

The Message of Philippians

by Ray C. Stedman

The letter to the Philippians has been called not only the tenderest letter that Paul ever wrote, but also the most delightful. It brims over with expressions of praise, confidence, and rejoicing despite the fact that this is one of Paul's prison epistles, written in Rome during his first imprisonment.

You can find the background for this letter in the closing section of the book of Acts, and also in Chapter 16, which tells of Paul's visit to Philippi and the founding of the church to which he later wrote this letter. You may remember reading of those exciting and danger-filled days when Paul and Silas were in Philippi together. They first met a group of women who were having a prayer meeting by the riverside, and to these women they spoke the gospel. One of them, Lydia, a seller of purple goods (one who dyed garments for royalty and the wealthy), invited them into her home, and her name has been known throughout the centuries because of her kindness and hospitality to the apostle. In Lydia's home the church of Philippi began. Paul's preaching throughout the city stirred up a great deal of interest and reaction. Finally it aroused the resentment of the rulers and he was thrown into jail. It was on that occasion, when he and Silas were locked in stocks down in the inner prison with their arms and heads held immobile, that an earthquake shook the prison, toppled the walls, and released the prisoners, setting them free. Then the Philippian jailer came running in and fell down before the apostle. Thinking his life was forfeit because the prisoners had escaped, he cried out in those words that have been the subject of so many gospel sermons,

“Men, what must I do to be saved?” {Acts 16:30b RSV}

The apostle's answer was brief and to the point,

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” {Acts 16:31b RSV}

Paul later went on to the cities of Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and other places in Greece. But now as he writes to the Philippians, he is in Rome, a prisoner of Nero. Although he is allowed to stay in his own rented house, awaiting trial before the Emperor Nero, he is chained day and night to a Roman soldier. Paul knew his life could easily be forfeit when he appeared before Nero. And yet this epistle glows with radiance and joy, confidence and strength. It is a great encouragement to any downcast or discouraged heart to read this letter to the Philippians. If you are going through times of pressure and trial, I urge you to read this little letter. It will encourage you greatly, especially if you remember the circumstances out of which it comes.

The letter is divided into four chapters which represent, for once, natural divisions within the text. The subject or theme of this letter is Jesus Christ and his availability for coping with the problems of life. The church at Philippi to which Paul wrote was not beset with serious doctrinal problems but only the normal, usual problems of everyday, commonplace existence – Christians who did not get along with one another, and incipient divisions within the church created by certain persons who were trying to mislead others with ideas not quite in accord with the Christian faith. To

deal with these problems, Paul designed this epistle as a guide for ordinary living. It faces the normal problems a Christian has, and proclaims the victory which a Christian can appropriate in overcoming these problems. The recurring theme, running throughout the letter, is that of joy and rejoicing. Repeatedly the apostle uses phrases like, “Rejoice, and again I say rejoice, rejoice in your sufferings, rejoice in your difficulties.” This becomes, then, a letter in which we are instructed how to live victoriously and joyously in the midst of the normal difficulties of life.

The four chapters present Christ in four different aspects. The themes are caught up for us in four key verses that appear in these chapters.

He is presented in Chapter 1 as our life – **Christ our life**. I think you will immediately recognize the key verse of Chapter 1. It sets forth this idea that Christ is our life. In Verse 21 the apostle says,

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. {Phil 1:21 RSV}

I think often times we read that verse as though it were the cry of a man fed up with life, who could hardly wait to get to heaven, who had ‘had it.’ He was in difficulty with pressures and problems and he just longed to go to heaven and get away from it all – sort of a Christian escapism. We usually put the emphasis at the end of the sentence, “to die is gain.” I think this reflects a very common attitude that we Christians sometimes have – that we would like to get away from it all. We do not like living life the way we have to live it, and we look longingly to heaven and sing songs like *Sometimes I Grow Homesick for Heaven*. But that is not what Paul is saying at all. If you look closely you will see that he is really saying, “I don’t know which to choose. To me to live is to have Christ and to die is to gain heaven, but if I had to choose, I don’t know which I’d choose. To live is to experience Christ who is my life. Thus life is continual adventure and excitement and I can hardly wait to live it.” This certainly indicates that he was not fed up with life at all, nor was he discouraged because of his circumstances. The entire context of the passage confirms this. Writing to these Philippians he says, “Don’t be disturbed about me, brethren. You hear that I’m in prison, but let me tell you some-

thing. My circumstances have served to advance the gospel, and my imprisonment has made it possible for the gospel to be spread in Rome as it never has before. And I’m not discouraged; I’m rejoicing. Furthermore, the other Christians in Rome are stirred up and are preaching around the city,” {cf, Phil 1:12}.

An unique evangelistic enterprise was occurring, the like of which has perhaps never been seen before or since, and he tells them what it is. God had designed a plan for reaching the Roman Empire that Paul never dreamed of. And do you know whom he made head of the arrangements committee? Nero, the Emperor! Paul tells us in Verse 13,

... it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; {Phil 1:13 RSV}

If you read between the lines, you can see what was happening. Nero, the Emperor, had commanded that every six hours one of the finest young men in the whole Roman Empire, from the elite who constituted his personal bodyguard, would be brought in and chained to the Apostle Paul in order that Paul might instruct him in the things of Christ. Isn’t that amazing? One by one they were coming to Christ, and there was being formed a picked band of young men, the very keenest, most intelligent, finest and strongest young men of the empire. If you do not believe that, look at the last chapter of the letter, where in the next to last verse he says,

All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household. {Phil 4:22 RSV}

Now isn’t that a unique plan for evangelizing the Roman Empire? But that is the kind of God Paul had, and that is why he could say, “To me, to live is Christ. I don’t know what he is going to do next but this is exciting, this is adventurous, and to step out into the daily adventure of a new experience with Jesus Christ captivates me. I don’t know which to choose, whether to live this exciting life or to die and be with him.” Now that is what life in Christ means.

We know that Christ died for us, but it was in order that he might live in us. The experience of the outworking of Christ’s life in us is what turns life on, and makes it a vital, glorious experience. You cannot read the first chapter of this letter

without seeing how thoroughly the Apostle Paul had discovered this. Even as he contemplates appearing before Nero he says,

For I know through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. {Phil 1:19-20}

What had made the difference? This man had found the secret that God intended for humanity – God indwelling man. It takes God to be a man. And no life is complete that does not have God in it. Paul had found this out, to the glory of his day-by-day existence, and he never forgot it. He lived life to the fullest in the knowledge that Christ is our life.

In Chapter 2 he applies this secret in a different way. Here he deals with the problem of the disunity which was threatening some of the saints at Philippi. The fact was that certain ones among them were quarreling, and there were divisions within the body of the church. This is constantly happening in almost any church. People get irritated with each other; they get upset by the way other people do things; they do not like the attitude that someone displays, or his tone of voice. Then cliques and divisions, which are always destructive to the life and vitality of a church, tend to develop. So Paul points out to these people that **Christ is our example** in settling difficulties and problems. The key passage that sets this forth begins in Chapter 2, Verse 5,

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus. {Phil 2:5 RSV}

That sounds strange, doesn't it, "Have this mind which you have?" What he means, of course, is that you have the mind of Christ, since you have Christ. All right, let it be expressed. Allow it to come forth. Let it show itself. And what is the characteristic of this mind? Paul goes on to tell us,

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, {Phil 2:6 RSV}

The phrase *to be grasped* means "to be held onto at all costs." He did not count the fact that he was equal with the Father – one with God the Father and God the Spirit, one of the three persons of the triune God – a thing to be held onto at all costs. Think of that! The greatest relationship that could possibly be true of any being or person was his. But rather than clutching it to himself,

emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. {Phil 2:7-8 RSV}

That was the self-condescension of Jesus Christ. It was the emptying out of all that he held of value in his life. And this, says Paul, is the mind of Jesus Christ. In your quarrels, one with another, have this attitude toward each other. Do not hang onto your rights at all costs. How apropos this is in these days, when we hear so often about clinging to "my rights" and that we should insist upon "our rights." How different is Christ's example!

In this connection I can never forget the incident that Dr. H. A. Ironside used to relate. When he was a boy of only eight or ten years of age his mother took him to a business meeting of Christians. Two men were having a quarrel – he didn't remember what it was about – but one of them stood up and pounded on the desk, and said, "I don't care what the rest of you do, all I want is my rights." Sitting in the front row was a dear old Scottish man, somewhat hard of hearing, who cupped his hand behind his ear, leaned forward, and said, "Aye, brother, what's that you say? What do you want?" The fellow said, "Well, I just said that all I want is my rights, that's all." And the old Scot replied, "Your rights, brother, is that what you want, your rights? If you had your rights, you'd be in hell. The Lord Jesus didn't come to get his rights, he came to get his wrongs. And he got them." The fellow who had been bickering stood transfixed for a moment. Then he sat down and said, "You're right. Settle it any way you like." And in a few moments the argument was settled. Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who gave up his rights, and humbled himself, became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. But don't stop there. What was the result?

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. {Phil 2:9-11 RSV}

When he gave up his rights, God gave him every right in the universe. He put his problem in God's hands, and God the Father vindicated him. This is what Paul is saying to quarreling Christians – give up your rights. Don't insist on them. He says, "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves," {Phil 2:3 RSV}.

The opening words of Chapter 2 are his practical application of this truth:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. {Phil 2:1-2 RSV}

Paul goes on in the rest of the chapter to show that when anyone decides to do this, God will be at work. It is God who works in you, he says, "both to will and to work for his good pleasure" {Phil 2:13b RSV}. Paul closes the chapter by mentioning two of his co-workers who exemplified these very attributes, Timothy and Epaphroditus. Timothy was faithful, and Paul says of him,

I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare. They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, ... {Phil 2:20-22a RSV}

Epaphroditus had come from these saints at Philippi and had brought a gift from them to Paul, and then had fallen desperately ill. They had heard about his sickness and were troubled. Paul says that they were right to be concerned, as he was very ill, but that God had had mercy on him and now he was sending him back to them. He says,

So receive him in the Lord with all joy; and honor such men, for he nearly died for the

work of Christ, risking his life to complete your service to me. {Phil 2:29-30 RSV}

He gave up his rights. Have this mind which is in you – Christ's mind, Christ's example.

I think that if we would put that admonition into practice we would be different people. There would be no quarreling within churches and no divisions among Christians.

Chapter 3 sets forth Christ again, this time as our confidence – **Christ our confidence**, our motivating power. He is the One who moves us to want earnestly what we ought to want and who makes us confident that it can be achieved. I do not think there is any quality in life in more desperate demand than confidence. Who is not looking for motivation? All the courses on personality buildup are designed to try to give us the spark that energizes, that motivates us, that makes us want to do what we ought to do and would like to do. All this, the apostle says, we find in Jesus Christ. He is the motivator. Paul puts it strongly in the well known Verse 10 of Chapter 3,

that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, ... {Phil 3:10a RSV}

For contrast he outlines the things that motivated him and gave him confidence, or rather, a false sense of confidence before he became a Christian. In Verse 3 he describes Christians as those who should worship God in spirit, glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. But that is the problem with us. We are constantly trying to build up confidence in the flesh – in the principle of self-effort. That is the philosophy underlying all the personality buildup courses – Dale Carnegie, the Powers Girls, and all the others – an attempt to teach us confidence in the flesh. Paul lists the training that he had had in that. He tells those who think they have reason for confidence in the flesh to look over his qualifications. "These," he says {cf, Phil 3:4-5 RSV}, "are the things in which I had pride and confidence: first, in my ancestry – I was circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews" – an absolute Boston blueblood. You can't beat that for ancestry. Furthermore, he says, "I was proud of my orthodoxy – as to the Law, a Pharisee, the strictest sect of my religion. I

was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. And then I was proud of my activity – as to zeal, a persecutor of the Church. And then of my morality – as to righteousness under the Law, blameless. But now,” he says, “whatever these things were to me, I count everything as loss because I have found that Christ could be my confidence. All the confidence I once got from these secondary sources I found to be of absolutely no value compared to that which Jesus Christ gives. And in resting upon his life in me, I have found so much more, that now all these other things are but dross, but dung, but refuse compared to what Christ gives” {cf, Phil 3:6-8 RSV} – Christ our confidence.

In the latter part of Chapter 3 he sets in contrast those who seek secondary values in the guise of religion. He says,

Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. {Phil 3:19 RSV}

But on the contrary, those whose confidence is in Christ do not end with this life, but we look for a city, a commonwealth which is in heaven and from it we await the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, to change our lowly bodies to be like his, by the resurrection power which enables him to subject all things to himself.

Then in Chapter 4 you see Christ not only as our motivator, but **Christ our strength**, our energizer. Not only does he move us to want the right things, but he makes it possible for us to do them. He provides the dynamic that fulfills the desire. It is mental torture to give a person great desire but then not to give him the ability to fulfill it. That is a certain recipe for frustration. So the apostle closes with the declaration that Christ gives complete fulfillment. He supplies our strength as well as our desire. In Verse 13 he declares:

I can do all things in him who strengthens me. {Phil 4:13 RSV}

How practical some of these things can be is demonstrated in the context.

First there is the problem of getting along with others. There were two ladies in the church at Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche. We know they were ladies because in the Greek the form of their

names is feminine. (Of course, you all remember the story of the man who couldn't quite pronounce these names but read them this way, “I entreat Odious and I entreat Soontouchy to agree in the Lord.”) Unfortunately we still have in our churches odious people and soon-touchy people – those whose feelings get hurt very easily and those who delight in hurting others' feelings. But the apostle says, “I beseech you, be of the same mind in the Lord,” {cf, Phil 4:2 KJV}. How? “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” {Phil 4:13 KJV}. That is the secret.

And then there is the matter of worry.

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. {Phil 4:6 RSV}

What a recipe for peace in the midst of anxiety!

How many have tried it and found that it works? Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything – there is a counteraction proposed. Do not just sit there and fret or turn your mind off. Do not suppress your anxieties. Pray to the Lord about them, with thanksgiving, and leave them with him. And the peace of God, which you will never be able to understand – where it comes from or how it gets there – will possess your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, {cf, Phil 4:7}. Christ is our strength.

Finally there is the matter of poverty. Paul says,

Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. {Phil 4:11-12 RSV}

And he passes it on to the Philippians.

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. {Phil 4:19 RSV}

Christ our strength.

This letter embodies the secret of a man who ran the full course, who fought the good fight, who kept the faith. This is his explanation of how he did it. We who live in this 20th century – with its

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perils and problems, its frustrations, its anxieties, its pressures – need to discover and understand this because we have the same One indwelling us who indwelt the Apostle Paul:

- Christ is our life;
- Christ is our example;
- Christ is our confidence; and
- Christ is our strength.

Prayer:

And now, our Father, we ask you to grant that these words will take root in our hearts and lives. May we be not merely hearers

of the word but doers also. Keep us from deceiving ourselves and going away from here having heard these great truths but unwilling to do them. Grant to us that we may begin at whatever level we find ourselves, whether we be young or old, in school, at home, at work, or wherever we are. Make us ready to test these promises, to step out on these mighty truths, and discover with the Apostle Paul the joy that floods the heart of someone who experiences Christ as a living Lord, and the one who can help us to live a daily adventure of new discovery with him. For we ask it in his name, Amen.

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