

THE KEY TO COMMUNITY IN PHILIPPIANS 2 with Allen Hilton

OPEN – SONGS WITH A MESSAGE

Songs reach our soul. That's why we listen long to play lists from Spotify on our i-Phone tech-ish or vinyl if we're if we're old school. And that's why we hear and sing songs in worship. We start today with a quirky alt rock song that oddly (and inadvertently, I imagine) captures the essence of Philippians 2. We'll spend our time together Wednesday evening learning how.

“Superman's Song” by the Crash Test Dummies
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeyhKWjQaKk>)

Tarzan wasn't a ladies' man
He'd just come along and scoop 'em up under his arm
Like that, quick as a cat in the jungle
But Clark Kent, now there was a real gent
He would not be caught sittin' around in no
Junglescape, dumb as an ape doing nothing

[Chorus:]

Superman never made any money
For saving the world from Solomon Grundy
And sometimes I despair the world will never see
Another man like him

Hey Bob, Supe had a straight job
Even though he could have smashed through any bank
In the United States, he had the strength, but he would not
Folks said his family were all dead
Their planet crumbled but Superman, he forced himself
To carry on, forget Krypton, and keep going

Tarzan was king of the jungle and Lord over all the apes
But he could hardly string together four words: "I Tarzan, You Jane."

Sometimes when Supe was stopping crimes
I'll bet that he was tempted to just quit and turn his back
On man, join Tarzan in the forest
But he stayed in the city, and kept on changing clothes
In dirty old phonebooths till his work was through
And nothing to do but go on home

PART ONE: SINGING IN PHILIPPI

One part of understanding what it would have been to be an everyday Christian in one of Paul's little church groups is understanding that they would have sung...a lot! Music was clearly a big part of Jewish worship throughout antiquity. They clearly had a reputation for it, we know, because their Babylonian captors used to demand, "sing us one of the songs of Zion." (Psalm 137) As a community of Jewish people who embraced Jesus, the earliest Christians naturally followed suit.

As with music in all oral/illiterate cultures, they would have taught/been taught songs by singing them over and over (rather than by handing out lyrics and music). Here are some texts that offer us access to this part of early Christian life together.

The Early Christians Sing

When Jesus and his disciples had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷And Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered (Mark 14.26/Matthew 26.30).'

But when the healed fortune-teller's owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. ²⁰When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.'²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them... (Acts 16.25)

What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up (1 Corinthians 14.26).

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5.19).

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. *¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3.16).”*

A Reputation for Song

Early in the second century, Pliny was the governor of a Roman province called Bithynia. He wrote occasional letters to the Emperor Trajan, supplying information on affairs in the province and sometimes asking for advice. His most famous letter is about the Christians. He wrote it in 112 C.E. The whole letter is in the back section of this handout. The most informative part is quoted here:

“Dear Sir...the main of the Christians’ fault, or of their mistake was this: That they were wont, on a stated day, to meet together before it was light, and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god, alternately; and to oblige themselves by a sacrament [or oath], not to do anything that was ill: but that they would commit no theft, or pilfering, or adultery; that they would not break their promises, or deny what was deposited with them, when it was required back again; after which it was their custom to depart, and to meet again at a common but innocent meal...(Epistles 10.96)”

An Early Christian “Hymn to Christ” (Carmen Christi)

Scholars have spotted one of these early Christians hymns in Philippians 2. Notice

the poetic structure of this passage.

*Christ Jesus...
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.*

*And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2.6-11).*

Paul's Purpose for the Song

Preachers in our time often quote hymns or songs in their sermons. Have you heard it done or done it yourself? One classic sermon form calls for a strong opening, a solid illustration to land each of the three main points, and an emotional closing quoting lyrics that bring home the main point.

Paul does something like that with the Philippians. Any good reader of scripture moves quickly from noticing the hymn to asking “Why did Paul choose to include the beautiful *carmen Christi* of chapter 2 in this brief letter to the Philippians?” Our first instinct by now is to ask after the circumstances and the literary context: what was going on in Philippi that made this song meaningful, and how does it fit into Paul's strategy for teaching them?

Pressure from Outside

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel,²⁸ and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing.²⁹ For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—³⁰ since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have (Philippians 1.27-30).

Signs of Division Inside

As attentive readers, when we see commands or exhortations, we imagine that something in the life of the audience has drawn that specific concern. In the early part of Philippians, Paul twice exhorts his beloved group to come together in unity.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel... (1.27)

make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind (2.2).

A Reference to Grousing

Do all things without murmuring and arguing,¹⁵ so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. (2.14-15)

A Conflict between Leaders

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.³ Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life (4.2-3).

A Closer Look at 2.1-2

First the review of God's help to them.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy...

Next, Paul's hope for them: Community

*...²make my joy complete:
be of the same mind,
having the same love,
being in full accord
and of one mind...*

PART THREE: THE KEY TO COMMUNITY

The Philippians seem to be undergoing social pressure or persecution from outsiders, and that has prompted some strife and division within. Paul is clearly calling the Philippians to unity. But he knows that it's not just a matter of saying "we want to be united." (Take a look at all the major denominational bodies in the United States for an example of how that doesn't work!)

The means: Self Sacrifice

*³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.
⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests,
but to the interests of others.*

Example #1: Paul

- Putting the gospel over his own consolation in prison (1.12-14)
- Putting the gospel over fairness to him (1.15-18a)
- 3. Putting the Philippians' needs over his own desire to be with Christ (18b-26)

Example #2: Jesus

"Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus..."

Who, though he existed in the very form of God,

*did not regard equality with God as a thing to be exploited,
BUT EMPTIED HIMSELF
taking the form of a slave, being found in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
HE HUMBLLED HIMSELF
and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.
Result: God exalts Jesus (2.5-11).*

Compare this to the words of Jesus:

*Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but whoever humbles himself
will be exalted (Matthew 23.12).*

Example #3: Paul's Co-Workers

Timothy puts the gospel above himself (2.19-24).

*I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.²¹ All
of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.²² But
Timothy's* worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with
me in the work of the gospel.*

Epaphroditus risks his life for the gospel (2.25-30).

*Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-
worker and fellow-soldier, your messenger* and minister to my need;²⁶ for he
has been longing for* all of you, and has been distressed because you heard
that he was ill.²⁷ He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy
on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one
sorrow after another.²⁸ I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order
that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious.
²⁹ Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people,
³⁰ because he came close to death for the work of Christ,* risking his life to
make up for those services that you could not give me.*

PART FOUR: PAUL'S WORDS FOR OUR LIVES

How does Philippians 2 land in our daily living? If we stop short of that question, we haven't quite finished Bible Study for the day. Here is a four-step answer to the

question, “How should I then live?”

Identify the Attitude

Paul calls each of the Philippians to stop thinking primarily and think, rather, about one another and the success of the good news about Jesus.

God is calling us to the same –

- putting others before ourselves and
- putting God’s redemptive work in the world before our own interests.

That’s not exactly natural, and it’s pretty hard just to grit our teeth and do. So...

Find a Model

Paul offers Jesus as prime example and himself, Timothy and Epaphroditus as imitators of Jesus.

All of them give up their own rights and pursuits for the sake of (1) Christ and the good news; and (2) the Philippians and one another.

They can be examples to us, too, of course. But it’s also good to have a living example in front of us.

Do you know someone humble, deferential, and self-sacrificial? Imitate him/her!

But we quickly get caught up in the means and forget the end. So...

Remember the Ultimate Purpose

Paul’s teaching in chapter two on humility, regarding the other, and self-sacrifice are not meant simply to make his Philippians “better people.” Paul hopes that three things will happen:

1. The Philippians will become a true community (2.1-4).
2. By doing that (rather than murmuring and complaining) they will shine like stars in a dark world (2.15).
3. Christ will be honored in their body (and ours), as in Paul’s (1.20).

CLOSE – FIND A GOOD SONG TO SING

“Tarzan and Superman” is a good song. The Christ hymn Paul quotes is better. One could do worse than developing a playlist for disciples going deep!

Letters of Pliny the Younger and the Emperor Trajan

Translated by William Whiston

These letters concern an episode which marks the first time the Roman government recognized Christianity as a religion separate from Judaism, and sets a precedent for the massive persecution of Christians that takes place in the second and third centuries.

In the year 112, Pliny the Younger was faced with a dilemma. He was the governor in the Roman province of Bithynia (modern day Turkey) when a number of Christians were brought into his court. It is unclear what the initial charges are, but he ultimately decided, despite the fact that the Christians seemed generally harmless to him, that he should execute them if they refused to recant their faith. Because he is unsure as to whether he can kill them legally for no other crime than their faith, he writes to his friend the Emperor for advice. The Emperor replies that he did the right thing in executing them, but advises him not to seek out Christians for prosecution.

Sir,

It is my constant method to apply myself to you for the resolution of all my doubts; for who can better govern my dilatory way of proceeding or instruct my ignorance? I have never been present at the examination of the Christians [by others], on which account I am unacquainted with what uses to be inquired into, and what, and how far they used to be punished; nor are my doubts small, whether there be not a distinction to be made between the ages [of the accused]? and whether tender youth ought to have the same punishment with strong men? Whether there be not room for pardon upon repentance?" or whether it may not be an advantage to one that had been a Christian, that he has forsaken Christianity? Whether the bare name, without any crimes besides, or the crimes adhering to that name, be to be punished? In the meantime, I have taken this course about those who have been brought before me as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians or not? If they confessed that they were Christians, I asked them again, and a third time, intermixing threatenings with the questions. If they persevered in their confession, I ordered them to be executed; for I did not doubt but, let their confession be of any sort whatsoever, this positiveness and inflexible obstinacy deserved to be punished. There have been some of this mad sect whom I took notice of in particular as Roman citizens, that they might be sent to that city. After some time, as is usual in such examinations, the crime spread itself and many more cases came before me. A libel was sent to me, though without an author,

containing many names [of persons accused]. These denied that they were Christians now, or ever had been. They called upon the gods, and supplicated to your image, which I caused to be brought to me for that purpose, with frankincense and wine; they also cursed Christ; none of which things, it is said, can any of those that are ready Christians be compelled to do; so I thought fit to let them go. Others of them that were named in the libel, said they were Christians, but presently denied it again; that indeed they had been Christians, but had ceased to be so, some three years, some many more; and one there was that said he had not been so these twenty years. All these worshipped your image, and the images of our gods; these also cursed Christ. However, they assured me that the main of their fault, or of their mistake was this:-That they were wont, on a stated day, to meet together before it was light, and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god, alternately; and to oblige themselves by a sacrament [or oath], not to do anything that was ill: but that they would commit no theft, or pilfering, or adultery; that they would not break their promises, or deny what was deposited with them, when it was required back again; after which it was their custom to depart, and to meet again at a common but innocent meal, which they had left off upon that edict which I published at your command, and wherein I had forbidden any such conventicles. These examinations made me think it necessary to inquire by torments what the truth was; which I did of two servant maids, who were called **Deaconesses**: but still I discovered no more than that they were addicted to a bad and to an extravagant superstition. Hereupon I have put off any further examinations, and have recourse to you, for the affair seems to be well worth consultation, especially on account of the number of those that are in danger; for there are many of every age, of every rank, and of both sexes, who are now and hereafter likely to be called to account, and to be in danger; for this superstition is spread like a contagion, not only into cities and towns, but into country villages also, which yet there is reason to hope may be stopped and corrected. To be sure, the temples, which were almost forsaken, begin already to be frequented; and the holy solemnities, which were long intermitted, begin to be revived. The sacrifices begin to sell well everywhere, of which very few purchasers had of late appeared; whereby it is easy to suppose how great a multitude of men may be amended, if place for repentance be admitted.

My Pliny,

You have taken the method which you ought in examining the causes of those that had been accused as Christians, for indeed no certain and general form of judging can be ordained in this case. These people are not to be sought for; but if they be accused and convicted, they are to be punished; but with this caution, that he who denies himself to be a Christian, and makes it plain that he is not so by supplicating

to our gods, although he had been so formerly, may be allowed pardon, upon his repentance. As for libels sent without an author, they ought to have no place in any accusation whatsoever, for that would be a thing of very ill example, and not agreeable to my reign.