

## **New Hope Sermon: Slaves and Saints: *finding joy and peace in all circumstances***

By Samuel Lau, Aug 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Our theme for this year is Shalom, a topic that Dr. Mary Lou introduced to us last week. She spoke on the complete, all-encompassing nature of Shalom. Shalom is a deep wholeness, a deep sense of safety and well-being. The future redeeming of heaven and earth is characterized by this concept, and its full realization on earth.

But as you've probably already wondered, what about the rest of our time here on earth? A common phrase Christians use is "the Kingdom is here but not yet", and this phrase describes the tension in which we live between the first and second coming of Christ. Christ has saved us, he has paid the ultimate price, he has won the victory over sin and death, and we are His. But at the same time, we continue to struggle against sin, the world continues to have much evil and darkness, and God's final rule has not come down to earth. This is often what we mean when we say "the Kingdom is here but not yet".

It is in the context of this question, this tension, that I've been drawn to Paul's letter to the Philippians. As one of Paul's last letters, it reveals a missionary and disciple of Christ that has gone through tremendous highs and lows, rejoiced over much, and grieved over much. This is no naïve spirituality, but a mature faith that has been refined in the fire of ministry and service to the gospel.

And what is most striking is Paul's joyful spirit and undiminished hope. Although I am still young, I have lived long enough to see the faith and hope of many strong Christians wither under prolonged disappointment, suffering, sin, and disillusionment. I myself have been tempted to do the same. In the midst of such testing, it is easy to become bitter, angry, or full of pride and self-justification. Perhaps worse, it is easy to walk away from the faith altogether.

Not so with Paul. He has suffered much. At the time of writing the letter, he is suffering. He feels great anguish and anxiety over many things. There are many problems that keep him up at night. Rivalry and gossip in the church, hostility and skepticism in the world to the gospel, the impure motives and heretical preaching of many teachers. And Paul himself is in prison and his very life is in danger.

How is this possible? That is the question I find myself asking as I read Philippians. And throughout this year, I will seek to get into Paul's heart and mind as revealed in his letter to the Philippians, in the hope that we could learn something from him, something about allowing the shalom of Christ to penetrate deeply into our lives, even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances. As he writes toward the end of the letter, "for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need." (Phil. 4:12) Wouldn't we all like to know this secret!

So today, I will offer some reflections on the opening of the letter, to get us started.

Most often, when we read Paul's letters, we read through the opening greeting rather quickly. It seems like just a list of formalities. But I want to direct our attention to them for a moment. They offer clues to the purpose of the letter, the state of mind of the author, and sets us up for reading the rest of the letter.

In the first verse, Paul introduces himself and his mentee, Timothy, as "slaves of Christ Jesus." You have it translated in your bible as "servants". But the servant Paul is talking about, in the context of the Roman system, is really more like a slave. Under Roman law, a "bondservant" did not have personal freedoms. It was possible to buy one's freedom, but this often took decades of service, and bondservants had no legal rights.

What is striking to me is that right from the beginning of the letter, Paul, who is in chains in a dark Roman prison, emphasizes that he is not a slave to Rome, but a slave to Jesus Christ. Paul is not blind to the suffering, shame and humiliation that accompanies being a slave. But as we shall see later in the letter, Paul sees himself as merely following the example of Jesus. Paul's perspective is radically different from those around him who would see his chains as evidence of the victory of the world over him. By contrast, for Paul, they merely reflect his truest identity and greatest victory, that he belongs to Jesus.

But if Paul speaks of himself as a slave, his dear friends in Philippi are most certainly not slaves. They are saints—holy ones—he honors them tremendously. Now, theologically speaking, we could say that Paul and Timothy are also saints, and the Philippian believers are also slaves of Christ. But Paul's focus is on the tremendous gift and amazing harvest of the Philippian church. They are his glory, his pride. And he reminds them, and us, of the incredible truth of our salvation in Jesus. We are saints. We reign with the King of kings and Lord of lords. Whatever our lot in life, we are saints, that is who we are.

And as we see in verse 3, this is Paul's joy. This, my friends, is the first part of his secret to contentment. His focus remains on the most important thing of all: Jesus Christ and what he's done for us.

It is from that place that he can say, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." We have freely received from God, and in that receiving we can have peace, shalom. Next time we shall see how Paul receives this gift.