

More than a Whisper of Treason

To The Citizens of Heaven, Part 3

Philippians 1:1b-2

When Philip II ascended the throne of the Greek empire 350 years before the birth of Christ, he would become one its greatest administrators and one of the world's greatest conquering kings. His reputation would be surpassed only by his son, Alexander the Great.

One of the cities Philip captured early in his rein was strategically located on a range of hills. These hills dipped into a natural pass that commanded the road between Asia and Europe. It was there that this city was located.

Even more importantly – at least in the short run – was that this city owned and operated rich gold and silver mines; gold currency from those mines would be used by Philip to outfit his armies.

The emperor would rename this key city Philippi – after himself – in all humility of course.

200 years later (168 B.C.) the empire of Rome defeated the Empire of Greece. By that time the gold mines of Philippi had been exhausted and the importance of the city declined.

It probably would have remained a relatively unimportant city – apart from its strategic location – had something dramatic not taken place. Julius Caesar was assassinated. And in all the turmoil that instantly engulfed the empire, loyalties were divided and regions took sides with all the potential emperors.

Augustus and his Roman legions finally chased down Caesar's assassins – just outside the city of Philippi. And Philippi had a choice to make . . . and they chose to stand with Augustus in battle. Brutus and Cassius, Caesar's assassins were killed in the battle and Augustus mounted the throne of a newly formed Roman Empire. And one of the things he would never forget was what the City of Philippi had done for him.

He immediately gave the city the status of a Roman "colony" to celebrate his victory. All the people of Philippi were immediately given citizenship in the Roman Empire – they could vote, elect and be governed by their own senate.

Still later, they were given the special status called "The Law of Italy" which freed them all from having to pay any taxes to the Roman Empire.¹

Philippi was the pet city of the Roman emperor.

And Philippi was proud of it too. They adopted all of the Roman customs, Roman law, Roman dress, a Roman senate, and the official language of Rome – Latin.

The emperor did something else too . . . he sent veteran soldiers to live in several special class cities or colonies. Philippi was one of them. These decorated and loyal soldiers would arrive in groups of 300, along with their wives and children, and settle into the culture. This enabled the empire to

spread out and yet keep control . . . and at the same time keep patriotism for the empire at a fever pitch.

These veteran warriors of course would receive great respect for their role in having forged an empire of commerce and law and culture and peace.

I was sitting at a stop light this past week, revving my engine and preparing to take off as soon as the flag turned green. Another car was in front of me . . . a brand new BMW . . . I was in my pickup truck, but I knew I could take him.

As we sat there waiting, I noticed his license plate. It began with the letters PH in all caps, followed by 4 numerals. I initially wondered if he had wanted to put PhD on there, but didn't have the room, so I studied the plate a little closer and noticed in the side margin of the tag were the words, "Purple Heart" . . . that PH stood for Purple Heart. I thought, "Is that great or what." This was a special tag for these decorated veterans.

I pulled up even closer – not so close that he'd jump out of his car and mess me up; just close enough to read the fine print on the side of his license plate and it read, "Purple Heart Veteran - (dash) Combat Wounded."

Underneath that script was a picture – in full color – of a Purple Heart award.

Pull into the city limits of Philippi and 1 out of 10 people would be – or belong to a family of – Roman soldiers who were decorated for their courage and valor. If they had license plates on their chariots, many of them would have the insignia of a purple heart.

Problem was – in Philippi – this sense of favor and privilege and loyalty and patriotism went beyond a sense of national pride. Within 100 years, the citizens of Rome will turn patriotism into idolatry; they will literally worship their emperors as the offspring of deity.

By the time Paul writes this letter to the church in Philippi, 100 years after it had become the pet city of Caesar, the citizens have adopted – and this will cause great persecution eventually throughout all of Rome – they have adopted the practice of declaring their ultimate devotion to their emperor by calling him, *kurios soter* – our Lord and Savior.

You remember what threw Paul and Silas into jail when they first visited Philippi 10 years earlier? The charge against them was *that "These men are Jews . . . and they are teaching laws and customs which we do not observe – for we are Romans."* (Acts 16:20) And the crowd descended on them and beat them and even the judges came down from their bench and joined in (Acts 16).

In other words, we follow Rome . . . not some Jew! Don't mess with the ways of Rome!

If you open your letter from Paul to the Philippians, you'll notice right away why this letter is so much more than a happy hallmark card to spread a little joy in the church.

Now that we know a little more of the context of 1st Century Philippi, we can appreciate the fact that Paul opens this letter with nothing less than a whisper of treasonous words and ideas.

He dares to announce his loyalty to a God that is foreign to the Roman pantheon. And horror of Roman horrors, he will designate to Jesus – this crucified Jew – the title of Caesar – notice at the end of *verse 2*, Paul writes that these believers belong to *God our Father* and to the *Lord – to the Lord . . . and He isn't Caesar . . . the Lord is Jesus Christ.*

This letter is rumbling with treason.

You dare to show your allegiance, ultimately to Jesus Christ.

I had a visitor come to my office this week – she had been a top advisor to a former president in the White House; she is about to become a key advisor of another yet-unannounced presidential candidate. She lives in another part our state and listens daily to our radio program. We had a really fascinating conversation – I mostly listened – as she talked with great concern about the growing hostility of the establishment toward Christianity; the utter loss of a moral foundation in the highest reaches of political power. And yet she was excited to represent Jesus Christ in that arena of growing hostility and utter contempt and great need for Christian influence.

I couldn't help but think of the political leaders that Paul allowed to remain anonymous, but simply noted at the end of this letter to the Philippians – his reference to members of Caesar's household –

members of Caesar's staff and perhaps even his senate – *they* were sending their encouragement to the believers in the Philippian church.

People in the highest reaches of political power were balancing their testimony for Christ with their work for the benefit of the empire.

This woman told me that she believed she had been called at such a time as this.

More than ever we need to understand how the Apostle Paul – ultimately the Spirit of God – wants the church to think . . . and to live . . . in an ever growing hostile environment . . . *for such a time as this*.

Now in the next few words, Paul is going to effectively and radically change their world view . . . the foundation for living . . . their worship and their mission.

If all we had were the opening lines of this letter – with what we've just rehearsed about the city of Philippi – we would know that this letter was going to **revolutionize the believer's way of thinking and living in at least three ways.**

First of all, here in the latter part of verse 1, Paul will:

1. Redirect their sense of loyalty

He writes, *To all saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi.*

I love the way Paul order his words. He effectively says, "Philippi might be your mailing address, but Jesus Christ is your permanent residence."

That's where your life belongs . . . that's where your heart belongs.

You are *in Christ Jesus*.

Which happens to be a favorite phrase of Paul's – it'll appear more than 150 times in his letters . . . "in the Lord", "in Christ", "In Christ Jesus."

It's a phrase loaded with the gospel.

In Christ Jesus, one author wrote, is theological shorthand for referring to our bond in Christ; so tightly that his obedience and crucifixion is ours; His death to sin's condemnation is ours; His

resurrection guarantees ours as we anticipate being ushered into God's presence forever.ⁱⁱ

I love the way Vincent put it when he wrote that a Christian lives in Christ like the roots of a tree live in the soil; like a bird in the air and a fish in the water . . . a Christian is always and everywhere encircled with the presence of Jesus Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ

And by the way, don't miss the uniqueness of this precious phrase to the Christian.

A Buddhist does not speak of himself as *in* Buddha; a Muslim does not refer to himself as *in* Mohammed; A Christian Scientist is not *in* Mary Baker Eddy or a Mormon *in* Joseph Smith or Brigham Young. They might faithfully follow the teaching of these religious leaders, but they are not *in* them. Only Christians can claim to be in their Leader.^{iv}

Paul reinforces this new sense of loyalty and belonging as he writes to the believers in Ephesus, ***But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with Him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-7)***

And who are we, now that we are *in Christ Jesus* – our new sphere of loyalty and love?

Paul answers that. He addresses his letter to them and to us – notice *verse 1* the middle part again, ***To all the saints.***

To all the saints! How do you become a saint? By dying and getting canonized, right?

Paul would strongly disagree – he's writing people who aren't dead yet and he's calling them saints.

Well, he must be referring to the pastors and deacons because everybody knows they're saints.

One amen would have been nice.

No, Paul actually refers to church leaders distinctly – as among the saints – notice, ***To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.***

In other words – *all* of these believers are saints.

And none of them are dead . . . so far as we can tell.

You need to understand that the word Paul uses here for saint – and throughout the New Testament it is used for Christians – is the word *hagioi* and it simply means “belonging to God – set apart unto God”.

Every believer is called a saint (that’s the noun form of this Greek word – *hagioi*).

What it means is that we now belong to God.

One author said, it means the Christian has been claimed and requisitioned by God for His purposes.

When Moses stood in front of that burning bush in Exodus chapter 3 and God told him to take his sandals off because was standing on holy ground.

That doesn’t mean that the soil was mystically purified or that all the worms and bugs had been exterminated; no, it meant that this parcel of ground had been set apart for God’s special purposes.

A Christian is a holy saint – a member of a holy nation (***1 Peter 2:9***); not because you are sinless and all the bugs have been exterminated; but because you’ve been redeemed for the special purposes of God.

The Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church for centuries have limited the use of this term for people who lived amazing lives of dedication and consecration and then after their death, typically by martyrdom, if some kind of evidence could be found that they were responsible for some kind of miracle taking place, they could possibly be named a saint.

Listen, according to the scriptures – every believer is a saint – and they are the miracle!

They themselves are the miracle of God’s power and redeeming grace!

Oh listen; it was really something to belong to a Roman colony – especially this one that had been awarded special status in the empire and special favor from their lord the emperor.

Paul says, “Oh let me tell you – you all have the incredible status as saints – precious people who belong to King Jesus; and you are now citizens of an empire that will last forever.”

As we’ll come to understand it in this letter, Paul views the church – the assembly of the saints not as some kind of club or service provider; he views the

church as a group of people both in the world, but at the same time not belonging to the world – a local church was an outpost.

Jonathan Leeman writes in his book entitled, *Church Membership*, The [local] church is an Embassy. What’s an embassy? It’s an institution that represents one nation although it is located in another nation – a host nation. And every embassy represents its home nation’s interests to its host nation.^v

Paul is informing the believers in Philippi that they belong to God and His kingdom. And while they serve together and worship together and belong to one another in Christ and strive to reach their community with the gospel, they are actually representing their home nation’s interests to its host nation.

To put it even more simply; we represent the Kingdom of Heaven while living among the kingdoms of earth.

We are all then, effectively foreign diplomats, representing a distant Empire; and Cary North Carolina is the place where our Embassy is located . . . for such a time as this.

This is radical teaching to the Roman citizens of Philippi . . . this represented a dangerous shifting of ultimate loyalty . . . many would consider it nothing less than the whispering of treason.

Paul not only wants to redirect their sense of loyalty, secondly, he wants to:

2. Redefine their structure of authority

He refers to the primary spiritual authority in the New Testament church – the elder, bishop, pastor. All three terms are used interchangeably for this one office, occupied by men who meet the qualifications.

Paul doesn’t list those qualifications here like he does in his letters to Timothy and Titus.

So in like fashion, we’ll simply focus on the word he uses for this office.

It’s the word *episkopos* (*επισκοπος*). It can be translated overseer, or superintendent, or even bishop.^{vi}

If you transliterate episkopos, you create the English word episcopal or Episcopalian. And of course, that particular protestant denomination named itself after this Greek term of leadership; and they refer to their leaders as bishops.

Another term for this same office or man in the local church is presbuteros (πρεσβυτερος) which is most often translated elder.

The Presbyterians got their denominational name by transliterating presbuteros – and, of course, they refer to their highest office of authority in the church as presbyters . . . or elders.

These are all perfectly biblical terms.

Maybe you're new to the evangelical church and about now you're wondering if the Baptists have been left out.

Well, we're fine with that.

Besides, we had the audacity to be named after an ordinance. Baptism – and most distinctively, we follow the literal translation of that verb, baptizo (βαπτίζω) – which means “to immerse”.

So the Baptist church is known for its practice of immersing disciples – as a statement of obedience to our Lord's commission to go and make disciples – and baptize them.

Nowhere in the New Testament do you read of infants being baptized – only disciples – followers of Jesus Christ.

Now most often, in the Baptist church, leaders aren't called elders or bishops, they're called pastors.

The term pastor comes from the word, poimen (ποιμην). It appears often in the New Testament but it's nearly always translated “shepherd”.

In fact, only one time in your English Bible is the word translated “pastor” . . . which really bothers the Baptists. It's translated “pastor” in *Ephesians 4:11* as a categorical term for the gifted men given to the church.

Every other time the term appears, it's translated *shepherd*; more woodenly, it can be translated *feeder*; one who pastors the flock literally pastures them – they lead the flock to pasture to eat; which is an outstanding reminder that the highest office of authority in the church has as one of its outstanding

responsibilities, the feeding and shepherding of the flock.

In the last few decades especially, the Baptist church has become more willing to use perfectly biblical terms for the office and to use them interchangeably, as we do in this church.

Every pastor is an elder and every elder is a pastor.

For the sake of avoiding confusion, we often refer to elders as those laymen who serve as volunteer shepherds, and we refer to pastors as those men who are vocational shepherds.

What a blessing we have here at Colonial to have nearly 20 pastors/elders who love Christ and His word; whether they are volunteer or vocational, they deeply desire to see that this flock of God is well fed; they pray for you and have given more time and energy than you could ever know to see that this flock is wisely guarded and shepherded along the journey to the Celestial City . . . and safely home.

If you're an elder in our church and you're in this 8:00 service, stand to your feet. They didn't know I was going to do this . . . if you're home in bed listening online, just raise your hand (identify elders).

The Apostle Paul is recognizing in his opening comments the spiritual leadership of the church.

In other words, the ultimate human authority for these Roman citizens wasn't Caesar. While the believers would be informed that they should respect the officers of the law and their government leaders – giving honor and custom and tax to whom it was due; while they were to pray for their political and legal authorities and desire their well-being, the church fully understood that their spiritual direction and leadership would be found in the assembly, directed by their shepherds who in turn, represented the Chief Shepherd of the church, Jesus Christ.

Even this idea would have been treasonous . . . that a body of believers would submit to spiritual leaders and possibly give *their* counsel greater priority than the counsel of Rome was – and would become – threatening to the Roman Empire.

We're living more and more in a day where your teachers in school and the legal parameters in the

community and the political and governmental leaders are counseling and urging and approving and requiring in action and attitude their message – and it runs directly counter to the message of your spiritual shepherds as they teach the word of God.

Which means those who are in leadership will be viewed more and more as a threat and an obstacle to the good of society and those who follow their spiritual overseers will also be marginalized and even suffer.

Like the church in China today – and of course, the Sudan and North Korea and Turkey – in fact, all over the world, the church is considered a threat to the authority of the politically correct powers and shepherds often just disappear.

You probably already know this – that in many parts of our world, the gospel is tantamount to treason.

You're either going to call Caesar Lord, or Jesus Christ Lord . . . you can't do both.

Finally, as *verse 1* concludes, Paul not only wants to redirect their sense of loyalty and redefine their structure of authority; he also wants to:

3. Rekindle the significance of humility

Notice the last part of *verse 1* again, I'll paraphrase it – to all the diplomats of Heaven who are assigned to the embassy of Christ Jesus there at Philippi – you are there with your shepherds and, notice, *deacons*.

Paul has referred to the saints, the shepherds, and now he specifically refers to the servants.

We have just affirmed a dozen more deacons – we now have 62 deacons. – do we have any really spiritual deacons in this 8:00 hour? Stand . . . they didn't know I'd do this either or they would have dressed better.

Thank you men . . . what a blessing you are to this Flock.

This term for this second office in the church is simply a transliteration of the Greek term, diakonos (διακονος) – deacon.

It means, servant. Paul uses this term to refer to himself in *1 Corinthians 3:5* – where he writes,

“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? [We are] servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned.”

It's interesting to me that this word is used for the Lord Himself in Romans 15:8 where Paul says that ***Christ became a diakonos – a servant.***

Now, this is not the same word translated slave, used by Paul of himself earlier in *verse 1* and throughout this letter.

However, this word, *diakonos*, in the New Testament was connected to lowly service; in fact it's used in reference to serving tables (Mark 1:31; Luke 10:40 and John 2:5). It was a reference to someone who held the lowly position of table serving.^{vii}

Someone who literally stood as a waiter and made sure that people had whatever they needed at the table.

The term is used for men in *Acts chapter 6* who settled the dispute in the early church by recognizing Grecian widows who were being overlooked in the church, in favor of Hebrew widows.

The deacons literally made sure these widows had something to eat.

Now don't misunderstand. Just because these men didn't hold the office of spiritual leadership in the church didn't mean they weren't spiritual.

In fact, all you have to do is read what kind of men they were in the early church (*Acts 6*); and the qualifications they had to meet (*1 Timothy 3*) which are nearly identical to the elders – and you'll get a different idea entirely.

In fact, there is little doubt that this office required an extra spoonful of humility simply because they were godly, capable men of faith and wisdom; but they just so happened to be men that God assigned to meet the physical needs of the flock – to wait on tables, so to speak; to serve in ways often unnoticed, behind the scenes, often unknown and even unappreciated by the church at large.

How do you treat waiters . . . and hotel maids . . . and bus drivers . . . and store cashiers . . . people who serve in roles that offer service to you?

These men will model humility as servants of the flock.

You see, Paul is inviting the Philippians to follow and imitate those who not only publically lead them, but those who quietly serve them.

And he's ultimately rekindling an appreciation for the significance of being a table waiter . . . showing the church what it means to imitate the most faithful, precious table waiter of all time – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Saints . . . shepherds . . . and servants make up the local church – the embassy of Christ in a foreign land, communicating to their kingdom the news of another kingdom.

Even if their lives and their news might be interpreted as treason . . . it will, for every believer

in every nation, ultimately lead to everlasting triumph.

And we look forward to the day – that great award ceremony day – where our Lord will award every one of His saints with their own unique Purple Heart award because every believer will arrive home, wounded.

Wounded in combat . . . combat of some sort or another; wounded in one unique way or another . . . all wounded . . . but all rewarded . . . and *all* safely home.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/21/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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i Introductory comments adapted from, Life Application Bible: Philippians, Colossians & Philemon (Tyndale House, 1995), p. 17 & William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 3

ii Adapted from Dennis E. Johnson, Philippians (P & R Publishing, 2013), p. 15

iii Adapted from Marvin R. Vincent, quoted in Barclay, p. 11

iv John MacArthur, Philippians (Moody Publications, 2001), p. 15

v Jonathan Leeman, Church Membership (Crossway, 2012), p. 27

vi Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 544

vii Adapted from Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland; General Editors, The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Ephesians – Philemon (Zondervan, 2006), p. 190