

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Paul's City Epistles: Philippians

Today we continue our present series entitled "Paul's City Epistles". In the past three weeks we have considered the epistles to the Romans, the Galatians and the Ephesians. Today we will look at Paul's letter to the Philippians. In the coming weeks (in the Lord's will, of course) we will consider Paul's epistles to the Colossians and the Thessalonians. I trust you have been enjoying these talks, giving a brief outline of these valuable epistles. How good to know that the things which the Apostle Paul wrote in these letters, in the early days of the Church, are just as relevant for us today, the last days of the Church's history on earth. Remember, too, if you miss any of these broadcasts you can listen to them, or download the transcript from our website. Just go to www.truthfortoday.org.uk

Although the epistle to the Philippians is a short one, with only four chapters, we don't have the time available to read it together. However, I would encourage you to read it through, from start to finish, just as you would do if someone you knew wrote you a letter. I know we often dip in and out of the epistles looking at certain chapters and verses, perhaps to study a certain point or subject, but essentially these are letters which certainly were meant to be read through.

Perhaps some background would be helpful before we look at the content of the epistle. In Acts 16, we learn that Philippi was a Roman colony and a chief city of Macedonia (Acts 16:12). Paul had gone there on his second missionary journey, together with Silas, in response to the vision he had of a man of Macedonia imploring him to "Come over to Macedonia, and help us" (Acts 16:9). The testimony in Philippi begins with a godly woman called Lydia whom they found praying and worshipping God, with other woman by the riverside (Acts 16:13-14). The Lord opened her heart to receive the truth of the Gospel (Acts 16:14), and she was baptised (Acts 16:15). Then we read of the jailor (Acts 16:23-40), who was quite a different character to Lydia. But following an earthquake (Acts 16:26) he too believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. What a remarkable change took place in his life! Only hours after we read of him casting Paul and Silas into the inner prison, putting them in stocks of iron (Acts 16:24), we see him washing their wounds and being baptised (Acts 16:33).

So Paul's experience in Philippi wasn't a pleasant one from a natural point of view, beaten and put in prison (Acts 16:23-24), but Paul saw beyond that and rejoiced in what the Lord Jesus was doing through his witness. He rejoiced in the Lord! And when we read the epistle to the Philippians, we read these very words, "*Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.*" Were things much more pleasant for Paul as he wrote this letter? Certainly not, he was in prison, again! Paul was a prisoner of Nero, (perhaps for the second time), but his physical circumstances couldn't extinguish his spiritual joy! His joy was in the Lord, and he rejoiced. In Philippians 4:11 we read he had learned in every circumstance of life to be content. Later he would write to Timothy (his son in the faith) and say, "*Godliness with contentment is great gain*" (see 1 Timothy 6:6). Paul practised what he preached! Even being wrongfully imprisoned in a Roman jail, he could see that what was happening to him was for the "*furtherance of the gospel*" (see Philippians 1:12). I've heard the epistle of Philippians called, "Joy in jail". As Christians, we can have joy in our hearts, in spite of difficult circumstances, if we have eyes to see what God can do through us in these circumstances.

Usually after the initial greeting, Paul's letters can be divided into two parts, the doctrinal and the practical. In his apostolic letters, he addresses any problems or difficulties with corrective doctrine before encouraging his readers to live out the truth. We need always to be challenged as to our walk and our witness as there is little value in knowing the doctrines of the Word of God, if they don't affect our lives. I remember a preacher saying, "Truth not practised, is truth not held" and I think he was right. The Apostle John puts it like this, "*If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar...*" (see 1 John 4:20). My grandfather used to say, "It's truth in boots we need today, more than truth in books". Not that he didn't value truth in books, he certainly did, but the great need he saw in his day, and it is no different for us today, is that our lives should speak of Christ to those who won't read about Him in the Scriptures.

Happily, when we come to the letter of Paul to the Christians at Philippi, there does not seem to be any issues to correct. Perhaps there is a hint that there was a disagreement between two sisters, but this is not addressed directly, only mentioned in a single sentence, in Philippians 4:2. The general theme of the epistle, if lived out in our lives, would resolve any little problems we had with our brothers or sisters in Christ. The well-known verses in Philippians 2:5-11 which speak of the humiliation of Christ, and the exhortation from the apostle, "*Let this mind be in*

you...” if obeyed, would bring an end to all of the difficulties amongst the people of God today. The problem is that we so often do not have the mind of Christ Jesus. The epistle has been called “The epistle of Christian experience”. It records what the Christian experience should be, not that it is always the experience of every Christian. I trust our short study today will both encourage and challenge us to “*work out our salvation with fear and trembling*”. Before moving on, I should just say that this verse (which we find in Philippians 2:12) has nothing to do with working for our salvation. We cannot work for our salvation. Our salvation is entirely dependent on the work of Christ upon the cross. Repentance towards God, and faith in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, is the only way we can receive the forgiveness of our sins. The ‘working out’ is the open demonstration of ‘the work’ which has taken place in our hearts by the Holy Spirit of God.

A suggested outline for the epistle of Philippians is:

Chapter 1 - God can and does bring good out of seemingly bad situations;
 Chapter 2 - Having care for each other - not being self-centred;
 Chapter 3 -Valuing the Lord Jesus; and
 Chapter 4 - Help for anxiety and worry.

Another suggestion as an outline is to consider the way the ‘mind’ is displayed in the epistle,

Chapter 1 - The single mind;
 Chapter 2 - The submissive mind;
 Chapter 3 - The spiritual mind; and
 Chapter 4 - The secure mind.

I personally read from Mr Scofield’s reference Bible, and the outline he gives to these four chapters is, (I think), first class!

Chapter 1 - Christ, the believer’s life, rejoicing in spite of suffering;
 Chapter 2 - Christ, the believer’s pattern, rejoicing in lowly service;
 Chapter 3 - Christ, the object of the believer’s faith, desire, and expectation; and
 Chapter 4 - Christ, the believer’s strength, rejoicing over anxiety.

Now let us go through the epistle, chapter by chapter and pick out the key verses. As I said earlier, it will be a blessing to you if you take the time to read the whole epistle from start to finish.

From the initial greeting which the apostle gives we note at least two things:

Firstly, he refers to himself as a “*bond-servant*” (Philippians 1:1) and not as an “apostle”. Perhaps this is because, as we have already mentioned, there seemed little which required being put right. I wonder if Paul wrote directly to our ‘church’ or ‘assembly’, if he could do so without emphasising his apostolic authority. We also see how he delights to be able to include Timothy as he writes. Paul had a special love for Timothy as we have already said, he was his “son in the faith” (see 1 Timothy 1:2). In fact, in Philippians 2:20 we read that Paul had no one else who was likeminded as Timothy was, whom he hoped to send to the Philippians shortly (see Philippians 2:24).

Secondly, we see clearly how much love Paul had for the believers at Philippi. He remembered them fondly, and regularly prayed for them. Note, too, that Paul’s prayers were for their spiritual blessing. Of course, it is right to pray for those we love, for their health and physical wellbeing, but how often do we pray for their spiritual blessing? Perhaps we are all too often taken up with “*the ‘outward man’ which is perishing, [rather than] the ‘inward man’ which is renewed daily*” (see 2 Corinthians 4:16). This letter was evidently written by Paul after he was made aware of the concern the Philippian believers had for him, probably through the visit of Epaphroditus, and it is likely that Epaphroditus took this letter back to the Christians at Philippi (see Philippians 2:25-30).

In the Philippians 1, Paul wants to let the Philippians know that he is in good spirit in spite of his present circumstances. He was ‘single minded’ and his paramount thought was for the Gospel, which was now being preached even contentiously with the desire to add insult to injury for the apostle (see Philippians 1:16-17). Rather than being discouraged, Paul rejoiced that the Gospel was being preached. I remember hearing of an evangelist who was walking along the promenade with a sandwich board on with a Gospel text written on it. In an attempt to belittle him and make him seem foolish, a bingo caller (with a microphone) called out, “*What must I do to be saved?*” (see Acts 16:30). The evangelist immediately turned round so that the bingo caller could see the other side of his board, and the announcement was made, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved*” (see Acts 16:31). Far from being discouraged, the evangelist rejoiced that hundreds had heard the Gospel message even if it was out of contention.

A key verse of Philippians 1 is Philippians 1:21 where Paul says, *"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain"*. With God as his witness (Philippians 1:8), what a remarkable statement to be able to make! Paul's whole existence was to the end that Christ would be glorified in everything he said and did, and that included his dying too! Although Paul knew he could be a blessing to the people of God as long as he lived, he had no fear of death. He says it would be *"far better"* for him to *"be with Christ."* If we break this statement down into two parts, thankfully we can say that the second part is true for every believer. If we die (and I say 'if' because we look for the imminent return of our Saviour, and may well be amongst *"Those who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord..."*, see 1 Thessalonians 4:15) whilst our bodies may be buried in the earth, our conscious enjoyment in spirit and soul is *"to be with Christ."* In 2 Corinthians 5:8, Paul says, *"We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord."* I know there are many sentimental things said when a person dies, which often sadly may not be true, but here we have the authority of the Scriptures for every Christian, that if we die we will be *"with Christ"*. No doubt that the body of the repentant thief who was crucified alongside Jesus (see Luke 23:32) was taken down from the cross and buried, but the Saviour's promise was, *"Today shalt thou be with me in paradise"* (Luke 23:43). What a hope we Christians have! But what about the first part of the verse, where Paul says, *"For to me to live is Christ?"* Can we say that? What a challenge!

In Philippians 2 we have the example of the Apostle Paul's selfless service for the people of God. We read, too, of Timothy (Philippians 2:19-24) who was *"likeminded"* (Philippians 2:20) and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25-30), who *"because for the work of Christ was nigh unto death, not regarding his life..."* (Philippians 2:27). But great as these examples are, we have the greatest example of humility and service in Christ Himself. I guess we could have spent all our time today looking at Philippians 2:6-8 and the consideration of Him who as God became man, and as man became dead. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son, was made for a little time *"lower than the angels for the suffering of death."* Angels don't die, and so it required the Son of God to become man, that He might *"put away sin by the sacrifice of himself"* (see Hebrews 2:9 and Hebrews 9:26). Remember though, that in becoming man, our Lord Jesus Christ did not cease to be God. And as the risen, ascended, exalted man at God's right hand, He has now taken manhood into heaven and is the forerunner for us who will shortly be with and like Him in glorified bodies. But let us feel the challenge of the Apostle's exhortation to the believers at Philippi, but also to us in our locality, *"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus..."* (Philippians 2:5). If there is strife amongst Christians as they gather it is evident that they are not following the teaching and example we have in this chapter.

Before moving into Philippians 3, just consider the verses from Philippians 2:9-11, in response to the humility and lowliness of the Saviour which led to His death on a cross. We read, *"Wherefore God also has highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* Ours is the privilege to confess Jesus as Lord now and to seek to show His Lordship over us in our everyday lives, but how good to know that the day is coming when His enemies will be made His footstool. All those who blaspheme His name now, and reject His claims upon them, will one day bow their knee and confess with their mouth, that Jesus is Lord. What an answer to the shame of Calvary!

In Philippians 3 Paul reminds the believers in Philippi (which, as we have said, was a Roman colony, and therefore under Roman law), that their citizenship is in heaven (see Philippians 3:20). How often do we find ourselves getting bogged down in the things which pertain to this world? I don't necessarily mean sinful things which, of course, we should flee from, but I'm talking about the legitimate things of life. Perhaps like me you have heard the saying, *"So heavenly minded as to be no earthly good"*. I don't agree with that at all, I believe that a truly heavenly minded person will be of immense blessing in today's world. Although I don't advocate reciting the 'Lord's prayer', a heavenly minded person will pray, *"Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."* A heavenly minded person won't get involved in the politics of this world but will seek to win souls to Christ. A heavenly minded person won't get so taken up with natural things as to forget that they are only here for a short time to serve the Master. As I consider this, I quote a verse which hangs in my study,

*Only one life 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

CT Studd (1860-1931)

In Philippians 3 we have the Apostle's 'Profit and Loss' account. In Philippians 3:4-14 we find that he lists the natural advantages and blessings he had, and concludes that they are *"dung"* or *"refuse"* in order that he might *"win Christ"*. Of course the Apostle knew Jesus as his Saviour and Lord, but what he desired more than anything else was that he might know the intimacy of that relationship and to be able to live here in this world in the power of Christ's risen life, beyond the reach of this world altogether. It comes back to what he said in Philippians 1:21, *"For to me to live is Christ..."* This was the Apostle's constant desire that he might *"know him"* now, whilst pressing on *"toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."* The hymn writer sums it up as he wrote:

Oh, teach us so the power to know

*Of risen life with Thee;
Not we may live while here below,
But Christ our life may be.*

James G Deck (1802-1884)

In our suggested outline of the epistle, we thought of Philippians 4 as "Help for anxiety and worry" or "The secure mind". Elsewhere in Paul's writings, he speaks about the fact that we have peace with God, which is a settled matter. In Romans 5:1 he states, *"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* Thank God nothing can alter that! Faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross of Calvary brings us into a settled, secure position of having peace with God. But in Philippians 4, we find the thought of enjoying the *"peace of God"* and having the *"God of peace"* with us, and this seems to be much more conditional. So how are we to experience this peace?

Philippians 4:4 is key to the chapter, and to the epistle. *"Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice."* Again we need to remember that this exhortation comes to us in spite of our present circumstances, whether they be pleasing or painful. We need to remember that God is good and He changes not! (see Malachi 3:6). *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever"* (Hebrews 13:8). And He is near or *"at hand"* as Philippians 4:5 puts it. An alternative translation of Philippians 4:5 reads, *"Let your gentleness be known of all men. The Lord is near."* I wonder how often are we conscious of the Lord Himself walking with us?

Paul says, *"Be careful [or anxious] for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep [or garrison] your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:6-7). This verse needs little or no explanation, but it is so necessary if we are to enjoy the peace of God and to know the God of peace. In the Gospels, the Lord Jesus speaks about the futility of worrying about things we cannot change. Again to quote an old hymn,

*Oh, what peace we often forfeit!
Oh, what needless pain we bear!
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.*

Joseph M Scriven (1819-1886)

Peter says in his first epistle, *"Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you"* (1 Peter 5:7) and what valuable advice that is!

Well, sadly we are out of time, but just let me quote Philippians 4:8 to close today's message, *"Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."*

May God bless you all.

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