

## Providing pastoral care from isolation to those in isolation

### The Letter to the Philippians<sup>1</sup>

(Geoff New – 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020)

#### The Place

The Letter to the Philippians is one of the four Prison Letters written by Paul.<sup>2</sup> The precise location of where Paul was imprisoned is not known. While Rome is the favoured location it might have been Caesarea or Ephesus also.

#### **The Place: COVID-19 Connection**

As a pastoral leader you are in a form of imprisonment.

#### The Person

Throughout all of Paul's letters, the same spirituality is evident: faith in Christ marked by thanksgiving, prayer, peace and joy.

#### **The Person: COVID-19 Connection**

In isolation marked by great uncertainty – practices and dispositions of thanksgiving, prayer, peace and joy can be elusive.

#### The Problem 1.0

The Letter to the Philippians has a range of theological themes and addresses various issues in the Philippian church. However, one major undercurrent influences it all: friendship.

In the first century there were strong cultural practices of how friendships operated. One key aspect was the glue of friendship was reciprocity. If you did something for me, 1<sup>st</sup>-century-friendship-etiquette obligated that I do something for you.

For Paul, as someone in enforced isolation, this was a major problem. The Philippian church had sent him a gift to meet his needs and Paul could not reciprocate. He could not honour his part in the friendship.

<sup>1</sup> This reflection rests on the work by Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). Due to writing this in lockdown, I am relying on memory and notes from earlier study using Fee's commentary.

<sup>2</sup> The other three are Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon.

### **The Problem 1.0: COVID-19 Connection**

As a pastoral leader there are natural expectations in how you honour your part in the pastoral relationship. However, your current imprisonment inhibits that.

#### The Problem 2.0

The Philippian church had sent one of their members – Epaphroditus – to Paul with a gift (Phil 2:25-30). However, while attending to this task, Epaphroditus had fallen gravely ill and nearly died. He recovered by the mercy of God (Phil 2:27).

But everyone involved was anxious.

- ◆ Paul had been anxious Epaphroditus would die (Phil 2:27).
- ◆ The Philippian church was anxious because they heard Epaphroditus was ill (Phil 2:26).
- ◆ Epaphroditus was anxious because the Philippian church was anxious about him (Phil 2:26).
- ◆ Paul was anxious to ensure the church and Epaphroditus were reunited (Phil 2:28).

### **The Problem 2.0: COVID-19 Connection**

Anxiety itself is a virus: infecting people's hearts and minds. Clarity, certainty and confidence evaporates. The world is unsafe and even threatens to harm those people we depend and rely on.

## Providing Pastoral Care

From his place of isolation, Paul provides wonderful examples of how we might provide pastoral care and leadership from our imprisonment.

Phil 4:4–20 is our text.

### 1. The Same as Psalms (Phil 4:4–7)

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This section echoes the words, movement and spirit of the Psalms. Specifically, an honest acknowledgement that suffering is real . . . and so is God. These words from Phil 4:4–7 also model

another crucial feature of the Psalms – the movement from the individual to community. Each person has relationship and responsibilities before God and this feeds into the whole community

Paul lists several do-this-and-do-that instructions. He draws on one of the enduring legacies from the Old Testament; “devotion and ethics are inseparable responses to grace.”<sup>3</sup> And all of this is heavily seasoned by the call to joy. For Paul – joy and peace are intertwined.

F. F. Bruce wrote that “Joy is peace dancing; peace is joy at rest.”

With this comes a hope-filled distinct Christian declaration: “The Lord is near” (v 4). This has a double meaning. The Lord is near now. The Lord will be near then, in the age to come.

The Lord is near now. The Lord is Emmanuel – God with us.

The Lord will be near then. The Lord has an eschatological intention – he will return as he promised and create a new heavens and new earth.

### **Combating COVID-19 with Phil 4:4-7**

When you communicate with those under your pastoral care:

Let your gentleness be evident

Model reliance and faith in God by drawing on appropriate words from Scripture

Speak words of hope grounded in the person and work of Christ

Offer to prayerfully present people’s requests to God with them

Remember – all of this is done in a spirit of friendship

## 2. The Search for Wisdom (Phil 4:8–9)

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. <sup>9</sup> Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

This list in verses 8 to 9 draws on the world in which Paul and the Philippians lived. While these verses are often quoted as “think about” it is more accurate to read these verses as saying, “take into account.” This is a strong and particular encouragement from Paul. Possibly unique in all his writings.

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<sup>3</sup> Fee, *Philippians*.

Note the two words “whatever” and “anything.” This is an exercise of searching, considering, choosing, selecting and discerning – this is a world-wide treasure hunt for whatever/anything that is excellent or praiseworthy.

To continue the friendship flavour of the Letter to the Philippians – Paul is making friends with the best parts of the world the Philippians live in, and strengthens that by calling the Philippians to make friends with Paul’s example.

So, the first part (v 8) is: “Take into account the best the world has to offer.” The second part (v 9) is: “Take into account how I, your pastoral leader, have done this same exercise in light of the cross.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Combating COVID-19 with Phil 4:8-9**

When you communicate with those under your pastoral care:

Highlight the wisdom of the experts’ (health officials and government) advice and measures

Encourage people, as ambassadors of Christ, to seriously take such important measures into account. They have a Christian ethical responsibility to do so

Cull any unhelpful, alarmist, ill-informed, or unsafe advice/information on social media

Help people to discern the goodness of God in the words and actions of skilled people who have trained and prepared for this kind of global crisis

Highlight joy-filled and life-giving suggestions from whatever source that helps people in their isolation

### **3. The Source of Strength (Phil 4:10–13)**

<sup>10</sup> I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup> I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. <sup>12</sup> I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. <sup>13</sup> I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

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<sup>4</sup> The throbbing heart of the Letter to the Philippians is the majestic hymn in Phil 2:5-11. The whole letter must be read with these words in mind.

Paul's imprisonment and the geographical distance from the Philippians raised concerns that their relationship/friendship could not bridge the gulf in practical ways. Circumstances are such that the opportunity to practically care for one another is not possible.

What to do? What to say?

Paul again brings the raw materials of faith in Christ and the faithfulness and nearness of God to bear on the situation.

Paul describes in stark terms the contours of life. Yet for him quality of life is not measured by what he does or does not have; it is measured by what Christ gives him to cope. There is no suggestion that this is a quick and easy process. It is one that Paul had to learn. Yet, he can say with confidence that in the absence of the means to serve each other – and fulfil their obligations as friends – he is empowered by Christ who gives him strength (c.f. Matt 11:28-30).

### **Combating COVID-19 with Phil 4:10-13**

When you communicate with those under your pastoral care:

You may discover people are concerned for your welfare – and they feel guilty they cannot do more for you.

When Paul encountered such concern, his response modeled an honest description of life *and* a robust trust in God. What will your honest and heart-felt response be?

Paul's response also modeled an offering from his own journey of faith. His words are reassuring and faith-full. What can you offer by way of reassurance and faith-full words when people are feeling awful they cannot do more for you?

#### 4. The Sacrament of Spaces (Phil 4:14–20)

<sup>14</sup>Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. <sup>15</sup>Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; <sup>16</sup>for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. <sup>17</sup>Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. <sup>18</sup>I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup>And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

<sup>20</sup>To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

These words in Phil 4:14–20 turn up the volume of what friendship looked like in the first-century and the dilemma Paul faced. He had been in need, and of all the churches Paul was connected with, the church of Philippi was the only one which helped him. They have been generous and faithful to him. They define friendship – but because he is in prison Paul cannot uphold his part in the relationship. At one level, Paul is violating cultural expectations.

His response is to hand it over to God.

Paul invites God into the gaps and deficits in the friendship. Paul invites God into the spaces.

He has some practical obligations but in the spaces where he cannot fulfil those – he genuinely and sincerely makes it sacramental.

He commends the Philippians to God's action and giving, and commits God to act on Paul's behalf.

“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

The Philippians give Paul gifts delivered by Epaphroditus and Paul re-gifts them as a sacrament:

“They [the gifts] are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (Phil 4:18).

Paul cannot fill the space with a gift of his own – as culture would demand it – so he calls on God to do it for him:

“And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus”  
(Phil 4:19)

**Combating COVID-19 with Phil 4:14-20**

When you communicate with those under your pastoral care:

Consider how you might re-interpret the spaces (gaps and deficits) people feel acutely in their lives. Such spaces can be distressing for people. They might feel burdened they cannot fulfil what they perceive as obligations to family, friends, neighbours or their church family.

Listen carefully to them. As they talk – can you punctuate their words with phrases such as “Pleasing to God . . .” and “My [their] God will . . .”

When you identify a space in someone’s life – rewrite Phil 4:19 to create a sacrament for their particular situation

“To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (Phil 4:20)