

The Lord's Grace is with you

Bible Reading: Philippians 4:10-23
Philippians 2:1-11

Text: Philippians 4:23

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

Psalms:

Ps 27:1,2
Ps 145:2
Ps 84:6
Ps 31:12,15
Ps 121:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

By means of a letter, the apostle Paul from his cell in prison has spent some time with the church in Philippi. He had listened to the needs of the congregation as reported to him by Epaphroditus, had thought through a God-centred answer to those needs, and put his conclusions to paper in the form of instruction, admonition and encouragement. Now that the apostle has finished his letter, he steps out of the lives of the Philippians again, closes off his letter, makes his farewell.

How he does it? Archaeologists have recovered hundreds upon hundreds of letters that Greeks wrote to one another in the days of the New Testament. The letters customarily ended with the encouragement to “be strong”, *sterkte*¹. From the apostle Paul we have thirteen letters in total, but not once does he sign off with that standard closure.² To say “be strong” as a manner of saying Good-bye was not good enough for an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ. As the apostle steps out of the lives of his addressees, he does not want them to think that they are left to their own resources – as the term ‘be strong’ implies. Instead, Paul makes his farewell by impressing on his readers that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ remains with them always.

As I close off my ministry in your midst this afternoon, I set before you the promise of God’s unending grace. I summarise the sermon with this theme:

¹ A Dutch term regularly heard amongst the older members of the congregation. It too means literally ‘be strong’.

² The decree of the council of Jerusalem ends with this same word (Acts 15:29). Though it literally means ‘be strong’, at the end of letters it is the popular equivalent of ‘Good-bye’.

PAUL ENCOURAGES THE SAINTS OF PHILIPPI WITH THE PROMISE THAT GOD'S GRACE REMAINS WITH THEM

1. The nature of the grace,
2. The need for the grace,
3. The effect of the grace.

1. The Nature of the Grace

The term 'grace' as we find it so often in the New Testament catches the notion of God's free favour to unworthy sinners. Though the human race had rejected God in Paradise, the Lord did not desert mankind but organised for him the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. The *Belgic Confession* captures the concept of 'grace' very well when it says in Article 17: "our *gracious* God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from him," and adds that God comforted fallen man with the promise of His Son. Yes, that is grace: God extends favour to the undeserving, pours additional goodness on those who first consciously rejected His goodness.

This grace of God comes to sinners through His Son Jesus Christ. Eternal God gave up His only Son for the benefit of the unworthy, sent Him from the eternal glories of heaven "for us" (Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:9,10). So the grace of which Paul speaks is "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ," is the grace of God *as demonstrated through* His gift of Jesus Christ. At the same time, the Lord Jesus Christ was not simply 'victim' of God's graciousness to the unworthy so that Jesus had to die against His own will; no, the Son of God gave Himself freely to the curse of the cross in order to save sinners. As Paul had written earlier: though Christ was "in the form of God" He did not insist upon His Godhead but emptied Himself for sinners (Philippians 2:6). That is: His actions at Christmas and on Good Friday were themselves displays of *Christ's* grace, His favour for unworthy sinners. When Paul, then, mentions "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ", he describes *both* the favour of *the Father* as He displayed it through sending His only Son for sinners *as well as* the favour of *the Son* in giving Himself to the shame and curse of Calvary for the benefit of the lost.

Such grace, of course, is a marvel. Why would infinite God show *grace* to the creature man? More, why would *holy* God show *grace* to *sinful* man? Yet this is what He did! And make no mistake: the Christians of Philippi were *sinners*! What the Old Testament says of all mankind was true of the first Christian baptised in Philippi, Lydia the purple seller: her heart was deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jeremiah

17:9); she did not seek after God but had turned aside (Psalm 14:1-3). Yet to *her* God showed His grace, for *her benefit* the Lord sent His only Son to earth, *for her sake* Jesus Christ gave Himself to the hellish agony of the cross. *Talk about grace!*

Equally, the apostle had to write his letter because there was brokenness and tension in this church. Paul writes in chapter 4:2 that Euodia and Syntyche are “to be of the same mind in the Lord,” and the implication is that they were at loggerheads. Paul instructs the whole congregation in chapter 2:3 not to do anything “through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind” to “esteem others better than himself,” and the implication is that the members had big thoughts of self while they looked down on the brother. Yet to *these persons* Paul speaks of “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and that’s to say that God gave His favour for the benefit of *these depraved and selfish people*.

Paul adds that this grace is “with” the Philippians. This grace is present, belongs to, is *there* amongst the Philippians. This favour-for-the-unworthy is not a theory that sits on a shelf, but is a favour-of-God that touches the Philippian congregation in the nuts and bolts of their daily struggles.

Now, in our English translations this grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is connected to the Philippians (“with you”) through the verb ‘be’ – as if Paul expresses here a wish, a hope that the grace of the Lord will be with the Philippians, but there is no guarantee that this grace actually is present as he writes this letter. As it is, in the Greek Paul does not use a verb at all. He simply says, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.” But surely it is evident, congregation, that the apostle is not expressing here the *hope* that God’s grace will (one day) be with the Philippians. For the whole point of Christ’s self-emptying on the cross is that *sinner benefit*. He gave Himself not so that His grace *might* be with the saints of Philippi (or of Kelmscott); He gave Himself so that God’s favour *would certainly be* with the saints. Then yes, the saints of Philippi remain so unworthy and so sinful; they have but a small beginning of the obedience God requires (see Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 44, Question and Answer 114). But Christ’s work on Calvary, that glorious display of God’s favour-to-the-unworthy, benefited those Philippian saints already; else they would not be saints! And as God had begun a work-of-grace for and in these Philippians, so He would continue that work-of-grace for and in them (1:6). There should, then, be no doubt amongst the Philippians as to whether “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” was actually “with” them;

they could know that this grace *was* with them, and it *would remain* with them.

Here, then, was great encouragement for the saints of Philippi (including the elders and deacons; see Philippians 1:1)! The apostle Paul had stepped into their lives by means of a letter, and given them instruction, admonition, encouragement. But that letter had come to its end, and now Paul would direct his attention to other labours in God's kingdom. The congregation with their office bearers were again on their own....

But, says Paul in his closing words: that's not so! It was not so that Paul had once just *happened* to step into their lives; rather, the Lord in His grace had *put* the apostle on the path of the Philippians, had caused him to write this letter. Now that Paul's task-under-God was completed amongst the Philippians, the Philippians are not left on their own; Paul may step off the stage, but the God who put him on the stage remains with the Philippians always. The God who once sent His only Son to earth to pay for sin –talk about grace!– and the triumphant Son who from heaven caused His servant Paul to write a letter to the Philippians (and now to sign off that letter) remains with the Philippians even when Paul is long gone. And He remains with them not in His anger and judgement (though the Philippians most certainly deserve that!), but remains with them in His grace – for Christ has taken that judgement on Himself. That is the force of the closing words of the apostle! Alone? Left to their own resources? None of it! The God who caused the apostle to write what he wrote –and that was the gospel of grace!– remains with the saints of Philippi always! And that is not a wish, an empty hope, but a guarantee – and therefore so encouraging for the saints of Philippi in the struggles of daily living.

That brings us to our second point:

2. The Need for the Grace

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is, then, present with the congregation in Philippi. Do these saints really need it?

The question is important. We very much like the idea that the grace of the Lord is with us too. But what does this grace look like in the dust and dirt of real life? What changes as a result of this grace? Does one really need it?

Paul had written his letter in order to address a specific problem in the church of Philippi. To be precise: selfishness was rampant in the congregation. Philippians 2: "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than

himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (vss 3,4). It was to set straight that weakness that the apostle mentioned the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, how He emptied Himself for the benefit of others – an example the Philippians were to follow (verse 5).

As it is, as Paul draws his letter to a close he again brings up the matter of their selfishness in their relations together. For in Philippians 4:21 he tells them to “greet every saint in Christ Jesus.” With our modern ears we hear in those words the command to say Hello to each other, or perhaps to shake hands. But Paul has something deeper in mind. The greeting Paul wants is not to be a cold ‘hello’, but a warm ‘How are you?’ resulting from genuine interest in the other. He wants the Christians of Philippi to reach into each other’s lives, to *connect* with their brothers and sisters in the Lord. I refer here to Exodus 18:7, where the Greek translation uses the same word as appears in our chapter. In our translation we read that Moses and his father-in-law “asked each other about their well-being”, and that catches exactly what the Hebrew says. But the Greek translation of that passage catches all of that with the word ‘greet’.

This is the word Paul uses in his closing instruction to a congregation where each esteemed the self more than the other. That is because Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, wanted the Christians of Philippi to make a point of asking each other about their well-being. And that, of course, involves being genuinely interested in each other. It involves a desire to read the other’s soul, involves a desire to understand the other’s struggles and help him. In a word: it involves *connecting* with their brothers and sisters in Christ. To say ‘hello’ to each other in the car park and then walk on was not enough, and a little talk about the weather and the flies was not enough either; they must *greet* each other, must inquire about each other’s well-being. For there must be no distance between the saints! That is the force of the term “greet” in verse 21.

Paul explains the nature of this greeting further. He adds that this greeting must be “in Christ Jesus.” As the saints greet each other, what must they inquire about? On what point must they connect? Must the saints connect on the topic of stocks and bonds? Must they inquire about each other’s cars or health or children? Says Paul: “greet ... *in Christ Jesus.*” That is: as saint greets saint, as the one inquires about the wellbeing of the other, the fine point of the inquiry is not to be one’s physical health or one’s financial health or one’s family health, but the fine point of the conversation needs to be one’s *spiritual* health, one’s relation to the Lord Jesus Christ. For one’s wellbeing *in Christ* is of

the essence for every saint. Christ: it is through His atoning blood that sinners are reconciled to God, and when one is reconciled to God one can handle the struggles of life – be they struggles with finance or with marriage or with neighbours or with children, etc. Yet the devil attacks precisely that relation with Christ so persistently. He would strain that relation, would have God's own doubt the Saviour's saving work, would have God's own cease their prayers, would have God's own leave their Bibles closed, etc. The apostle wants the saints of Philippi to greet each other *in Christ*, and so wants them to connect with each other on the point of their daily and dynamic relation with Christ. Then health and finance, work and children, house and car invariably enter into the discussion (for those are the bits and pieces that make up real life), but they receive place in the discussion *subservient to the principle aspect of the Christian's life*, and that is his relation to God in Christ.

But here is now the big question. Given that the saints of Philippi esteem self more than the brother in the next pew, how can they actually *connect*? How can they greet each other in Jesus Christ, speak with each other about their relation with the Lord, open up to each other about something so personal?

We can put more colour to the question. Shall you approach me, or I approach you? Shall the slave owners of Philippi approach their slaves, or the slaves approach their masters?! Shall those who once hurt you approach you, or should you approach them? Let's face it: we have our expectations, our social etiquette as to who should approach whom. And we have our pride also....

But Paul, brothers and sisters, does not go into any of those niceties. He gives a *general* command to one and all: "Greet every saint." It may not happen amongst the saints of Philippi as was common in Israel in Jesus' day, where the Pharisees expected the masses to greet them and not the other way around (cf Matthew 23:6,7). Nor was it to happen that saints who had a bone to pick with another were to wait for the other to greet them (cf Matthew 5:47). Paul's command is *general*, and therefore directed to *each* saint irrespective of any assumed ladder or hierarchy: *all* are instructed to greet the other. And that is to say that each saint was to be interested in the other, was even to strive to be first in inquiring about the welfare of the other. None should be busy with self (as in: I've got big problems, and so you should be interested in me and my burdens); each was instead to be busy with the other and seek to help the other carry his burdens.

So the question comes back with a vengeance: just how can the Philippians do what the apostle wants? Here, beloved, is the point of our

text. It is no accident that Paul mentions the presence of the Lord's grace *hard on the heels of his closing instruction to greet every saint in Christ Jesus*. That instruction cuts to the core of the one big weakness of the Philippian congregation, a weakness the Philippians could not master on own strength. To be of the same mind, united in Christ, emptying the self for the sake of the other, be genuinely interested in the other: how can sinful saints do that?! Is the task not too much?? The answer of the apostle is clear: No, it is not too much to ask, for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is with you all. God's favour is present; more, the God who gave up His only Son for the benefit of sinners, the Son of God who emptied Himself even to the shameful death of the cross, and so demonstrated what *favour*, what *grace* really is: the grace of this God is present with these saints! So each had *strength from heaven* to be the first to inquire about the other – before the other inquired about you. Because God's grace was with them, each was able –no matter past histories or social relations– to give of self, to empty self, in order to connect with the brother or the sister of the next pew! Truly, how encouraging – especially in the specific weakness of the Philippian church!

We come to our last point:

3. The Effect of the Grace

As Paul steps out of the lives of the Philippians, he encourages the church with the assurance that the saints of Philippi are not left to their own resources; the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is with them. In the midst of the specific struggles of the Philippian church, that gospel is so very encouraging; as they seek to reach out to each other, the Lord's favour is with them.

But now a question. Does this grace actually get things done? Is it effective?

Notice what the apostle writes in the second half of verse 21: “the brethren who are with me greet you.” Of the ‘brethren’ referred to in that verse, we know only of Timothy (2:23). (Epaphroditus had been with Paul too, but as he carried this letter to Philippi he cannot be one of the brethren Paul has in mind.) However it all may be, it is more than likely that these brethren were strangers to the Philippians. Certainly the saints mentioned in vs 22 were strangers; “those of Caesar's household” are either members of the emperor's family or officials in Caesar's employ – perhaps the guards in Paul's prison. Either way, they are strangers to the Philippians.

But see: they send their greetings. We realise that greeting someone via a letter is a more distant greeting than meeting the other face to face,

looking the other in the eye. That takes nothing away, though, from the fact that these strangers extend their greetings – and so express an interest in those strangers of Philippi. Why they are interested in those strangers? Surely, congregation, that is only because of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ upon them. The brethren with Paul have tasted something of the favour of the Lord to unworthy sinners, and so they reach out to total strangers to acknowledge them. That is the effect of the grace of the Lord; those who receive this grace and appreciate it make a point of being gracious to another – even if they be total strangers.

How encouraged the saints of Philippi ought to be with the *effect* God's favour-for-sinners has on those strangers-become-brethren with Paul. The favour of God is manifestly powerful to get things done; that favour removes barriers of geographic distance, barriers of language, barriers of race, removes the barriers that not knowing the other creates. Here, congregation, is a little bit of Pentecost, when strangers from Arabia and Cappadocia and Jerusalem and Rome all came to faith through the preaching of the gospel, and then "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42), cheerfully sharing all they had for the advantage of the other – irrespective of language or race or social class. The "middle wall of separation" once generated by our fall into sin has been taken away through the gracious work of Jesus Christ – and the presence of that grace ensures that distances disappear.

But why should we think only of distance generated by geography or language or race? In the harsh reality of living in this fallen world, there are *so many things* that can cause distance between people. The work of Jesus Christ on the cross overcomes *all such distances*. Being interested in the other, being able to greet the other is the powerful effect of the favour of God as displayed in Jesus Christ. That favour is with the Philippians! Truly, how encouraging for the Philippians as they strive, in the strength of the Lord, to put the command of the apostle into practice!

The time has come for me to close my ministry in your midst. Through the wise leading of the Lord our God, the congregation of Kelmscott has grown very close together so that there is a much greater caring for each other today than was the case years ago. This is the case not only among the adults, but also amongst the youth, as the recent youth camp demonstrated so vividly.

Yet none of us has reached the goal of perfection, and so the closeness that exists in the congregation is not perfect either. There are those

in Kelmscott who will not visit each other. There are those in the congregation who live on the edge. In the congregation and in the bond of churches are those who make things difficult for the other. What effect shall these imperfections and frictions have in a period of vacancy?

The Lord, my brothers and sisters, closes my ministry in your midst. But as I leave, please remember that only a *man* leaves; the God who sends His servants when and where He pleases *does not leave*. With His grace and Spirit He is with you always (cf. Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 18). In the strength of that grace, greet one another and continue to greet one another; be diligent in acknowledging each other in the Lord, being genuinely interested in each other, encouraging each other in the service of the One who gave His only Son for our sins. Remember: Christ has broken down that "wall of separation" so that saints can be one body together, irrespective of past differences. More, the Lord who broke down that wall of separation gives the strength to overcome tensions – for His grace remains with you always.

April 3, 2005