

Philippians Chapter 2 v 1-18
The Obstacle Course
27-04-03

Last year we went through Philippians, and I am not intending to go through in the detail as we did last year but to look at one or two particular angles.

Introduction

Many journeys that we should choose to make are very smooth, very uneventful, but of course sometimes they are not. It might well be that you were involved in travelling over the Bank holiday, perhaps your car overheated, or perhaps the children were sick in the back or perhaps you found yourself ground down in an enormous traffic jam. There can be all sorts of problems that come across you when you are making a journey.

About 6 months ago on the M25, the first time it has happened to me, a lorry went passed, and managed to cause some debris to go straight into the car and causing some damage, which caused me to have to stop. Something that I would rather not have repeated again.

Those sorts of things do happen from time to time. In any journey it is not always smooth progress from beginning to end. It is exactly the same for a church family, as a Church family moves forward on the way to glory. There are many obstacles that we encounter that would threaten or hinder that progress.

In the Old Testament, we are given a wonderful example of that as we think of the Children of Israel as they come out from Egypt and as they head towards the promised land of Israel. And that journey, which is recorded for us in the books of Exodus and Numbers, is a journey that is full of problems; of things that come in to hamper or threaten the end of progress. And sometimes we are not even sure if the Israelites are going to make it.

In the New Testament, we see this also as we look at Paul's letters. Because each of Paul's letters were written to address a particular problem that was threatening the progress of that particular church family, whether a doctrinal error, moral error, or whatever it was.

And Philippians is one of those churches where many, many things are going wonderfully well but there are certain issues that threaten the smooth progress of

that church family. As we begin to look at Chapter 2 of Philippians, we need to think as we come across the various problems that Paul highlights, are these our problems? And especially as we come to this Tuesday, to our annual meeting, which is a good opportunity to look back as well as forward, we need to be thinking, what are the things that could hamper our progress forward as a church family. Let's learn from Philippians.

Firstly, we are going to look at the obstacles on the journey.

Obstacles on the journey

There are three obstacles that we can find as we look through Chapter 2.

1. The problem of disunity

People pulling in different directions within the church family, we see it in verse 2 *“make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.”*

Often with Paul's letters, it can be like looking at a negative of a photograph. As you look at the negative, you are able to work out what the photograph looks like. And the same here, Paul is obviously saying wanting them to be like-minded because they are not wanting them to have the same love, wanting them to be one in spirit and purpose because they are not one in spirit and purpose. We see it elsewhere in Philippians, in chapter 4 v 2 *“I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.”* There was a disunity. They were pulling in different directions. We see it also at the beginning in chapter 1 v 4 *“In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy”*.

He is not just praying for some of them in that group but is praying for all of them. In verse 7 *“It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart”* and in verse 8 *“God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.”*

It was a church where there were divisions that were becoming apparent or perhaps were very real. That was the problem. We have seen in recent months the way in which the United Nations has been pulled in different directions to the detriment of the whole organisation. So it can happen within the church of Philippi and so it can happen in any local church. That is one obstacle that we need to be aware of.

2. The problem of rivalry/ selfish ambition

Verse 3 *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.”*

There were some in the church of Philippi who were obviously out to make a name for themselves, who were thinking that their ministry was more important than the ministry of others, and therefore should be done at expense of others perhaps.

We see it elsewhere. It is a theme within this letter because Paul talks about his own experience in chapter 1 v 15, talking about whilst he was in prison, *“It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill, the latter do so in love”*, & but verse 17 *“The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.”*

So there we see an example of rivalry, of people looking for their own interests beyond the interests of other people. Again this is the time of year when we are coming up to the local elections and we are being bombarded with literature and party political broadcasts. And we know there is an important role for local politics and indeed central politics. But we know that when we look under the surface, so much is about personal reputations and maintaining your position as against the other party or even as against others in your own political party. And we see it played out before us those issues of selfish ambition and vain conceit. And again it can happen in the local church as well.

3 The problem of grumbling /complaining

Verse 14, Paul says *“Do everything without complaining or arguing.”*

And the word for complaining is the word that is used in the Greek versions of Old Testament to describe the Israelites on their journey from Egypt, that I have already mentioned, to the Promised Land. Do you remember how they ran out of water and immediately started grumbling, murmuring, complaining to Moses and to God? That issue was solved, and then they run out of food, so once again murmuring, grumbling complaining. As someone told me after the first service, the modern equivalent is whinging and that is something they do against Moses and God.

Again it is something we see elsewhere in the letter to Philippians. Paul has to write as he prays for them, what is his prayer in chapter 1 verse 9 *“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more.”* There seemed to be a shortage of love and that was what he was praying for for them.

On our screens over the last month or so, do you remember the fall of Basra, a city in the south of Iraq. A few days before and a few days afterwards, one of the things that really affected people in Basra was a severe shortage of water, and indeed other items as well. Such things can cripple a community. Well similarly, a shortage of love within local church can cripple that community as well. As so as Paul says, do everything without complaining or arguing.

With a medical examination, that can be an anxious time for us because it can throw up issues and problems, but nevertheless is useful for us to face the facts, and so it is here with the Philippians. It is good for them to know what these problems are so that they can surmount them. So as we examine ourselves individually and as a church family, it is good again especially as we come up to an annual meeting to be examining ourselves and thinking through, are these our problems? Is there disunity? People pulling in different directions? Is there rivalry, selfish ambition, grumbling, complaining? We need to search ourselves, be aware of the obstacles and then as we move secondly, we then need to think through how we can overcome such obstacles.

How we can overcome these obstacles.

We will notice that the way in which Paul deals with these issues is not the way of laying down the law of legalism. Notice how he argues, it is very important. He doesn't just say you shouldn't be disunited, you shouldn't just be looking after your own interests, you shouldn't be complaining, or grumbling. He does say these things, but says far more.

He earths it in certain things about the person and work of Christ.

To a people who are faced with potential disunity, what does Paul say in verse 1? He reminds them that they are all of them united with Christ. *"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded."* Can you see how he argues? He is saying that you have a Christ-given unity. Each of you individually are united with Christ and together you are united with Christ. Therefore if you are going to be pulling away from others, you are going to be pulling away from Christ. So he doesn't just lay down the law but he gives a very good reason why they should remain together and work at being together.

Just imagine a family who go through very hard times, times of disruption, arguments, all sorts of things. But the fact is they are a family. It is a biological fact and an important one to remind themselves of. And so it is with the local church;

we are Christ's family, the body of Christ. So it is important that we work at that and remind ourselves of our unity in Christ.

But what about obstacle of rivalry and selfishness. Well, here we are to remember that we are to follow Christ's example and we see that in verses 3-11. Paul says *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."*

Now how do we do that? Well, verse 5 *"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus."* And then he shows how Jesus' life was dominated by this desire to consider the interests of others. It is an example for us to follow. Now we won't go into detail in verses 5-11, as we have done that within our expositions of the passage last year, but look at where Jesus ends up in verse 9, highly exalted at the highest place. And let's just ask ourselves the question, how did he get there? Come with me if you like to a place where there are mountains such as the lake district and you are standing on a fairly low hill and you are looking across the valley to the highest peak around and you would like to get to the summit and the way in which you can get to the summit is by plunging down into the valley and then by coming up to the peak.

And that is what the Lord Jesus Christ has done and he has every opportunity, every right to be with God in glory and it says verse 6 *"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped."* It was within his power to grasp it. But he didn't go that route. Instead He plunged into the valley and we see the way in which he did that. He made himself nothing and took the nature of a servant. More than that; being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself. More than that he became obedient to death, more than that, even death on a cross. He went all the way to the very bottom of the valley before being exalted to the very highest place. And so there was no concern for his own reputation but rather the honour of God. No concern for his own interest, rather the interests of sinful people like you and me, which took him to the cross.

You see, verse 5 *"your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus"*, Paul is saying that Christ's path is to be our path. The cross saves us and that is where our forgiveness is won, but it is also to be our pattern for living. I know that this dates me, but there was an advertisement about 25-30 years ago, for chocolate – perhaps that is why I remember it – it was for toblerone. It was all about triangular

chocolate, triangular bees, triangular honey, and triangular trees. Everything in this advert was triangular shaped.

For the believer, the Christian, every aspect of our life is to be dominated by the cross. We are to live cross-shaped lives, focussing on the needs of others, the interests of others. That is how Paul says that n we are to surmount rivalry, selfish ambition, and vain conceit.

The last obstacle was grumbling, moaning, whinging, complaining. How do we to face that? We are to remember that everything is to be viewed from the perspective of the day of Christ, the day when Christ will return again, the day of judgement and resurrection at the end. Paul says in verse 16 *“as you hold out the word of life – in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour for nothing.”* The day of Christ will reveal whether Paul’s labour has been in vain or not. In the same way, as the day when the examinations for GCSEs or A levels, that day when the results are published, will highlight the work of students and teachers. What Paul is saying is that if you have your eye on the day of Christ, how will you live if that is the thing that dominates your perspective? Well if one eye is on the day of Christ, it will help you to live lives that are ready for heaven even now. So amidst the darkness of a world that is crooked and depraved, in verse 15, you will reflect God’s holiness and shine like stars.

You will be different from the grumblers, the complainers around you. And if you have one eye on the day of Christ at the end you will also live lives getting others ready for heaven. You will hold out, verse 16, the word of life which can rescue people from the darkness around. But the day of Christ gives a proper perspective on the way we live now.

So the way we overcome obstacles in the path of ourselves, individually and of the church, according to Paul, is not by simply trying harder, but it is a battle that is won in our minds. By reminding yourself of these 3 issues, for example, that we are united with Christ, by reminding ourselves that we follow the example of Christ, by reminding ourselves that everything is to be done within the perspective of the coming day of Christ. It is a battle that is won primarily in our minds before it is worked out in practice in our lives. These are the things that should mould and shape our behaviour and help us to overcome these obstacles in our journey. So let’s move into our concluding point.

Work Out your salvation

Paul says in verse 12 *“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence - continue to work out your salvation.”* You don’t need to do it on your own, because it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. He is on your side and he will help you and us as we seek to work these things out.

But we do need to put them into practice. Although it is a battle that is won in our mind, it needs to be translated into our daily living. And so Paul says work out your salvation, not meaning save yourself, but apply what you have been living so that you really are living a life worthy of the gospel of Christ. So he says work out your salvation, maybe we should have the figure of someone working out at gym, of sweat, of developing their muscles. Or perhaps we could have a picture of someone slaving away over a mathematics puzzle and they are trying to work it out. Of course, it is great if you are trying to do something like slaving over a maths puzzle to have some worked examples to help you, which can guide you and help you.

The rest of Philippians chapter 2 is really about Paul giving three worked examples that can show us how we can translate what he says in the earlier part of chapter 2 into practice.

So if we were to ask the question “What does a cross-shaped life look like? Look at Paul, verse 17 *“even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.”* You see, Paul was someone who poured himself out for others. Think of a wine bottle. It is full and you pour out from it and you pour out and pour out. You have an image of Paul giving himself to others. It reflects only what Christ has done in going to the cross. Look at what he says in verse 7, He made himself nothing, he poured himself out. He could have remained in glory forever, but he poured himself out and became like us but without sin.

Again we look at Timothy, verses 19-24, we didn’t have it read, but look in verse 20 *“I have no-one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone look out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.”* The thing that distinguished Timothy is that he was someone who didn’t look after his own interests but the interests of others and of Jesus Christ. It only reflects what we have seen about Jesus in verses 4-5 of this chapter *“Your attitude should be the*

same as that of Christ Jesus". Someone who looked after the interests of others that took him to the cross.

Or again at the end of the chapter we see verses 25-30 and Ephaphroditus. The thing about Ephaphroditus was that he was someone who for the sake of the Philippians became ill and almost died. Verse 29 "*welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour men like him because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me*". The same as the lord Jesus, Ephaphroditus risked his life. The Lord Jesus Christ became obedient, even death on a cross.

They are all examples of sacrificial service for others within the church family that show us what a cross-shaped life looks like. So we need to examine ourselves. So how can we embrace a cross shaped life within our family setting, in our work, in our neighbourhood. Or perhaps, within our small group or more broadly within our church family. It will certainly involve being a servant, sacrificing our time, which for all of us probably a very precious commodity, sacrificing energy, even money. But that is the way we are to work things out in order to embrace a cross-shaped life and it is a cross-shaped life that will above all help us to overcome whatever obstacle is thrown into our way along our journey to glory.

We are almost at the end now and just one final word of conclusion. We were thinking of journeys at the beginning. I know that especially when we were on camping holidays, inevitably we would always leave one or two important things behind. In the Christian life, the one thing that we must never leave behind is the cross. It is tempting to think that we can leave it behind. Because when we become a Christian, we become a Christian when we see the work of the cross and what Christ has done for us in forgiving us, and giving us new life. And as we enter through the door of the cross into a new life. So it is tempting to think that as we proceed, we can wave goodbye to the cross. But not a bit of it. Everyday we need the cross to remind us that that is where our forgiveness was won. But also this is the argument of Philippians chapter 2, we need the cross to highlight the way we are to live as Christian people. We are to live cross-shaped lives, and that is the way we are to travel on our way to glory.

Amen.