

Sermon 10th January 2021 Philippians 1:1-11

Today we start a new series looking at the book of Philippians.

We all face storms in life, some are greater than others, but storms are an inevitability. As I looked back over the past year, there has been so many storms for so many people. So much heartache, illness and suffering

And so, this series on Philippians is quite timely, as we look at how Paul came to terms with the storms of his life. How is it that he was able to say: 'It is well with my soul?'

Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians, whilst in prison in Rome. It was late in 61 or early in 62 AD, and his case had still not come to trial. If we include his two years in prison at Caesarea and his journey as a prisoner to Rome, he had been in jail now for almost five years.

He had been in chains for so long that he was starting to imagine he was going to die in jail. His friends at Philippi had grown so concerned that they sent one of their key church leaders, Epaphroditus, to comfort him.

The more we consider Paul's worsening situation when he wrote his letter, the more we expect depression and frustration to fill its pages. That is what is so amazing about this letter. He isn't depressed and discouraged at all. The big theme of Philippians is that he is joyful on the inside. And I am sure we will come back to this theme later in our series.

But, he isn't joyful because he's mastered the art of positive thinking. His joy is grounded in a proper knowledge of the Lord. We will see how the Gospel helped Paul to understand and live his life for Jesus and remember that it isn't about him.

If our plans and priorities revolve around ourselves, it is very easy for us to lose our joy. But if we remember that the Gospel tells us life isn't about us at all, this perspective changes everything.

As times got harder for Paul, he began to turn his focus more and more onto God's plans for other people. This is Paul's last letter to the churches. From now on he would only write to equip and release emerging leaders like Timothy and Titus.

How we react during difficult times says less about how we view our circumstances than it does about how we view God.

The Gospel has helped Paul to remember that being IN Jesus changes everything. He is happy to let Jesus choose his circumstances, so he still enjoys God's grace and peace in the midst of suffering.

There's a story of another man called Horatio Spafford that I'd like to tell you about, for in the darkest moments of life, he too found hope and peace in Jesus.

His wife, Anna and their 4 children, boarded a cruise boat in New York bound for Paris in the year 1873. Two years earlier, Horatio's business was destroyed in the great fire of Chicago and they had spent 2 hard years rebuilding their lives and business.

This trip was supposed to be a time for rest and restoration. A time to celebrate together. Horatio was delayed by business but would catch up with them soon.

On the evening of Nov 22nd Anna and her children would have knelt down and said their prayers together, completely unaware that at 2 am the following morning, despite a calm and stary night, their ship would strike another boat and rapidly sink.

All the children drowned, but Anna Spafford was found alive drifting on a wooden plank in the ice cold water.

On hearing this devastating news Horatio immediately boarded a ship. Four days into his trip the captain summoned Horatio on deck as they were passing the place where his wife's ship had gone down. But Horatio refused to look down. Instead, he gazed out across the rolling waves and up into the moonlit sky.

There and then, despite the heartache, he began to formulate a simple expression of his faith. A verse that would become a hymn:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll
whatever my lot, thou has told me to say
it is well it is well with my soul.

Like Paul, in the midst of the storms of his life, Horatio, having lost his dear daughters and nearly losing his wife was able to say...'It is well with my soul'.

Once reunited with his wife, Horatio grieved, of course, but then went on to live out their faith....they knew they had been saved for a purpose....

What was it about their faith that enabled them to ride through the storm of life and still say – it is well with my soul?

Here in Philippians, we will go on a journey together – and my prayer is that, for all who are grieving, all who are struggling with illness & loss in these difficult times you too will, in time, be able to find it possible, to say – It is well, with my soul....

The theologian and writer Phil Moore, writes about the three anchors we can see in the opening verses of Philippians, that helped Paul, and I hope can help us too.

So, let's take a look at these three anchors.

Paul's first anchor is his belief in the faithfulness of God. We find this in verses 3–6,

Paul thanks God for the Philippians' partnership with him in the Gospel, because he recognizes, that it has all been a miracle, from the very start.

In Acts:16:12 we read that Paul was only in Philippi a short while ... it says:

'From there we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.'

But in those few days he saw remarkable conversions:

A wealthy lady called Lydia was worshipping God by the river and *'The Lord opened her heart'* to hear the Gospel about Jesus – and she and her household were baptised and there and then they started a small house church. The Philippian church was born by a chance encounter. Coincidence, I think not!

The recount continues with a demonized slave girl at the other end of the social scale. She was set free 'at the Name of Jesus.' The powerful name of Jesus.

A miracle that her owner was less than pleased about but a miracle that drew many others to Jesus.

Then there was the suicidal local jailer who was dramatically saved. God had responded to Paul and Silas' worship and prayer with an earthquake that enabled them to walk free of their prison cell and the anxious jailer was ready to kill himself. But instead, he was given the opportunity to *'believe in the Lord Jesus'*. And he and his family were baptised and "he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God." What a trip that must have been. Seeing God powerfully at work.

And when fierce storms beat against Paul's soul, he drew on all of this, as an anchor. The church at Philippi had only come into being in the first place because of the faithfulness of God. Paul was reminded that it is God who acts, God changes hearts, it's God who saves,

You see, how you think people have been saved, determines how you think they must stay saved. It's not by our efforts, not by our clever words or our kind acts, but by God's faithfulness.

To those who worry about people drifting away from church in these dark days of the pandemic, yes, please try and stay in touch with them, yes pray for them – but remember God is faithful and God alone saves.

Paul's anchor when he heard the church in Philippi was in trouble was to remember that the church had been planted through the faithfulness of God.

We do well to remember verse 6 - Paul says he is *"confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* God is not a quitter. He finishes everything he starts.

Let us remember those times in our lives when God has done great things.

That's a mighty anchor which keeps us smiling when the stormy winds begin to howl.

So, our first anchor – trust in the faithfulness of God. It is well with my soul.

In verses 7–8, we see **Paul's second anchor is his experience of the love and compassion of Jesus.**

It is not easy to love everyone. There are some people who can be difficult to get on with. Paul must have been quite cross with the quarrelling women in Philippi because they were his co-workers of old and really ought to have known better. Every church has people who are harder to love than others and, when the storms of life start raging, loving others can get harder than ever.

and yet Paul says... 'God can testify how I long for ALL of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.'

Our mistake is to strain hard to love **like** Jesus, because doing this doesn't work. Paul tells the Philippians that he doesn't love them like Jesus; he loves them **with Jesus' own love.**

Praise the Lord that we love others with the supernatural love that Jesus gives us. And it is extraordinary. We know we should love everyone, and yet, we know we can't love everyone and that there are times

when we fall out with others... but praise God for his abounding love, and Praise God that we *ALL share in God's grace*.

And what is God's Grace? God's riches at Christ's expense. G R A C E. God's riches at Christ's expense. The Lord Jesus came at Christmas as a baby, but you will see how quickly this year goes and we will very soon be in the season of Lent and look forward to Easter. Christ came to save us, sinners one and all. He died to take away our sins.

Christ conquered sin and death, **for** us.

Christ rose from the dead and sent his Holy Spirit to work **in** us and **through** us. As it says in our John 15 reading 'Greater love has no one than this; to lay down one's life for one's friends.' Jesus says You are my friends ...

Because Paul has God on the inside, he asks the Spirit of Jesus to fill his heart with one of the many fruit of the Spirit. He asks the Holy Spirit to fill him with love, the love of Jesus for everyone. As a result, he is able to tell the Philippians that he loves them all, every one of them, "with the affection OF Christ Jesus."

We ARE able to love others, even those we don't like, but only by a deep understanding of Jesus's enormous love for us, a love that took him to the cross.

As Horatio Spafford lifted his eyes to heaven, on the deck of the boat, as they passed the place where his children drowned, he understood the enormity of the sacrifice Jesus had made on the cross for him. It's a place we all need to come to...My friends never forget the huge price Christ paid for us, for you and me.

That Christ has regarded my helpless estate
and has shed his own blood for my soul
My sin, not in part but the whole –
is nailed to the cross, I bear it no more
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord O my soul

So, our second anchor – remember the love and compassion of Jesus. It is well with my soul

In verses 9–11 Paul's **third anchor** is his **expectation of fruitfulness in Jesus**.

He writes that the more they let their lifestyle be shaped by the fact that they are IN Jesus and he is in them, the more they will grasp God's will for them and the more they will bear righteous fruit in Jesus.

If Paul's joy was based on wishful thinking or on mushy sentiment, it would be quickly blown away in a storm; but it isn't.

He tells the Philippians that they will share his confidence too if they deepen their understanding of the Gospel.

Verse 9 reads 'And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth...'

The normal Greek word for knowledge is gnosis, but the word Paul uses in verse 9 is actually 'epignosis', which means complete knowledge. The more the Philippians understand the Gospel, the more they will share in Paul's confidence that Jesus will make them fruitful.

Do you feel that you cannot be used by God?

Although Paul has personally suffered many setbacks, and although the news from Philippi is not good, he is still confident that Jesus meant it when he said in John 15: 16, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit –fruit that will last.”

Storms will keep on coming, right up until the end of time. Paul mentions the second coming of Jesus, the day of Christ’ twice in our opening verses, in verses 6 and 10 of the Philippians reading because not only did his troubles make him long for Jesus to return, but also because it reminds him that his suffering, is all part of God’s eternal plan.

And as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.* How can we know God’s comfort unless we need it and experience it for ourselves?

The hymn continues,

And Lord haste the day when the faith shall be sight
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll
The trumpet shall sound, and the Lord shall descend
Even so – it is well with my soul

So, my friends, Don’t be surprised when hardship comes.
We have three great anchors to sustain us.

Firstly, we remember that God is completely faithful in fulfilling his purposes.
Secondly, **He** fills our hearts with **his** love
and Thirdly, it is he who makes us fruitful.

We are IN Christ and He is IN us. Grace and peace come FROM Christ and fruitfulness comes THROUGH Christ. To the Glory and praise of God

This knowledge anchors Paul and it gives him joy in fierce storm after fierce storm.

My prayer is that you will know these anchors in your life this year and that you too will be able to say...it is well, it is well, with your soul.

Amen