

INTRODUCTORY NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

GOD'S JUSTICE

The Flourishing of Creation & the Destruction of Evil



ZONDERVAN®



INTRODUCING PHILIPPIANS

by Corneliu Constantineanu

The great Roman Caesar Octavian Augustus established the city of Philippi as a Roman colony after a great victory in the battle against Brutus in 42 BC. After another victory over Mark Anthony in 31 BC, he named the city after himself, *Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis*. This was in order to announce the *good news* of his great victory and, at the same time, to honor the great Roman Empire's accomplishment of justice, peace and security! The *Pax Romana*, together with Roman law and justice, is the great news that the Roman imperial ideology proclaimed—as the dawn of a new era for humanity, as the greatest good news ever heard! But like the establishment of the city of Philippi, the good news of Roman peace and justice was brought about through violence and war and maintained by force and the subjugation of people.

In stark contrast, the apostle Paul announces the real good news, *the gospel*—God's action to put the world right, to bring his peace and justice to this beautiful yet fallen and corrupted world. He has accomplished this not through violence and war but through the self-giving life of Jesus Christ. This is the astonishing story we find in Paul's letter to the Philippians—the significant and wonderful yet costly journey of God's redeeming the world and bringing his peace and justice for the entire creation. Jesus, not Caesar, brings peace and justice! This is the good news of the gospel that we read in Philippians.

Indeed, as we read through the text, we see that the crucial and urgent subject matter of Paul's letter to the Philippians is *the gospel*. The apostle Paul is grateful for the Philippians' "partnership in the gospel" (1:5; cf. 4:15) and preoccupied with their continuous progress in faith/gospel (1:25). He is in chains for "defending and confirming the gospel" (1:7; cf. 1:16), though happy that his imprisonment serves "to advance the gospel" (1:12). Finally, in the key verse of the letter, which expresses the essence of his message, Paul exhorts the Philippians to live "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27). Thus, the entire letter is about *the gospel*, about the great and amazing good news of God's intervention through Jesus Christ to bring justice, to put the world right, to redeem the world. And this new life of justice is announced in and through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the gospel. Just as God brought the good news of justice and righteousness through Jesus, Christians will spread justice around them by following Christ's example. As they are Christlike, they will be agents of God's justice in this world. Only as they manifest their heavenly citizenship will they be responsible earthly citizens.

It is extremely important to understand that the Bible presents salvation/redemption as a reality that comprises the whole of life—from individual salvation to social and structural dimensions of life. Despite our tendency to limit redemption to our personal salvation and morality, redemption in the biblical narrative implies the entire creation, with the ultimate purpose of human flourishing and well-being for all. Salvation is not at all simply about getting souls to heaven, but about a new life lived out in righteousness, with love and service, with justice and mercy. Because Scripture presents God as "the God of justice," Christians, as his children, are to embody the very same character in the world (Amos 5:23–24; Mic 6:8).

It is exactly this that Paul requires of the believers in Philippians—that their lives reflect the content of the gospel of Christ (1:27). Two important parts of the letter exemplify the kind of life he envisions: the example of Christ, his obedience, humility and concern for others (2:1–18); and the example of Paul, who gladly lost everything in order to gain Christ (3:1–21). In 3:17 Paul makes an appeal for such an imitation: “Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.” In the concluding chapter of the letter Paul tries to inspire in his audience the desire and commitment for a life worthy of the gospel.

There is an important connection between theology and ethics in Philippians, which is seen in the close link that Paul makes between believers’ identity and their behavior. Their life in society should reflect their double citizenship, Paul insists—their heavenly citizenship (3:20) should be reflected in a distinctive pattern of behavior in the world (1:27). The examples of Christ and Paul illustrate the conduct required.

According to Paul, being a Christian is not about being religious. It is rather about being faithful to the one who was crucified and rose again and brought into being the new creation, thus fulfilling God’s story to redeem the world, to bring peace and justice and love. To live according to the gospel is to be concerned with justice and human flourishing in anticipation of God’s final restoration. In Christ a new world is possible; a new creation is taking place, a new world where peace, justice and love are possible. This is the good news! This is the gospel! And this gospel is the concern of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, the good news of God’s restoring the world, of God’s justice. The followers of Christ live in this gospel story and take an active part in God’s redeeming the world.

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think about such things. ⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² 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. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

¹⁴ Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵ 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; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I desire your gifts; *what I desire is that more be credited to your account.* ¹⁸ *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. ¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

²⁰ To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

²¹ Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings.

²² All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.

²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.^a

^a 23 Some manuscripts do not have *Amen*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON PHILIPPIANS

1. Have you ever thought that your work for justice and peace is partnership in the gospel? In what concrete ways could this understanding change your approach?
2. Do you agree that in our prevalent culture of anxiety and fear, the proper Christian response is not suspicion but love? How do you imagine acting out that love?
3. What do you think a "life worthy of the gospel" means?
4. In what way should God's strange justice determine your way of seeking and offering justice? What would it mean for you personally to follow the way of the cross?
5. Are you encouraged to know that we can do all things through Christ? What are some of the greatest challenges we face in bringing justice? In what way do you think Christ can strengthen us?

PRAYER

Lord, please help me to see your blessings and love in everything, whether joyous moments or everyday tasks ... and even in dreadful catastrophes. You are at work in the world in mysterious ways. Help me to join with you and to invite your presence. Make me quick to hear your voice and to get in step with your Spirit. Let me be all through this day an instrument of your peace.

—Harold Myra

4:13 We Can Do All Things *There can be no better conclusion to our notes in Philippians than the affirmation of a powerful reality: we can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us! Our call as Christians is to represent Christ as signs of the new creation, loving mercy and justice. Christian existence is a life lived in the power of Christ,*

through the Spirit. That is why Christians are hopeful in a hopeless world! Not that we are unaware of the suffering and injustices in the world. But we live with confidence that we will succeed at all things, justice included, through Christ, our Lord!