol. 133, No. 2, 2014. “Sauls blinding would very likely have amounted to his “unmaning” …”. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. . He was profoundly conscious, none the less, of Israel’s religious and moral superiority to the Gentiles. REST of p364 and acknowledge Rylands Professor [↑](#footnote-ref-52)