

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Philippians 4:21–23, English Standard Version.

²¹ Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

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

Proselytizing in prison.

It's widely believed that Paul wrote the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon while he was in prison, during the first of two known incarcerations in Rome. This would have been during the years 60 to 62 A.D., approximately. In the Book of Acts, written by Luke, the same person we believe wrote the Gospel of Luke, we are told that Paul did indeed serve time in prison, and this confirms the reports that Paul himself gives in his letters. Luke accompanied Paul on some of his mission trips and personally documented the spread of the faith out of Jerusalem and into the world of the Gentiles, far away from Jerusalem and into what is now western Europe, literally to the ends of their known world. The letter to Philemon was addressed to his wealthy friend Philemon; the other letters were to various churches. Consider our very brief passage for today. It is from one of those prison letters. Philippians is a letter written by Paul the

evangelist to a church he had founded. According to the Book of Acts, he did this on his second missionary journey, around the year 50. Philippi was an important city in Macedonia and was either built or rebuilt around the middle of the fourth century B.C. It was part of the Roman Empire and located in a fertile area with nearby gold and silver mines. The population was mixed: Romans, Greeks, and Jews, and correspondingly, many different religions were practiced there, with a tiny Christian church. Since the letter is choppy, some scholars believe that it is a blend of two or three separate letters written by Paul. The purpose of the letter was to give the Christians in the city advice on how to deal with growing persecution, how to manage dissent among the members of the Church, and how to help that church mature spiritually. What I have included as our passage are the very last words of this letter. I'll get back to this passage.

From what we know of the conditions under which people like Paul would have been imprisoned, he was quite likely chained to a guard at all times. Often, he was treated brutally. In the Book of Acts, chapter 16, the imprisonment of Paul and his assistant Silas is recorded: ²² *The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods.* ²³ *And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely.* ²⁴ *Having received this order, he put them*

into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. What's true, though, is that most of the time, Paul was probably free to talk to other prisoners, to guards, and sometimes even to outsiders who came to see him. Part of his imprisonment was apparently a form of house arrest; while still in shackles, he had to cover his own living expenses, but at least he could have personal guests. A good part of the reason he was allowed this sort of freedom is that he was a highly educated Roman citizen. But indeed, perhaps much of the time, he was in an underground, low-ceilinged cell made out of blocks of stone. Such cells have been located, and interestingly, one at least had an altar in it. That is the picture on the front of your bulletin. There is very good reason to believe that one of his prisons was the Roman Mamertine Prison inside the Roman Forum, and this is where that picture was taken. The light you see in this picture is artificial, placed there for modern visitors. There were no windows underground. This might actually have been Paul's cell.

But what did Paul do while in prison? Acts ends with a statement that makes it clear that Paul was busy evangelizing while he was in prison: ³⁰ *He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.* In the letter to the church in Philippi, Paul wrote, in the first chapter: *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really*

served to advance the gospel,¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Paul is saying that being in prison has helped his job of spreading the faith. The entire military guard in charge of the Emperor's residence and the prison knows that this man is in chains because of his faith. He has been proselytizing to them and the faithful in Rome in general feel freer to express their faith knowing that Paul, who is in prison, is doing so!

Several years ago, I was required to attend an all-day meeting as part of my duties at the University of Colorado at Boulder. For some reason, rather than holding it on campus, we met in a conference room rented out by the Humane Society in Boulder. The idea was to isolate us off campus, so that it would feel more like a retreat where we could bond with each other. It was a very boring meeting where we were required to play some team building games. I coyly slipped out during one of them and went for a walk. I discovered that the grounds outside the center were being maintained by inmates from the jail. They were wearing yellow jumpsuits and were weeding gardens, picking up trash, planting bushes, etc. There were maybe fifteen of them. I started talking to them, and yes, they were far more interesting than a bunch of professors; during that meeting, each academic was

competing with the others to prove that he or she is the most intelligent, important, and famous. One the prisoners was a man of about forty, I would guess. He told me that he had been living on the street and had gotten in trouble because he was caught sleeping on private property. Somebody called the cops when they saw him wrapped up on a blanket sleeping in the snow on their back deck. He went to jail because he already had a record for sleeping on land he didn't own. He was a happy guy. He told me that he was eating three times a day in jail, had a warm place to sleep, that the other guys in the jail were fun to hang out with, and the corrections officers were friendly. He said that when he got out, there was a job waiting for him, as part of some program to help ex-prisoners reenter society. He said that he was part of a Bible study in jail and that he was in charge of the next lesson, but that he didn't know yet what Bible passage he was going to choose. I told him that the great evangelist Paul spread the faith while in jail. I told him that if he looked at Acts or Philippians, he would find some good quotes. I don't know what might have come of this. I did ask him his name. We'll call him Nate. I figured I had escaped from my faculty meeting long enough and needed to get back. But I did talk to Nate one more time, and I'll get back to that.

But you know, our quote for today says this: ²¹*Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you.* ²²*All the saints greet you, especially*

those of Caesar's household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

There Paul is, ending his letter to the Philippians, casually sending the Christians there greetings from himself, from the other Christians in Rome, and of course, from the members of the Emperor's household who have come to the faith.

I'd like to read to you an abridged version of the eleven verses that come just before this one, at the end of the letter to the Philippians:

¹⁰ I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that you were indeed concerned for me. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

¹⁴ Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. ¹⁶ Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. ¹⁸ I am well supplied, having received the gifts you sent, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

What does this say? Paul is thanking the Christians of Philippi for sending gifts to him. He is saying that while they have met his physical needs, he is hoping

that God will fill all of their needs. He is also saying that regardless of this generous gift, he is okay whether he is poor or wealthy, that his joy in life has nothing to do with his physical situation. While he did very much need whatever they sent him while he is in prison and responsible for feeding and clothing himself, he doesn't want them to feel sorry for him. Paul is deliberately minimizing the value of earthly things. He wants them to value their spiritual lives above their physical lives.

The point is that Paul could have remained Saul; remember that he was a highly educated, powerful Jewish leader. But he was converted on the road to Damascus when Jesus – after having been resurrected – appeared before him. Rather than remaining in the Jerusalem area and living a life of plenty, a life of comfort, respect, and wealth, he chose to throw away everything he had and go on the road. He spent his life wandering, with no permanent home, relying on others to house and feed him, finding a way to pay for his own food and personal items while imprisoned, and always using every opportunity he had to talk to people about his faith. Most of all, he found a life that was far more joyous than the wealthy and powerful one he had left behind. Remember that he had been a Pharisee, raised in a rich part of Jerusalem, educated by famous Jewish theologians, in particular a Rabbi named Gamaliel who was the president of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court. Paul, that is, Saul, was a zealous prodigy, fast-tracked to be

an important man. He was fully literate in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. He must also have known Latin to some degree. He was proud and ambitious. He was charged with pursuing, arresting, and prosecuting Christians. He was a brutal man. But all we know of him at the end of Acts is that he is Paul, and is now in prison, perhaps for a long time, and that he is very happy because he has an opportunity to spread the faith that changed his life. It's thought that he was eventually executed. But throughout his life, as he wandered, he openly spoke of his faith with everyone, regardless of whether those people would be likely to appreciate what he had to say or more likely to want to kill him for saying it. Paul didn't just give. It's important to note that he also received. Every time he identified himself as a believer in the teachings of Jesus, he was lifted up in joy. That's what happens when we share with others what is most important to us. When Paul was proselytizing in prison, we was also being set free while in prison.

After our day-long faculty meeting was over and after I was forced to play a number of silly team building games, and after we had all pretended that we had bonded, we all got to go home. I was feeling very stressed about having wasted a day that I could have used to do far more important things, like working on papers or research proposals, or planning lectures. The prisoners were still out there. I looked for Nate, the prisoner who was planning to lead a Bible study. I found him

leading a small group of prisoners, about a half dozen, in prayer. He looked up and saw me, and he waved me over to join them. As I knelt down with this ring of men, Nate explained that a couple of the men there were not yet believers. I noticed that they didn't care that the other prisoners could see them on their knees, offering themselves to God. I felt a sudden surge of joy and thankfulness. I offered the next prayer, thanking God for bringing Nate into my life and turning a boring, ineffective day into a very beautiful day. I was witnessing a man use his jail time to bring others to God. I was also watching a group of men, most of them young, publicly express their faith, and in doing so, releasing the anxiety that comes with living a Christian life in world that wants us to hide our faith. Please pray with me.

God, we tend to focus on the astonishing success that Paul had as an evangelist. He is personally responsible for hundreds of millions of people living Christ-like lives. We forget that along the way, he was rejected and beaten many times. He was imprisoned. He didn't succeed one hundred per cent of the time, far from it. But Paul was persistent. We live in an age that is a lot like Paul's, where it is often not at all acceptable to talk about one's faith. Give us the courage and the determination that Paul had. Let us never lose an opportunity to bring other people to the faith. And let us feel the joyous release that comes when we no longer hold our faith in darkness and instead, we let our faith see the light. Amen.