

An unwanted gift

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[0 : 00] Father, we want to thank you for your word to us. And we want to pray that now at the end of what's been a busy day with lots of different things going on, we want to pray that you might graciously speak to us and also be at work in us to give us ears and hearts that would listen well, we pray.

Bless our time together for the sake of your glory. We thank you that time in your word is never time wasted. And so we pray, Lord, that you do us good for the sake of your glory. Amen. Okay, so Philippians chapter 1, verse 27 to 30.

I've printed it out on the front of your handout so that you can scribble on it if you want to. Just these four verses. Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel, without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.

This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved, and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.

[1 : 30] Since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. Now, I'm not sure that anyone is going to admit to this.

Maybe you will, because we're only a small group. But I wonder whether you've ever been given a gift that you didn't want. Anybody been given a gift that they didn't want?

Mm-hmm. I once gave Vanessa an iron in the early days of our marriage, which wasn't particularly well received.

Seemed a little heartless. Anybody want to confess to a gift that they received that they didn't appreciate? You were nodding your head, Jen. What did you get?

A colorful vase. Oh, dear. An ugly vase. My grandfather, everyone used to combine their money, my mum's side of the family, in order to buy you a bigger present.

[2 : 44] And I asked for a watch. And I was only probably eight or nine, and I was really excited, because it was going to be like an expensive watch. Anyway, he gave me a ladies Casio watch.

I was so, so disappointed. Anyway, there you go. So I think in the center of this passage in Philippians is a gift that you probably don't want.

Well, at least half of it is what you don't want. Let me show it to you. It's there in verse 29. It's right at the center. This is how the passage works structurally. It's the four at the beginning of verse 29. For it has been granted, literally there, graciously given to you.

On behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, that's the first part, but also to suffer for him. So here's the gift.

There are two parts to it. Believing and suffering. In other words, God in Christ has blessed us with faith in him and suffering for him.

[3 : 45] It doesn't often make it to our evangelistic appeals, does it? But come to Christ so that you might suffer for him. But it does in Jesus' teaching, doesn't it?

Take up your cross and follow me. Deny yourself and come after me. But this suffering is at the center of these few verses as Paul tells the Philippians what the Christian life is like.

And so we're just going to think about two things tonight. The first is the nature of Christian suffering. And the second is the purpose of Christian suffering. And we're going to spend some time discussing it together and asking questions as well.

So firstly, the nature of Christian suffering. Now, we've got to be quite specific about what the suffering is here. And we have talked about it before, but we're going to go over it again. Because it's important that we acknowledge that not all suffering that we face is the same.

Okay? So there is a kind of suffering that everybody faces in a broken world. Yeah, we live in a world which does not work as it should.

[4 : 46] And there is a suffering which comes to us as a result of living in that world. And it comes to all of us. It's sort of unevenly spread, isn't it?

But it comes to you whether you're a Christian or not a Christian. Whatever religion, faith, creed you are, you find that you suffer because you live in a broken world. You live in a world where people are angry with one another.

You live in a world where deluges of rain come and flood the world around you. You live in a world where tornadoes hit, that kind of thing. We live in the suffering of this world. Now, that is not the suffering that Paul is talking about in verse 29.

Nor is he talking about the kind of suffering that comes from doing wrong. It's right to say, isn't it, that not all suffering comes from sin, our specific sins. But it is also true to say that sin does lead to suffering.

We saw that this morning, didn't we, with David. That even though our world is twisted and messed up, there is still, in God's common grace, a link between doing wrong and suffering for it. Just by the natural law of consequences in a world that was made good.

[5 : 53] If you commit a crime, you will suffer the punishment for it. If you lack integrity, you will suffer the consequences of nobody trusting you. Paul is not talking about that either, is he?

Right? So Peter talks about this suffering for doing evil is of no great benefit to anybody. Right? He's not talking about that. Rather, he is talking about and saying to Christians, there is a particular gift of suffering that is given to you as a believer.

A kind of suffering that is not shared by the non-Christian or by the person who's just doing something wrong. And what is that? Well, have a look at verse 30 and let's work out what it is together.

He says this, Since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. In other words, the suffering here is what he calls the same struggle.

In other words, this gift of suffering that has been given to the Philippian church was also given to Paul. And they saw him struggling with it when he was with them. And they now have it themselves. And that means that Acts 16 is the really important background to the book of Philippians.

[7 : 00] Because what's going on in Acts 16 when Paul is in Philippi actually explains what's going on in Philippi now. And Acts 16 tells you that the struggle that Paul had in Philippi was the struggle with his citizenship.

Specifically, the Roman authorities, egged on by the owners of a slave girl, who you may remember, and the angry crowd, said that it wasn't possible to be a Christian and a Roman citizen. So these men are arguing for and presenting things which are not lawful for us as Roman citizens. So they argue that to be a Christian was necessarily to be a bad Roman citizen.

These things are incompatible, they're saying. These guys can't be Roman citizens because of the way that they are teaching the gospel and preaching Christ.

The two are incompatible. So either their choices are, you know, either leave Jesus or leave life in Philippi, basically. Now that happened to Paul, so much so that he ended up getting locked in prison, then they come out of prison.

[8 : 07] Interestingly, they get flogged, but then they say, actually, no, we're Roman citizens, is it lawful for you to flog us? And then they stop. And then they get asked to leave. So Paul leaves Philippi with this struggle of its being told that it's incompatible with his Roman citizenship to follow Christ.

And now that is happening in the Philippian church. That it's this kind of suffering that the Philippians are suffering is gently hinted at in verse 27 as well.

So he says in verse 27, whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. And the word translated there for conduct yourself is literally citizen yourself.

I know that because Nick's Greek and Mike's a genius. I'm kind of slightly trepidatious about these things.

But anyway, it's from the root word polis, which is for city. So you've got the, you know, we get the word politics from that, don't we, about running a nation or a city or whatever. So Paul is telling them to see themselves as Christians first.

[9 : 11] The first thing that the Philippians are to do is to citizen themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. In other words, you are first, above all things, a citizen of the Lord Jesus.

You belong to him before you belong to Philippi. To own their membership of God's kingdom more dearly than their membership of the Roman Empire. Now, then sits the scene, doesn't it?

That citizenship for the suffering of the exclusion that's described in verse 30. Now, I think this is worth thinking about some more because I think this kind of suffering for the Lord Jesus is still alive and well in our day.

I think we are given the same kind of suffering, aren't we? We are given to this suffering. Okay, let's move on because I think this is going to be helpful to think about some more.

The purpose of Christian suffering. Now, I want to be careful here, again, because I'm not giving here. This is not me giving an exhaustive list of the Bible reasons for suffering.

[10 : 13] Okay? Paul, in this short section in the book of Philippians, is not giving you an exhaustive list for suffering itself. Sometimes I think we make that mistake, don't we, when we read the Bible.

But we try and say everything rather than just following the text precisely and saying exactly what it is saying. So Paul has his sights on a very particular kind of suffering for the Christian that is given by God and experienced by Paul and the Philippians and by us.

And then he's got two very specific reasons that that kind of suffering exists. So if tonight you'll find yourself suffering sickness or grief or loss, that is not what we're talking about here.

And, you know, you can be sure as a Christian that that kind of suffering is not purposeless, right? The Bible is full of all sorts of different purposes for suffering in our lives. Romans 8, 28 ultimately tells us that all things work together for our good.

So it's not that, but we're going to be really specific about what this passage says about the reasons for this specific kind of suffering, the exclusion from the predominant culture for belonging to Christ.

[11 : 17] And that suffering in these verses happens for two reasons. The first reason being in the church and the second reason being in the world. So let's do the first one first and second one second. So firstly, in the church.

Notice how these verses go. Paul wants to hear verse 27, that they are standing firm in the one spirit, side by side or striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose them.

Now, I think the NIV footnote probably captures it better in verse 27, that it's not a capital letter spirit. I think the parallel here is the one man.

So it's talking about our unity with each other. So not so much is talking about the indwelling spirit of God. In other words, Paul, I think, is slightly mixing metaphors. He's going from citizenship to the military, where you stand firm, to then competing together as one man, as a sports team for the sake of the gospel.

So this then is his understanding, is that suffering in some senses unites the church. It pulls us together. Because here is the place that we belong.

[12 : 32] We know we don't belong in the world, because we're told that all the time. But we do belong here, because we are like one man or one person suffering the same things in the same way for the same reason. And that pulls us into each other for refuge and for strength.

So he says, then when I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one spirit, striving together as one man or one for the faith of the gospel, without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.

It's not difficult, is it, to imagine how this might work in the church in Philippi, that actually their suffering from exclusion from the world pulls them in together into relationship with one another.

Oh, we know we don't belong there because we get told that all the time. But we do belong here.

And we know that. And so we pull together. And actually, we're not frightened because we are encouraging one another and spurring one another on.

And we stand shoulder to shoulder with each other, giving each other strength. But there's more to this suffering as well, isn't there? So let's just finish by thinking about its purpose in the world.

[13 : 40] Not only does suffering like this unite the church, it's also, I think, in these verses, a witness to the world. So look at the end of verse 28. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved and that by God.

Paul doesn't expand exactly on how this works, but I'm not sure that it's that difficult to work out. I think the fact that the Philippians are willing to have their Roman citizenship questioned and challenged shows the world that they are living for something else.

That's something different to what the rest of the world are living for. In other words, it's the willingness of the Philippians to live and die without what the rest of their culture thinks to be the most important things points to a steadfastness and an assurance beyond anything they know. Sort of like a, goodness, what are those guys on that they are willing to suffer like that? Look at their confidence in the face of suffering. Look at their steadfastness, even in the face of our ridicule. And then they see, don't they, not only the steadfastness of the church, but they see their exclusion from the church.

So they see that they don't have something that they can live for or die for in the same way. So this is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved and that by God.

[14:58] So they know that they don't have this. I don't have a confidence beyond this world. I don't have anything that I can hope for in this world.

It's this realization, isn't it, that I, like we were talking about this morning, I don't have anything that can speak to my guilt or my experience of betrayal. I don't have those kind of things.

I'm excluded from them. I'm being destroyed and will be destroyed. So our willingness to suffer and our willingness to suffer and contend as one person alongside each other for the sake of the gospel is a witness to the world as well as to one another.

I think it's just really helpful, isn't it, if our non-Christian friends can get this idea that my Christian friend is, they're not living for what I am living for.

And they are not troubled by the loss of things that I would be devastated by. Because it seems as though their treasure and their hope and their desires are placed somewhere else, other than in the place where my treasure and my desires are.

[16:09] And it works out in church life as well, doesn't it? Because we want people, we want people who are not Christians to feel really welcome to come and hear the gospel.

But we also want them to know that outside of faith in Christ, you don't, you belong by faith in Christ, not any other way. So our testimonies to what it means for us to be a Christian, to belong here, are because of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Attendance at a gathering of the church is not the same as belonging to God's people, as it's described here in the church in Philippi.

Philippians chapter 1, verse 13. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace garden to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

You know, maybe at work, it's possible to say, Steve is suffering at work because he's a fool, right?

[17:10] But it needs to be like, Steve is suffering at work because he holds dearly the truth of the gospel, and people are persecuting him for it. But if you're, yeah, so it's important, isn't it, the way we express that.

Yeah, thanks, Mike. Let me close our time in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for him.

We pray that you might just give us a grasp of what a treasure it is to know the Lord Jesus, that we might be willing to suffer for him. To know that actually exclusion from this world does not matter because we are citizens of heaven.

Sons and daughters of you, the living God. We pray, please, as a church family, that this kind of suffering together might draw us towards one another, that we might love and care for one another. And also that we might demonstrate to the world that we have a treasure that they don't have, a hope that they don't share. And Lord, we pray that that might open opportunities that they too might come to know and love and trust you for themselves.

[18:31] Do this work amongst us, we pray. And as it feels like we live at a point in history where these things will be increasingly important to us, we pray that you might strengthen us to be willing to suffer like this for the sake of your glory.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.