

2 Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, 2 complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. 3 Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. 4 Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. 5 Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

6 Though he was in the form of God,

he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

7 But he emptied himself

by taking the form of a slave

and by becoming like human beings.

When he found himself in the form of a human,

8 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

9 Therefore, God highly honored him

and gave him a name above all names,

10 so that at the name of Jesus everyone

in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow

11 and every tongue confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, my loved ones, just as you always obey me, not just when I am present but now even more while I am away, carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. 13 God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes.

- **Common English Bible**

Paul was writing from prison to a persecuted church. This was not one of the better days in Paul's ministry. He knew it was not one of the better days for the church. And so he uses an important word at the beginning of chapter 2- IF. If there is any encouragement, any comfort, any sharing, any sympathy... IF, a condition. Not just any encouragement, but encouragement in Christ, not just any comfort, but comfort in love, not just any sharing, but sharing in the Spirit. He knows that when things are hard people can begin to feel very alone. Even people surrounded by people can feel deeply lonely. This is what we talked about on Wednesday night this week— the difference between loneliness and aloneness. So Paul knows he's talking to people who might not

Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.

be feeling much encouragement, comfort, sharing, sympathy. He's talking to people who are feeling especially vulnerable and lonely. And gently reminding them with the way he's framing his condition that there is always encouragement in Christ and comfort in the love of God revealed in him. Even when we can't feel it, it's there for us. And by the Spirit we are connected to a body of believers that crosses time and space, so we can at any moment experience sharing, connection... even when it seems far away, it's here for us. With that little word "IF," Paul honors how hard life in these bodies on this planet can be, and gently nudges his readers, his hearers to turn outwards and open our hearts to the encouragement, comfort, sharing, and sympathy that is always there, always here, for us.

What does Paul encourage the Philippian church to do if they are able to access the encouragement, comfort, sharing, and sympathy that is there for them? To be united with kindred in Christ. When things are hard, the world seems so unfair, stress is through the roof, we can become very impatient and intolerant of the people around us. But Paul suggests that the path to greater experiences of salvation is through humble relationship with one another. Making space for one another, setting selfishness aside. If everyone seeks to understand what others need and to meet those needs, everyone's needs will be met. This does, of course, require being aware of and honest about our own needs so that others can serve us appropriately— I don't think Paul is asking us to be mind readers! It also requires listening carefully to what others need and rising to meet needs when you have relevant gifts.

Paul suggests that the church will best live into the unity he proposes by seeking to adopt the attitude of Christ, and then he shares what might be one of the oldest songs about Jesus ever written.

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Jesus, God with us, emptied himself, entered into full solidarity with vulnerable and suffering humanity. He pursued this self-emptying on behalf of humankind all the way to the point of a brutal, violent death. And it was this humility, this self-giving love that resulted in his exaltation, being lifted above all, and honored and glorified by all.

While we embody our frail human flesh on this beautiful and broken planet, it is tempting to puff ourselves up and think ourselves above it all or over it... but if we can instead tap into our vulnerability, and stand in solidarity with the most vulnerable on our planet, those who die brutal, unjust deaths, like those 21 people, 19 children included in Texas this week, like the thousands of Ukrainian civilians, like all those under the thumb of oppression everywhere, if we stand with these, we will be standing with Jesus— and I believe we will find ourselves encouraged, comforted, and connected and we might just help one another to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. God in Christ saves us. But we live into that salvation earthside only through our connections with Christ and each other in service of our neighbors.