

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Philippians - The Christian Life: Keep your eye on the goal - Philippians 3:1-21

Uncle Ben was having an enjoyable walk round the farm with his two visiting nephews, Alan and Sam. As they were getting back to the house, he said to them, "There will be a special prize for the one who can walk in the straightest line across the next field to the gate". Alan wanted to show his ability and go first. Being so determined, he carefully watched each step as he took it. Then he stopped to check his position and found he was out of line. He altered course and on various occasions did the same thing. At the end there was no straight line. Sam had noticed Alan's problems and was determined to keep his eyes off his feet. As he crossed the field his attention was soon attracted to some birds flying over the area. Later on he felt scared to go through the group of cows slowly gathering for the milking. Was there a bull or would they attack him? By the end his path was not straight either. Last of all came Uncle Ben. He took no notice of the birds or cows but just kept his eye on the boys at the gate. "How did you do it", they asked as he approached in a perfectly straight line. "I heard the birds overhead and knew the cows were there but I just kept my eye on the gate", he replied.

The Prize

As we look at Philippians 3:1-21, we can see that this is the main thrust of the chapter. Philippians 3:14 puts it this way: "I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus". In all that we do in life, never lose sight of that point to which we are heading - "the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus". What a prize!

Rejoice

We must start at the beginning of Philippians 3. As we have been reminded so far, the Apostle has told the Philippians of the wonderful way the Lord has allowed the gospel to be preached, even though Paul had become a prisoner (Philippians 1:12-14). Then he impresses on them the need to have humility in their lives, just as the Lord Jesus "became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8). He begins Philippians 3 by saying: "Rejoice in the Lord" (Philippians 3:1). This has already been a theme of his in the last two chapters. Why not go back over these and see how many times Paul speaks of "joy" and "rejoicing". He can say this with a happy mind. There is nothing safer to be said to any Christian as a guard against the errors around. "Rejoice..." We are told there is nothing so therapeutic than to be able to be happy and laugh a while. It lifts our spirits and encourages us. The Apostle knew for himself the blessings of rejoicing. This was not just breaking away from the cares of the day in some idle joking way but the whole sense of the word brings with it the knowledge of a Source in which we can be thankful. Rejoice. Now, the Apostle gives that Centre of knowledge - "Rejoice in the Lord". There is no more certain Centre for our rejoicing than the Lord Himself - the One who left his position in heaven to come into the world, who abandoned His place in the world to go to the cross and die there. Yet the One who is risen again, is ascended and exalted above every name (Philippians 2:9). And whatever the circumstances, the Apostle has said, we can rejoice together because of that. Now, he says, "rejoice in the Lord". That is, we are thankful for His work here; for all that He is as God, for His mighty power in and around us. We rejoice that He will be with us day by day. Let us make sure from today that we will never forget to rejoice in the Lord.

Spoilers

Now we need to realise that there are those around who will spoil our rejoicing and will not help our progress to the "prize". Three terms are used - dogs, evil workers, the concision - which refer to those false teachers who also disturbed the Galatian churches and worked such evil at Corinth.

Dogs

The term "dogs" was used to describe Gentiles and their ceremonial impurity, outside of the blessings of Judaism. The Lord used this word to illustrate the general understanding of the way blessing was limited to the Jewish nation, when He spoke to the Syrophenician woman in Matthew 15:26.

Evil Workers

“Evil workers” describe those who are not just evil in character but who appeared to work for the Gospel but, in fact, who only acted for themselves. They are later described in Philippians 3:18-19 “as enemies of the cross of Christ ... whose God is their belly ...”

The concision

Lastly, “the concision”. The spiritual significance of circumcision was lost and these people depended upon a senseless mutilation of the body. These are the teachers to beware of, boasting of religious righteousness but they are spiritually unclean, working for themselves and not for God. They glory in mutilation of the flesh without understanding the true separation through the cross of Christ. “Beware”, Paul says. But we are also told what is true, what is real. “We are the true circumcision, [that is, those who have separated themselves truly to God] which worship God in the Spirit [flowing from the inworking of the Holy Spirit in us], and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3). We can beware of all else and shun all that is false.

Counting all things lost

It may be asked, “Surely we should work to help ourselves to heaven”? Paul was, perhaps, the one man who could demonstrate in his life that he knew what he was talking about. If anyone could have confidence in “the flesh” (Philippians 3:4), that is, to look at what had been achieved in his life and on which he might be able to depend, he could. Everything that was required for a Hebrew was fulfilled in his life. This is detailed in Philippians 3:5-6. He says at the end of the list, “blameless”. In the eyes of men he surely obtained a legal perfection and he has become blameless. But he adds, Philippians 3:7, “What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ”. Just listen to what he says, “I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them refuse, that I may win Christ, and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings [being identified with them], being made conformable unto His death; if by any means [not because of uncertainty but whatever the cost] I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (Philippians 3:8-10). This is the goal to which he reaches out knowing that the power of God would achieve this through whatever means. What a statement! What a longing for a man in prison! All that he was and he had was, in his own eyes, worthless. Nothing, absolutely nothing, must stand in the way of his longing to gain the goal. This is the kind of life for which the Apostle passionately longed. Are we ready to live in this way? Do we have the same goal as the Apostle of old?

Running the Race

Well, we might think, Paul is far and away ahead of us. Yet he says that he does not wish it to be thought that he has already obtained a perfect knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. This was not yet so, but the wonderful thing was that the Lord had apprehended him, laid hold on him for this very purpose and so he is determined to keep his eye on the goal (Philippians 3:12). The Apostle is describing himself in a race. All the things of the past, helpful or wrong, were to be forgotten (Philippians 3:13). Looking back is sure to end in going back. The only thing that mattered was to be “reaching forth to those things which are before”, with hand and foot, with the body leaning forward, reaching forth and pressing towards the goal, that mark on which his eye was fixed (Philippians 3:14). He is looking towards the prize, Christ in glory. The Lord Jesus has taken possession of him. Now he wants, more than anything else in his constant effort, to take possession of this wonderful prize, Christ in glory. His whole life was directed to this great Object. How do we shape up by comparison with the Apostle of old? The Lord Jesus has laid hold on me. He has laid hold on you, fellow believer, in the same way as with the Apostle Paul. We must fix our eyes upon Him as our goal, rejoicing in the Lord day by day.

Maturity

Having given the illustration of his own purpose the Apostle, in Philippians 3:15-16 appeals to his readers. “Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded”. The word “perfect” implies growth into full maturity of godliness. In Philippians 3:12 Paul says that he was not already perfect. In that context he is referring to his Christlikeness in glory. Full perfection will be reached when we shall be in the presence of the Lord. In this world we gain maturity as those “who rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh”, Philippians 3:3. Hebrews 10:14 tells us, “He has perfected forever them that are sanctified”. Then Colossians 2:10 tells us, “Ye are complete in Him”. So that as we come to a fuller knowledge of our new position and of the One who has brought us to the place of blessing, we mature, we are perfected. Now, the Apostle says, “be thus minded” (Philippians 3:16). We need to unite ourselves with the Apostle and the course he has just been describing. But suppose we do not agree with this approach? Maybe we still think that we must make some effort to bring us into blessing. Perhaps the attractions of the world still have a hold over us. Well, the Apostle says, we must start where we are and not slip back. Then we can seek

earnestly the way forward of God Himself and He “shall reveal even this unto you” (Philippians 3:15). Surely the Apostle has weighed up the values of this world in the balances of heaven and has so set his course, seeking only a full appreciation of Christ in his life. How much he desires this for all the people of God. Then, perhaps there are some who have not fully reached this point. So the Apostle encourages those to still follow the same way.

The Humble Mind

The Apostle is continually asking to be “thus minded”, How much we are governed by our mind. Never let us forget the mind “which was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5), the humble mind, the mind desirous only of the purposes of God. This must be our course, too. The hymn puts it this way:

*Not I, but Christ, be honoured, loved, exalted;
Not I, but Christ, be seen, be known, be heard;
Not I, but Christ, in every look and action;
Not I, but Christ, in every thought and word.*

(Mrs. AA Whiddington 1855-1933)

The example of Paul

In Philippians 3:17-19, once more the Apostle urges the Philippian church, and all who read this letter, to follow him, as their model in life. What a blessing that Paul could write this. He accepts that grace, the grace of God, had enabled him to follow the Lord Jesus fully. This was the whole purpose of his life and his living. As we reflect on the Scripture portrayal of the Apostle, we also see how effective was his life. Yet there were those around, whom Paul describes as totally unfaithful. The Apostle describes them as “enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things” (Philippians 3:18-19). What a complete contrast to the upright and totally yielded life he practised. These people were clearly professing to be Christians but, as the Apostle writes to Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3:5, they were “having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof”. Philippians 3:19 says of these that their “end is destruction”. This is clear evidence that they are not Christians at all. Now we can judge that their fleshly craving had never been set aside for the things of Christ; they rejoice in the interests of the “old nature”. They are religious but cling to the pleasures of the world. By so doing they are “enemies of the cross of Christ” (Philippians 3:18). There are, today, religious cults which clearly fit into these circumstances. If we find such “religious” people in the church today, would we seek to follow them? One has written: “There is nothing like the cross. It is the end of the world of judgement, and the beginning of the world of life. It is the work that put away sin, yet it is the greatest sin that ever was committed. The more we think of it, the more we see that it is the turning point of everything. If a person follows the world, he is an enemy of the cross of Christ. If I take the glory of the world that crucified Christ, I am glorying in my shame”. How the Apostle wept at their condition! They were bringing dishonour on the Name of Christ.

Our politics are in Heaven

As we draw to the close of this chapter the Apostle now describes in Philippians 3:20-21 a further reason for having Christ as the aim and Object of our life. We do not really belong here in this world any more. “Our conversation is in heaven...” The Greek word for “conversation” is that from which we get our word “politics”. Perhaps we could say, “Our politics are in heaven”. We are citizens of heaven; we are members of the commonwealth which has its existence in heaven and it is from this vantage point we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:20). No longer is the believer restricted to being a citizen of any country in this world. We have a better one! We are citizens of heaven! We have Christ as our Object; we look for the Saviour to come. This is the grand, final outlook of every believer!

Looking for the Saviour

Yet, there is more. A transformation is to take place. Today we have “a body of humiliation”, one that has been subject to sin and, therefore, will have to be given up at some time. We look for the Saviour to change all that. His work is not restricted to His death on the cross. His saving power brings not only freedom from the power and result of sin but will bring us into fullest blessing in heaven. We will receive a body “fashioned like unto His body of glory” (Philippians 3:21). In Matthew 17:1 we see a picture of His body of glory. Our mortal body will be fashioned like His body of glory. He has the power to bring all this about and, in fact, it is through this power that He will subdue all things unto Himself. There will be no power able to withstand His. This gives a tremendous impetus to every believer to “keep our eye on the goal”, to put Christ first, so to conduct our walk that there is nothing else to take His first place in our lives. This is what the Apostle desired for all those believers he knew. If we are doing that, we will gladly be saying, “we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ”. Another verse from the hymn already quoted says:

*Christ, only Christ, ere long will fill my vision;
Glory excelling, soon, full soon, I'll see -
Christ, only Christ, my every wish fulfilling -
Christ, only Christ, my All in all to be.*

(Mrs. AA Whiddington 1855-1933)

May we, each one, ever look to Him, while we wait for Him to come.

A prayer:

Lord Jesus, we consider what has been done for us, all Thy perfection yet humility in going to the cross, and the tremendous blessings we have and will receive. We listen to the Apostle Paul encouraging us to follow him in subjecting everything to the scrutiny of what would please Thee. May we see only Thee before us and walk to Thy glory every day until the glorious moment when we shall see our Saviour. Amen.

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