

CAREY CONFERENCE, CANADA
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PHILIPPIANS I

Well, I'm very glad to be with you for these days. I'm so grateful for the invitation and for the welcome I've received.

Now I've said that during this week, I'm going to be bringing you five messages from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

We're not trying to cover the whole letter by any means, but we are going to be following one thread of thought through the book. Really you can think of this as one sermon divided into five parts, not five sermons.

I'm going to start just by reminding you of some of the background to the letter. It was somewhere around the year 51 AD when Paul first arrived in the town of Philippi. He had been sent out as a missionary from the church at Antioch - this was Paul's second missionary journey. He had with him a colleague called Silas. Various other folk joined the team as they travelled - men like Timothy and Luke. Now Paul's plan on that second missionary journey was that he was going to visit a circle of churches in Asia - the country that we now call Turkey. But God stepped in. God redirected the whole project. Paul had a vision. In his vision he saw a Greek man - a man from Macedonia. Now what you've got to understand is this. Up to this point, none of the apostles had set foot in Europe. All their work had been done in the east. That was the part of

the world where the great OT empires had stood - the empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia. Those empires had gone - the world balance of power had shifted. Since the OT had been finished, great new world empires had risen in the west - the empires first of Greece, then of Rome. It was there in Europe that you had the great central fortresses of human power, human greatness, man's rebellion against God. If the world was going to be conquered by Christ's gospel, Christ's kingdom, someone had to be prepared to lead the invasion of Europe. But no-one had done it yet. The gospel of Christ was still seen a strange eastern cult. But now was God's time.

Paul had this vision. He sees a man from Macedonia. And in the vision this man appeals to Paul - "come over and help us". And Paul knows it's a word from God. He and his friends abandon their own plans - they set sail - they cross over to Greece. And they step ashore in Macedonia. It's the poorest part of Greece, up in the north - way off the beaten track - mountainous, barren. But it's Greece.

It's one of the great epic moments in the history of the world when Paul and his companions step off this ship and set foot for the first time on Greek soil. Three or four insignificant looking men and they're launching the invasion of the western world. They're taking on the whole vast edifice of Graeco-Roman society. They're challenging the grip Greek culture has on human minds - they're confronting the whole might of the Roman empire. When Paul and his friends step off the boat in Neapolis, they're establishing the first bridgehead in the invasion of Caesar's kingdom.

They step off the boat - and they begin to march forward. And their first stop is the town of Philippi. Not a particularly big town, not rich or influential. But a very significant town. It was named after Philip of Macedon - that's the father of Alexander the Great - the man who really established the Greek empire. It was Alexander who built Philippi up - he was the one who really put Philippi on the map. Philippi became a symbol of Alexander's greatness. And then much later it was at Philippi that Octavian - the man who was going to be Augustus Caesar - won the battle which paved the way for him to become the ruler of Rome. So he heaped honours on Philippi. He made it a Roman colony. This little town in the hills of Macedonia actually became part of Rome - as it were, a distant suburb of Rome. There really was no city in the world that summed up more clearly the power of the Greek and Roman empires. It was Alexander's city; it was Caesar Augustus's city. These were the men who had stamped their identity on Philippi. And now the question is, is it going to become Christ's city.

Well, you know the book of Acts. So you all know something of what happened in Philippi. You know about the wonderful conversions that happened there in Philippi through Paul and his friends. A wealthy business woman called Lydia - God had prepared her long before Paul arrived in Philippi. She had been praying, seeking the Lord - but it was when Paul preached the gospel that the Lord opened her heart. A wretched girl possessed by an evil spirit - she was wonderfully set free by the power of Christ's name. The business world invaded by Christ. The world of occult religion invaded by Christ. And then there was the local jailer - he and his family were all converted together - in the middle of the

night when God shook Philippi with an earthquake - the world of Roman justice , the police force invaded by Christ.

These were the first glorious conversions in Philippi. These people were going to be the nucleus of the first church in Europe. They were going to be the first step in the conquest of the western world for Christ. Do you begin to understand what God did in Philippi? Isn't it awesome? This handful of men - insignificant men, unknown men - arrive in that town. But when they leave it, the influence of Greece, the power of Rome - have been shaken to their foundations. A bridgehead has been built from which Caesar's empire, Satan's empire in the west can be assaulted. It's a wonderful, triumphant, glorious story.

But now - and this is the thing I want you to remember - there's another side to that story, isn't there? We have to remember what those glorious victories cost. I wonder, when we read together the story from the book of Acts - I wonder whether you picked up the hints of just how weary, how dejected Paul became in Philippi.

This slave girl we were talking about. It says in Acts that she followed Paul and the rest of us around shouting, raving, distracting people. And she kept this up for many days. And, we read, finally, Paul becomes so troubled that he turns round and confronts the evil spirit that's speaking through the girl". But do you see, he's reached the end of his tether. He's reached a point where he just feels he can't take any more of this. He's been very patient. But he just feels he can't

take any more. Everything he's trying to do is being undermined by this girl, with her frenzied screaming; she's pouring out a distorted version of the Christian message, giving people a completely false view of what Paul is about. And God allows it to continue, for many days. And it's only after many days that God intervenes and says to Paul - "Now, you have the authority to cast out that evil spirit". But up until then, Paul just has to endure this persistent frustration and trouble.

But even then just when it seemed that God had intervened to help Paul and change the situation - what happens? Well, you know. The owners of the slave girl seize Paul and Silas and drag them in front of the court. And they're nearly torn to pieces by an angry crowd. And then they're stripped of their clothes - it's humiliating, and they're flogged. Now we're talking here about a Roman flogging. It's carried out with a whip of many strands with jagged pieces of metal or bone tied into it. It rips the flesh off the bones and leaves a man a mass of bleeding wounds. Lots of people died under the whip. And then Paul and Silas are thrown into the inmost cell in the prison with their feet in the stocks. They're lying there with their bodies lacerated and pouring with blood, hardly able to move. And yet they don't resent what God has done - what's he planned for them. There in the prison cell they sing God's praises.

Well, as you know it was that night that God moved. He sent the earthquake. He saved the jailer. But what was it that led to the jailer's conversion? Was it the earthquake? Yes. But why did the jailer run to Paul and Silas when the earthquake struck? Why did he fall at their feet and cry "What must I do to be saved?" Well surely it was because of what he had

seen and heard in these men. He's seen them tortured, humiliated - but still singing God's praises. He had something supernatural, something awesome in these men. It was their suffering and the way they reacted to their suffering that spoke to this man.

Well, God vindicated Paul and Silas. The following morning Paul's set free. The magistrates realise that they've flogged a Roman citizen - so they panic - and they themselves come and escort Paul out of the prison - they publicly give their backing to Paul. Well, that sets a precedent. It means the church in Philippi is going to have the protection of the courts. It wouldn't have happened if Paul and Silas hadn't suffered such humiliation and pain, if their bodies hadn't been torn to shreds by the whip, if they hadn't spent that dreadful night in the prison. That was the cost of planting a church in Philippi, of invading Caesar's kingdom in the name of Jesus.

The magistrates beg Paul to leave Philippi. But just try to imagine what he looked like when he left. Do you think he was striding along full of energy, a bold, dynamic, impressive figure - a conqueror, a great evangelist? I guess he could hardly move. He's been beaten black and blue by an angry crowd. He's been flogged nearly to death. He's spent a sleepless night in agony. When Paul left Philippi he was a ruin, a broken wreck of a man. There in Philippi, if he didn't know it before, Paul learned that the way the kingdom of Jesus triumphs is through frustration and sacrifice and pain - but pain accepted and endured in obedience to Jesus Christ. It's not just that Paul suffered for the sake of the gospel- it's that he

submitted to that suffering - he sang in the prison cell. He was humiliated, he was driven to distraction, he was tortured, and he accepted it willingly for the sake of Christ. And that's how the first victory of the gospel was won in Philippi.

That's one of the big themes that we're going to be noticing in this letter - the way in which suffering, humiliation, can lead to victories for the gospel. But only when they're accepted the way that Paul and Silas accepted them - humbly, obediently, submissively. Victory, triumph, won through suffering, humiliation, obedience - that's a theme we're going to come back to again and again.

Well, ten years or so have passed since that day when Paul first arrived in Philippi. And all through those years, Paul and that church have stayed in touch. They've sent him financial help again and again. He's revisited the church on this third missionary journey, somewhere around 58 AD; since then he's been in Jerusalem; he's spent a long time as a prisoner in Caesarea. He's made a dangerous journey to Rome where he's going to face trial; he arrived in Rome probably somewhere around 62 AD. And now Paul is in Rome, waiting to have his case heard by the Roman emperor himself. These months or years in Rome have been intensely painful. At first he seems to have been given a fair amount of freedom by the authorities - but as time goes by, the conditions he's held in have become more severe. Here in this letter he says he's in chains for Christ - and I think he means it literally. He's chained up in a prison cell. He's short of supplies, he's hungry much of the time, he's lonely. Most of the Christians in Rome seem to have been unable to give Paul in any help. You'll

see in Philippians 2 Paul's heartcry: he says there's only Timothy who's really with me: "I have no-one else like him, for everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.." The majority of the Christians in Rome seem to have been too caught up in their own work, their own situations to spend time helping Paul.. And there were some who went further. There were who were actively working to make Paul's life a misery. They were jealous of him, they resented him and they wanted to stir up trouble for him. And always there was the pressure, the fear of the trial that lies ahead, when he's going to stand in front of the most powerful man in the world, a man who's only got to lift his little finger to have him tortured to death.

Well, the church back in Philippi hears of Paul's situation. Now they're not a wealthy church. As I said, Macedonia's one of the poorest parts of Greece. In fact as a church they're in great need themselves. But they love Paul. And they've got to do what they can to help. The Philippian Christians feel a real fellowship with Paul. That word - fellowship - koinonia in Greek - just means a sharing, a having something in common. And that's going to be another big theme in this letter - the koinonia that binds believers together - the way they share a common life. The word turns up again and again in this letter in various forms - Paul can talk about people being his sharers, his partners, he can talk about them sharing, partnering, he can talk about the sharing, the partnership, they're involved in - but it's all the same word in different forms. One of the problems of course reading in an English translation is that you may not realise that you're dealing with the same word. But whenever you come across the word share or sharing, or partner, or fellowship in this letter to the

Philippians, you're almost certainly looking at this word *koinonia* in one of its different forms.

Paul uses the word for the first time in this letter in ch 1 vs 8 - when he talks about "your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now". From the day the church in Philippi was planted, the Philippian Christians have seen themselves as being Paul's partners, sharers, in gospel work. They've had fellowship with him in the gospel. And Paul says that's true right up to the present.

The Philippians really felt that they were partners with Paul, they had fellowship with Paul in his gospel work. And they felt that had to involve being involved in his suffering, being partners with him in that. So they raise a large sum of money. Sacrificially, it wasn't money they couldn't afford to give. But because they're his partners, they wanted to share what little they had with him. And one of their leaders - a man called Epaphroditus - agreed to carry it all the way to Rome. After a long dangerous journey, Epaphroditus arrives in Rome. He manages to find Paul, he brings this gift from the Philippians to Paul. And Paul is overwhelmed with joy - not so much because of the money - but because of what it means. It's a real proof, a wonderful token of the partnership, the sharing, the fellowship between him and that church all those miles away. He's felt so isolated, so alone. But when Epaphroditus walks into that cell, and says, Hi, Paul, here's a little something from the folk in Philippi, Paul knows in that moment he's not alone. Through Christ he's got a bond with people hundreds of miles away that can't be broken. They're his partners whatever happens. They're one with him in his

suffering, his need, his struggles. He says it in ch 4 vs 14, “It was kind of you to share my trouble”. It’s the same word again - they shared, they had fellowship with him in his trouble. As I said, the reality of sharing, fellowship, partnership, koinonia - dominates this letter to the Philippians.

And that brings us to a third great theme - the theme of joy. Because one of the key results of real koinonia, real fellowship is that it produces real joy. It may be hard to believe, there in that lonely prison-cell in Rome Paul had already experienced real joy. We’ll be talking in a moment about what’s moved Paul to rejoice while he’s been rotting there. But now Epaphroditus has walked in with this gift from Philippi, and joy just floods over Paul again - the Philippians by sharing his troubles, have brought him real joy. Paul can say in ch 1 vs 4 that every time he prays now for the Philippians, he does it joyfully - “making my prayer with joy” - but why? - because of your partnership in the gospel until now. Epaphroditus’s arrival is the proof that the partnership, the sharing, the fellowship he’s had with the Philippians is still a reality right up to now - and that thought moves him to joy and thanksgiving.

But remember, this partnership, this sharing is a two-way partnership. So if Paul is full of joy, then he’s got to share that with the Philippians. And that’s why he sits down to write this letter. He wants to tell the Philippians all about what’s been happening to him, all the things he’s been meditating on, all the things that have been making him rejoice, so that they can share his joy. And he also wants to tell them how they can give him even more joy - how they can make his joy

complete.

Fellowship, partnership, sharing, however we translate that word koinonia, and joy go together. Fellowship means that believers joined to Jesus Christ are linked to each other - it means they can be one with each other even when they're hundreds of miles apart, it means that they share a common life - it means they can share one another's troubles and needs and struggles. And then that fellowship leads to joy. Believers are supposed to bring one another joy. The fellowship that Paul and the Philippians have is a fellowship of joy, in which each of the partners brings joy to the other.

That was true for Paul and the Philippians. And it's supposed to be true for all believers. Sadly, though it was true for the Philippian church in its relationship with Paul, it wasn't true at this point in time within the Philippian church - it wasn't true of the relationships that different members of the church had with one another. It seems that members of that church found it easier to have real joyful fellowship with someone hundreds of miles away than with someone sitting in the same meeting. That's true to life isn't it? And again that was one of the reasons Paul wrote this letter - to stir the Philippians up to restore real fellowship with one another, to find joy in one another again. And he said that that was the one way they could give him most joy.

Well, I hope that serves as an introduction. You may want tonight just to read through the book of Philippians and note

some of the places in which those big themes surface. But what I want us to do now in the remainder of our time - I want us to start looking together at Philippians chapter 1 - from vs 12 to 26. That's the first passage we're going to be looking at, and DV we're going to be looking at it today and tomorrow.

As we've said Paul is a prisoner in Rome. And he is having to cope with real hardship and pain. But he doesn't want his friends in Philippi to be discouraged when they hear what he's going through. He wants them to know - verse 12 - that what's happened to him has really served to advance the gospel. Remember - that's one of our big themes - that suffering, humiliation, can lead to great victories, great triumphs for Christ and his gospel - if it's accepted graciously, humbly, obediently. That's what happened when Paul suffered in Philippi ten years earlier. And now it was happening again in Rome. Paul's suffering had led to the progress of the gospel. People were hearing the gospel and were being saved who would never have been reached if Paul hadn't been lying in chains in a prison-cell in Rome. Paul says it in vs 12: "I want you to know brothers, that what has happened to me, has really served to advance the gospel".

Now that's been true in two ways. Firstly - vs 13 - multitudes of non-Christian folk have heard about Paul himself - and have been made aware of Christ himself. Paul, because he's a prisoner waiting to be tried by the Emperor himself - is guarded by soldiers from the Emperor's own bodyguard - the palace guard - the praetorian guard. At any time, there'd be one of these elite troops guarding him. And then after four hours or so he'd hand over to someone else. So there'd be one

of these soldiers there while Paul is praying. He'd hear the note of devotion and love in Paul's voice as he calls on the name of Jesus. He'd be listening while Paul is singing hymns to Jesus Christ - and he'd see the joy on Paul's face. Sometimes one of Paul's friends would visit - Timothy or Epaphroditus - and the guard would sense the wonderful love and tenderness which bound these men together - and he'd listen to their conversation as they talk about Jesus Christ. Sometimes Timothy would bring a non-Christian friend with him, and the guard would listen as Paul begins to tell him the story of Jesus. I guess each of those guards must have heard Paul give his testimony a hundred times - how much Paul hated the name of Jesus Christ, how Paul persecuted Christ's people. And the guard would see Paul's eyes fill up with tears as he remembers the wrong he did to Jesus - as he tells the story of how he helped the crowd that lynched Stephen. And then he'd see Paul's face light up as he remembers that day on the Damascus road when he saw Jesus in all his glory and heard the voice of the Son of God, calling him. And then he'd hear Paul saying - and however many times Paul tells the story, there's still the same wonder and amazement in Paul's voice "He loved me - he gave himself for me - he saved me - he forgave me - and I'm here for him". And so the guard goes back to his colleagues in the barrack room, shaking his head and saying to his mates - "that man Paul - he's obsessed with Jesus Christ". And when they leave the barracks and go out to meet their girlfriends, or when they're drinking down at the wineshop, these soldiers are still talking about that strange prisoner - and this Christ who seems to dominate his life. And so "it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ".

Just imagine if Paul had come to Rome under his own steam as an evangelist sponsored by Global Apostolic Ministries Unlimited. And he makes his way to the Headquarters of the Emperor's Personal Guard. And he says to the sentry "You don't mind if I hand out these tracts round the barracks do you? Or perhaps I could have half an hour to address the men - just get them together for me will you?" Can you imagine the reception he'd get? You know - I can't imagine a more unreachable group of people than the palace guard - how on earth do you get the gospel to them? There was only one way that Paul would ever have reached those men - and it was by suffering - by becoming a man in chains. In Philippi Paul's suffering led to the gospel invading the town jail. In Rome Paul's suffering led to the gospel invading Caesar's own palace. His chains did not restrict him. His chains freed him to preach Christ to people who would never otherwise have heard of him.

Let me tell you about the woman who taught me the lesson of these verses more effectively than anyone else I can remember. She was a woman who was converted in her late fifties - a very simple lady, very little education - she would have struggled to read a chapter from the Bible. She felt so much her own inadequacy. She wanted to share the gospel with others, but how could she? She had been saved so late in life, she knew so little about the Bible, she struggled to explain what she believed. But she prayed that God would somehow make it possible for her to reach others with the gospel. It was just two or three years after she was baptised that she had a stroke - a severe stroke.

It left her paralysed down one side. From that point on her life was lived between her bed and her wheelchair. And the same stroke took away her speech - all you hear from her lips was a stream of meaningless syllables. I watched her for seven years, fighting for breath, in constant pain, in and out of hospital. And I tell you this, everyone who came in contact with her was made aware of Christ. She had her own code of strange signals - and you learned to interpret them! It doesn't matter who came into that home - the social worker, the community nurse, the doctor, unconverted relatives, the man who mended her wheelchair - they heard about Christ. She'd be waving her one good hand - her face would be radiant - she signals a cross - and then points upwards to heaven - and then nods vigorously - and they look at her puzzled - and then to her husband. And he says, I think Elma wants you to know that she loves Jesus Christ and that she's looking forward to going to heaven. And her face lights up into an even more dazzling smile and she nods even more vigorously. I visited her home every week - and there were often other folk there - it didn't matter who they were. Elma wouldn't let me go without reading the Bible and praying with those folk. And because she was a paralysed woman in a wheelchair, they would sit and listen without protest and they could see the radiance in her face, and they knew that she had something they have never seen in anyone else. I remember visiting her in the hospital and she was signalling to the women in the other beds - they had to know who I was - and then she gestured to the Bible - I have to read - they have to listen - and a girl from across the ward and her mum who's visiting have to come and sit the bed. And I tell them the story of how Elma found Christ - and her face is shining - and her head is nodding - and her finger is pointing heavenward.

She turned a wheelchair into a pulpit. She turned every hospital ward into an evangelistic centre. She turned the loss of her speech into a constant opportunity to speak for Christ. God put her in a wheelchair. God put her in a hospital ward. God took her speech from her. And she submitted to it. And the result is that people who would otherwise never have heard the truth about Christ have heard it through her.

It's not that that was a strategy she's adopted. Elma was simply a woman obsessed with Christ. And a believer like that will make Christ known in a prison-cell - in a hospital ward - wherever God has put them.

Paul's chains were not a restriction. They gave him freedom to preach Christ. The key to that cell didn't close the door to witness for Christ. It opened the door to reach people who would never otherwise be reached.

I remember reading a book written by an baptist pastor called Don Baker. Don Baker had a complete breakdown - he was suicidal. And he finished up on ward 7E in a psychiatric hospital. As he says, he had visited the ward any number of times as a pastor - now he's there as a patient. "To admit to my fellow patients that I was a minister was terribly embarrassing. I was always grateful to those staff members and patients who didn't probe with the question, 'What do you do for a living?'" You see - to be a patient on a psychiatric ward closes the door to any gospel witness, doesn't it? Listen to what he says, "Fred and I met while folding sheets in the laundry room. Fred was twenty-seven, the father of two children. He

and his wife had been separated.

He had been arrested for drunkenness and indecent exposure...

After telling me his story he asked, 'Hey what do you do for a living?' I was silent for a long time, worried that my answer would create distance between us. Finally I answered him, slowly and reluctantly. 'I'm a minister,' I said.

His response was immediate and animated. He dropped the sheet he was folding, grabbed my hand, shook it wildly, and said, 'Wow that's great. I've never talked to a preacher before. Tell me, what's it like? What do you do? How does it feel? Do you think I could ever become a Christian?' He never once asked me why I was there."

He was one of many people who heard the gospel for the first time while Don was there in that psychiatric ward - people who would never have heard it any other way.

You understand what we're saying. God puts Paul in a prison. He puts Elma in a wheelchair. He puts Don in a psychiatric ward. And the temptation for each of them is to say, "Oh if only I weren't restricted in this way; if I weren't in such pain; if I weren't struggling with this humiliating condition, I could serve Christ. I could be useful to him." The temptation is to resentment and self-pity and an attitude of helplessness and defeat. Paul says "no, God has put me here in chains in order to free me to reach the unreachable". Christ's kingdom comes through believers who submit to the suffering God ordains for them, willing, obediently, lovingly for Christ's sake. It was true when Paul first came to

Philippi. It was true when Paul came to Rome. It is still true today.

God puts his people into painful, humiliating, heartbreaking situations. Maybe he's put you in the situation where you're nursing an elderly relative with Alzheimer's day and night. And you're saying "if I weren't tied down here I could be so much more useful". You're single and lonely. And you're saying "if I had what other people have - a home, a family, I could do so much more for Christ." You're unemployed and you say "if I were in work, I'd have so many more opportunities to speak for Christ". Well, maybe you've been put in that unemployment queue just to speak to one man who would never have heard about Christ any other way. For Paul the price that had to be paid for the gospel to be advanced was humiliation, imprisonment, chains. For you it's frustration, loss of income, embarrassment. But what Paul has learned - and what we have to learn - is that there is no other way that the gospel can be advanced. It has to be this way. What you need to decide is whether that's a price worth paying - for Christ.

OK. We're going to leave it there for this evening. Tomorrow we'll go on to talk about the second way in which Paul's sufferings advanced the gospel.

