

Philippians

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Author:

Jack Krayenhoff, M.D.

SBCI, P.O. Box 324, Hillcrest 3650, South Africa
E-mail: sbci@absamail.co.za Tel. 031-7660284 Fax. 031-7660449

Common sense in Bible Study

Lesson 1

A. Introduction

Is the use of common sense in Bible study helpful? Is it even right to approach the Bible with common sense at all?

Some people think that common sense is not suitable for Bible study, because the things of God are spiritually discerned. They think of 1 Corinthians 2:14-15 "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment".

Others think that true Bible interpretation can only be done by people who are properly trained for it – like Greek scholars and pastors. They do not think it safe or possible for a mere layman to understand the meaning of Scripture and that it should be left to the specialists.

Let us consider these objections to the use of common sense, that is, the ordinary mind well used, but without special education.

B. "Spiritually discerned"

What does this mean with regard to understanding the Bible?

1. God is Spirit.

- a) The Bible, inspired by God, comes from the realm of the Spirit. It is not a philosophical treatise, which can be understood by the mind alone.
- b) In the Bible, then, the Spirit of God speaks to the spirit of man. If the spirit of man is dead because of sin, the things of the Spirit make no sense to him.

Illustration: To a university professor, who is completely intellectually oriented, only the world of the mind is important; he is not interested in sports at all. When he sees someone else getting excited about football, it seems foolish and meaningless to him. We might say he is dead to sports.

- c) However, even if a man is spiritually alive, he may be alive to the wrong spirit and therefore still not understand the Bible. This would apply to people with "New Age" beliefs.

Illustration: We are like spiritual radio receiver sets. We have to tune in our spirit to the right broadcasting station: the Holy Spirit. Not everything that reaches our spirit is from the Holy Spirit.

- d) Because the Bible is inspired by God, there is power in it: power to change our

thinking, power to enlighten, comfort and correct us. Hebrews 4:12, "The word of God is living and active" and John 15:3, "You are made clean because of the word I have spoken to you". However, we have to be willing to receive that power, to be open to it, or it will not affect us.

Illustration: An electrical current will be generated in a metal wire when we place it parallel to a wire through which an (alternating) current is being sent. The energy in the first wire is "caught", or induced, by the second one but the first wire has to be laid side by side with the second; if it lies at right angles, nothing will happen.

The Bible, like the second wire, is energized by the Holy Spirit. It will energize us too, but we must lay our wire (spirit) alongside it, not pointing it in another direction.

2. **However, though the Bible's significance and power is accessible to our spirit only, it is still necessary to UNDERSTAND IT WITH THE MIND as well.**

- a) This is immediately apparent when we look at a foreign language translation. Consider, for example, a Chinese New Testament. Is it the Word of God? Of course it is, but unless we can read Chinese, it will do our spirits no good. To receive it spiritually, we must understand it mentally first.
- b) What is necessary to understand the Bible with the mind?
The key lies in the fact that God used human minds to write the Bible. Those authors were indeed inspired by God, but in the process of writing they still used their own minds, and therefore it is understandable to our minds. They were not writing in a trance, taking dictation while their own minds were inactive. (There are some exceptions to this rule, when the writers were in an unusual state of consciousness, but this is always clearly stated in the text. Examples are Ezekiel 3:12-15, or Revelation 4:1-2.)
- c) The way then to understand the Bible is by following the thought-processes of the writer of each individual book. If we know what the writer was thinking, we are following the thoughts that God inspired. God reaches our spirits through the minds of the writers of the Bible.

3. **Our first task, then, is to understand what the Biblical writer had in mind. The way to do that is to LISTEN CAREFULLY and RESPECTFULLY, setting aside our own ideas.**

- a) We have all experienced trying to tell somebody something, but the other person did not listen with care, and as a result misunderstood us completely. Usually it is because they took something we said out of context, giving it a different meaning from the one we intended. Had they paid attention to the story as a whole, this would not have happened.

Many people make this mistake in reading the Bible. They take a single verse and get a meaning out of it which the writer did not intend at all. **Example:**

Romans 14:22 (RSV) reads: "The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God". From this some people conclude that they should not share their Christian faith with others, but if they had read the whole passage, they would have realized that this particular faith was the assurance that they did not need to be concerned whether certain foods were "unclean". They were not reading carefully.

- b) Sometimes people are worse than careless: they twist our words to suit their own purposes. They have no RESPECT for what we are saying. They do not wish to understand us, only to use our words for their own objectives.

Many have used the Bible as a tool for their own purposes. To achieve their ends, they will even mistranslate the Bible. **Example:** Jehovah's Witnesses translate John 1:1 to read: "The Word was a god", instead of "The Word was God".

Clearly, if we have no respect for what the writer of a Bible book is saying, we will never understand him. We cannot understand unless we desire to understand.

- c) Conclusion: Some people take 1 Corinthians 2:15, "The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment", and think it gives them freedom to interpret the Bible any way they like. However, what it really says is that he is not subject to an unspiritual man's judgment – not that he can disregard the intentions of the writer!

C. "Bible interpretation should be left to Bible scholars and pastors"

1. Is accurate Bible interpretation a matter for specialists?

Many Christians fear they are not equipped for it.

- a) This may be because they have read and heard the Bible only in translations that are hundreds of years old, when speech was quite different from what it is now.

Example: In the King James Version we read in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, "We which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep". Today the word "prevent" means to "hinder"; but, clearly, this cannot be what the writer intended. The problem disappears when we realize that in the days of King James "to prevent" meant "to go before".

In Russia many Bibles are in Old Slavonic, which to many contemporary Russians is practically unintelligible. An even more extreme example used to be the Roman Catholic Church, which for centuries used only the Vulgate, the ancient Latin translation, and suppressed translations in the contemporary languages of the people.

The prolonged and exclusive use of such outdated translations left a long legacy of thinking that the Bible was not to be read and understood by the common layman.

Whatever the beauty and literary merits of these old translations are, if we use one of the contemporary (and very accurate) versions, we shall find that a great proportion of difficulties in understanding will disappear.

- b) It is true that only knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, the languages in which the Bible was originally written, can clarify some Scripture passages. However, this does not happen very frequently. Also, without actually learning these languages, we can use the helps in the better Concordances to overcome many such problems.
- c) It is also true that knowledge of the historical and cultural background of the Bible is often helpful.

Much of this type of knowledge is in the Bible itself. We only have to read it with an open mind, and we soon acquire an understanding of what life in Bible times was like.

In addition, we can get a great deal of help from a Bible Dictionary.

2. **The truth is that the Bible was not written for scholars, but for ordinary people without special education.**

- a) The Bible is God's message to all people of all ages and all cultures. Is it possible that He would have caused it to be written in a form that requires explanation from highly trained specialists? Of course not!
- b) It is remarkable that the New Testament was written in Koine – a form of “people's Greek” which was much simpler and less sophisticated than classical Greek, the language of the philosophers and literary figures. It is also noteworthy that Koine was the international language of the entire Roman Empire, as English is today's world language.
- c) Once we read a book like Philippians in a modern translation, it is immediately obvious that this is simply a letter to ordinary believers, not to a highly educated class of persons.

Once we see this, we begin to expect to understand it ourselves, as we would a letter from a friend. The things of the Bible may be profound, but they are not complicated. They may be hard to accept, but not hard to understand; challenging but not obscure.

D. Conclusion

We must approach the Bible with the attitude that it was written by ordinary people for ordinary people like ourselves, and that therefore we can expect to understand it without expert help. All we need to do is read it with care and with respect, and use some common sense principles. More about these in the next lesson.

Memory verse

1 Corinthians 14:15, *"I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also"*.

Teachers' Notes

Some Christians, having been taught and having experienced the power of the Bible, do not understand that this power works only for those who are open to it. They think its power is meant to be like that of a magic formula or a magic wand. Jesus advised us not to "throw our pearls before swine" (Matthew 7:6), and He, Himself, often hid His meaning in parables, so that only those who really wanted to would understand.

Some Christians believe that only the spirit, not the mind is necessary to understand the Bible. They will say about a certain verse: "I sense in my spirit it means such and such", and they cannot be reasoned with any further. They need to be directed to Romans 12:2, which shows that it takes a renewed MIND to really know God's Will.

Common sense principles in the interpretation of Philippians

Lesson 2

A. Introduction

To begin with, read Philippians all the way through.

1. **Philippians is called a New Testament "book", but in reality it is a letter. That makes a difference to the way we approach it.**
 - a) When we receive a letter, do we read it in small portions, one a day? Of course we do not; we read it all the way through.
 - b) Of course, if there is a great deal of content in the letter, or we do not understand it completely, we read it again, paying attention to the details. We certainly need to do this with Philippians, because there are so many riches in it. We need time to absorb it all.
2. **Not only is it natural to read through the letter in one sitting, it is also necessary in order to get the overall picture. Without that, we cannot properly understand the details.**

Example: In Chapter 4 verse 14 we read about Paul's "troubles". We can only guess what these troubles are, until we read the whole letter. Then it is immediately clear Paul is in custody (1:17).

B. We can understand a letter better if we know the writer and the addressees

Illustration: If we open a letter that was delivered to us by mistake, we often cannot understand what it is talking about because we do not know either the writer or the one he is writing to.

1. **In the case of Philippians we can find out a great deal about the sender – Paul.**
 - a) **The Book of Acts** is a rich source of information about Paul. Even if we do not know Acts very well, the cross-references in Philippians will usually refer us to the relevant passages in Acts.

Example: From Chapter 1:1, which mentions Philippi, we get a cross-reference to Acts 16:12-40, where we find an account of Paul's adventures in that city.
 - b) **Paul's other letters** tell us much about his character and the things that occupied his mind. Again, cross-references help us here.

Example: In Chapter 3:2-3 we read about those who "mutilate the flesh" and about "we who are the true circumcision". What is this about? Cross-references

refer us to Romans 2:25-29 and Galatians 5:2-6. These passages explain why Paul so strongly resisted the teaching that Gentile believers had to be circumcised – that is, to be made into Jews – in order to join the church.

- c) **Philippians** itself tells us much about Paul.

Examples:

- i) **Background:** See Chapter 3 verses 4-6: he was a prominent Pharisee who used to persecute the Church.
- ii) **Present circumstances:** According to Chapter 1:12-14 he was in jail.
- iii) **Financial support:** Chapter 4:15 tells us it came from the believers in Philippi and probably from other churches he had established.

2. **Likewise, we can get to know much about the people Paul was writing to: The believers in Philippi.**

- a) From Acts 16:12, to which we are directed by cross references, we see that Philippi was Paul's first stop-over in Macedonia, and therefore the first church he started on his new venture outside of Asia. He must have felt particularly warm towards them. To find out where Macedonia was, we can look it up on maps that we often find at the back of Bibles, or else in a Bible dictionary.
- b) The letter itself can also teach us much about the situation in Philippi. Read this letter as if you were listening to one end of a telephone conversation: by what the party at our end says, by his tone of voice and by other clues, we can often get a good idea of what the other party is saying.

Examples:

Chapter 1:3-5. What was the attitude of the Philippians to Paul? It was obviously very supportive.

Chapter 2:1-4; 4:2. Was there perfect harmony in the church? No, there was some competitiveness and quarreling.

C. What guidance, what principle can we use to determine how Philippians applies to us?

It helps if we answer this question: "What was the purpose of the letter?" If we know what Paul wanted it to do for the believers in Philippi, we will also know how the Spirit wants to use it for ourselves. For instance:

1. **Was it to give doctrinal instruction?**

The answer is no. It is true that Chapter 2:5-11 clarifies Jesus' pre-existence and glory, His self-humbling in becoming mortal man and in dying on the cross, and His glorification after that; but it is clear that this teaching was given in passing, to illustrate a practical point.

It follows that we should not expect primarily to be taught doctrine in this letter. If we want doctrine, we should read a letter like Romans, which was clearly written for that

purpose.

2. **Was the purpose to give us a historical record?**

No, although the letter does give us some information about Paul's imprisonment and possible execution. Though this fact helps us to understand the strength of the apostle's faith, it is evidently not Paul's purpose to provide this sort of information. If we are looking for history, we should turn to Acts.

3. Likewise, we can see that Philippians **was not intended to provide uplifting spiritual poetry** like Psalms, **nor practical wisdom** like Proverbs, nor a glimpse of the **end-times**, like Revelation.

4. **What then was Paul's purpose in writing it?**

If we know that, we shall also know God's purpose in inspiring it. To find out, it helps to look for words or thoughts that set the tone (“**Key Words**”).

Examples:

- a) Chapters 1:18-19; 1:25; 2:17-18; 3:1; 4:4.
Key words are “REJOICING” and “JOY”. Paul speaks of his own optimism and joy in spite of being in prison and facing execution, and he wants his readers to have this same joy.

And indeed God uses Philippians for us in exactly the same way: it inspires us with joy and optimism when circumstances are difficult.

- b) Chapters 1:27; 2:1-3; 4:2.
The recurring point stressed here is on the need for UNITY. Unity in the Philippian church was of great concern to Paul, and God uses it to impress His concern for unity on us as well.

5. **Conclusion.**

The letter to the Philippians was written for encouragement and EXHORTATION. This is what we should look for, and when we do, we shall receive it.

D. Over-all conclusion

Having read through the whole of Philippians with this attitude, we have acquired an over-all impression of Paul's situation and intentions that gives us a background against which we can understand the details. This over-all picture is the CONTEXT.

Memory verse:

(This one is not from the Bible, but it is worth remembering)

TEXT WITHOUT CONTEXT IS PRETEXT

Teachers' Notes:

This lesson, and the ones that follow, is laid out in such a way that the audience can be given the opportunity to apply for themselves the principles just taught.

To this purpose, the teacher can go to the examples and give out the references mentioned there, and then ask the listeners to say what they conclude from them.

This method is suited to smaller audiences (up to thirty) only; above that number it is better if the teacher himself supplies the answers.

The main purpose of this lesson is to encourage the people to explore Philippians (and the Bible in general) with the expectation that they themselves will be able to interpret it correctly, simply by applying their God-given mind. (In lesson 1 it was pointed out that this intellectual understanding is not the same as spiritual understanding, but it is a preparation for it which is absolutely necessary.)

We want to release the students from any notion that the Bible is a book for specialists in religion, by showing them that it is accessible to common sense, with a little help from concordances and Bible dictionaries.

The single most important key to understanding is to establish the CONTEXT of a verse or passage. If the people remember nothing more from this lesson than that principle, they will have gained something absolutely vital.

Philippians – 1:1-26

Lesson 3

A. Greetings – Chapter 1:1-2

Paul always begins his letters by identifying himself as the writer, and greeting the people he is writing to. These greetings are more or less standardized, but yet contain interesting details.

1. Saints.

Paul usually addresses Christians as “saints”. The Greek word is “hagios” which means HOLY, so saints means “holy ones”. The related verb “hagiadzo” means to sanctify, that is, to make holy. What does it mean to be holy?

- a) “Holy” first of all describes the perfection of God, which stands in great contrast to the sin-tainted imperfection of man – Isaiah 6:3.
- b) Because God is holy, any man called into His presence and service must also become holy – Leviticus 11:44.
- c) But man, being by nature sinful, is unable to make himself holy.
- d) How then can man ever be fit for God's service?
Find the answer in 1 Thessalonians 5:23: "May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through". It is God, not we ourselves, who brings about this great change in us.

2. Bishops and Deacons.

Who were these people? Specially trained church officials with clerical robes? Not in Paul's day. Let us see what we can learn about them.

- a) Bishops: The word means overseer. According to verse 1 there was more than one bishop in Philippi, because the word is in the plural. In Titus 1:5 and 7 we see that a bishop (verse 7) is also called elder (verse 5), so apparently the two expressions mean the same thing. Conclusion: in Paul's day, the leadership of churches was in the hands of a number of mature believers, which were called bishops or elders. We call it multiple leadership.
- b) Deacons: The word means servant. How did they originate?
In Acts 6:1-6 we see that seven men were appointed to serve food to widows in the church. These were the first deacons. Next to the elders, whose responsibility was primarily spiritual (Acts 6:4), they formed a group whose responsibility was in the physical realm (though they had to have spiritual maturity also). Today, following the example of Acts, many churches entrust temporal affairs to deacons.

- c) Should our modern churches have the same form of government?
- i) Some groups say “yes”. They hold that the structures and customs of the early church must be our model in everything. They build their teaching on precedents from the New Testament, so they have multiple leadership.
 - ii) Other denominations take their precedents for leadership from the Old Testament. They call their spiritual leaders priests, giving them powers and privileges which lay people do not possess. The Roman Catholic Church is an example.
 - iii) Then there are churches which take an intermediate position. They have single leaders (often called senior pastors), but do not consider that they have special spiritual powers
- d) Conclusion: It cannot be wrong to use biblical patterns as models for today's practices. Certainly God has blessed, throughout history, groups that follow different scriptural precedents as their models.

It is important to remember that precedents do not have the same force as commands. When the Lord commands something, we do not have the freedom to take another course. However, in the matter of precedents, we can be tolerant of groups who follow biblical models different from ours.

B. Paul's prayer and feeling for the Philippians – Chapter 1:3-11

1. What are some words and expressions that tell us how Paul feels about his friends in Philippi?

Verse 3 "I thank God (for) you".

Verse 4 "All my prayers for you".

Verse 7 "I have you in my heart".

Verse 8 "I long for all of you" "with affection".

Conclusion: Paul loves them dearly, as his own children.

2. Why does Paul have such a strong affection for them?

The secret is in verse 8: it is the love of Jesus working through Paul. Paul is strongly conscious of the fact that Christ is alive in him – see Galatians 2:20. It is indeed Paul who loves those Christians in Philippi, yet at the same time he is aware that it is a supernatural love: the love of Jesus within him.

(By the way: what does this tell us about the way Jesus loves you and me?)

3. Verse 5: "Your partnership in the gospel". Why did Paul think of the Philippians as his partners?

Chapter 4:15 tells us: they supported Paul financially. This is a strong encouragement for Christians who have to stay at home and cannot be missionaries themselves: by supporting others as missionaries, they become their partners. Before God, they will

share in their rewards.

4. **Verse 6:**

- b) What does this verse say to encourage Christians who feel they are not making any progress in faith or holiness?

It tells us that we are in God's hands – it is He who will perfect us. If our perfection depended on our own efforts, we would indeed have little cause for hope, but in fact we are God's project – and is it likely that He will fail?

- b) When will we be perfect? On “the day of Jesus Christ”. What day will that be?

Chapter 2:16 gives us an indication: it is the day that Paul's work will be judged. 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, in which the day of Jesus Christ is simply called “the Day”, confirms that one day our lives will be judged.

1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 4:14 tell us more about “the day of the Lord”: it is the day of Jesus' return.

Conclusion: We will be judged and made perfect on the day that Jesus returns.

5. **Verse 7: Here we see where Paul is writing from: he is being confined.**

In what city is he being confined? In verse 13 the term “palace guard” (or Praetorian Guard) tells the story: the palace guard was a military unit stationed in Rome. They were the emperor's life-guards.

6. **Verses 9-11: Paul's prayer for the Philippians.**

It represents his heart's desire for them: God's best. We can assume that this is also God's best for us; what He sees as most important to give us. What is it?

- a) Verse 9a: MORE LOVE (for each other).
Faith is important, joy is important, being full of the Spirit is important, but nothing is as important as the love Christians have for each other.
- i) JESUS stressed it: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" – John 13:34-35.
 - ii) PAUL stressed it: "If I speak with the tongues of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" – 1 Corinthians 13:1.
 - iii) JAMES stressed it: "If you really keep the royal law found in the Scripture, Love your neighbour as yourself, you are doing right" – James 2:8.
 - iv) PETER stressed it: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins" – 1 Peter 4:8.
 - v) JOHN stressed it: "And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" – 1 John 4:21.
- b) Verses 9-10: “Knowledge and depth of insight, ability to discern what is good”. Why is this so important? Is it not enough just to love God and each other? In Chapter 3:2-3 we see that there was false teaching in Philippi, which Paul

considered as very dangerous. Probably he was thinking of this when he prayed for discernment for his friends. False teaching is important, because it means spreading lies about God, and that will affect our love for Him.

- c) Verse 10: “To be pure and blameless until the day of Christ”. We know that on that day we will have to give an account of ourselves. That is a powerful motivation for us to keep ourselves from sin.

7. **Verse 11: The secret of righteousness.**

Under verse 1 we discussed holiness, and saw that only God can make us holy. In verse 6 it became clear that not only is God able to do it, but that in fact He will do it. Here in verse 11, we see how – it is through Jesus Christ. As we open ourselves to Jesus in obedience so that He is truly our king, His righteous presence in our lives actually makes us righteous, just as His loving presence in us (verse 8) actually makes us loving.

C. Bad circumstances turned good – Chapter 1:12-18

- 1. **Verse 12:** Under B5 we have already seen that Paul is writing from Rome, and that he is chained. Is he in jail? But in 2:25 we learn that Epaphroditus was looking after him and that would have been impossible in jail. The answer is found in Acts 28:16: though Paul was under guard (and chained to his guard), he was allowed to stay in his own dwelling, at his own expense. (Acts 28:30). There, Epaphroditus could look after him. Also, it explains his need for money. In addition, it explains why the Christians in Rome were not discouraged by his confinement, but rather encouraged: they could freely visit him (Acts 28:30-31). He was a wonderful inspiration to them!
- 2. **Verses 13-14:** Most people would be frustrated and depressed by being chained to a guard continuously, but not Paul. What made him so positive?
 - a) By sharing with his guards, the gospel spread through the whole palace guard.
 - b) His example inspired the other Christians in Rome to speak fearlessly about their faith as well.

Through this, the gospel was helped rather than hindered, and frustration was turned into success. Paul loved his Lord so much and was so completely dedicated to carrying out his assignment, that he was not at all bothered by his physical discomfort and lack of freedom. Physically he was chained, but his spirit was free! This is true Christian freedom: not that our circumstances are made easier, but that they cannot defeat us.

- 3. **Verse 15-18:** “Preaching Christ out of envy”. It seems that some leaders in the church in Rome were envious of Paul's success in making converts, because they preached the gospel in order to increase their own following, not out of love for Christ. But Paul could see good even in that, and refused to get upset. As long as the gospel was being preached!

D. “To be with Christ, which is better by far” – Chapter 1:19-26

1. Why is Paul thinking of his possible death?

Again, we need to look at Acts, the second half of which is mostly Paul's biography. It shows that he was facing charges for which he could be executed if found guilty. (See Acts 24:5 – Paul was charged with stirring up riots.)

2. What did he think of the prospect of execution?

He was actually looking forward to it, because it would bring him into the presence of Christ!

It was this victorious attitude that brought the persecuting Roman emperors to despair: Nothing, not even the prospect of death, could discourage or intimidate those Christians! It effectively robbed the persecutors of their power over their victims.

Memory verse

Philippians 1:6, *"He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Jesus Christ".*

Teachers' notes

In this lesson, and the ones that follow, many points are introduced with a question. These are meant to stimulate the students to think for themselves, before the answer is supplied. Again, this system works best in smaller groups.

The use of cross-references is introduced. If possible, the students should be given time to use this important tool in Bible study themselves to find the answers.

In the discussion about bishops it is pointed out that we should make a difference between doctrine based on clear divine commands, and doctrine based on scriptural precedent. When believers from different denominations see this distinction, it becomes easier for them not to let such secondary doctrines stand in the way of Christian unity.

In A 1.d the point is made that our holiness can come only from God. Under B7 the same is said about righteousness. Is there a difference between the two? Holiness is first that quality of God that sets Him apart from sin-tainted creation. Righteousness means moral perfection, which is at the heart of holiness. So while holiness includes righteousness, the word stresses the separateness of the holy person from the sinful world-system.

What was the outcome of Paul's trial? Was he set free or was he executed? The book of Acts does not tell us, and we have no other sure sources to settle the question. However, it is interesting to look at 2 Timothy. There, Paul is a prisoner (2 Timothy 1:8) in Rome (1:17) also. Is this the same confinement as the one in Philippians? Look at 2 Timothy 4:6-8. Here, Paul sounds like an old man who has come to the end of his life and expects to be executed. The contrast to his vitality and expectation of release and further ministry in Philippians 1:25-26 is very noticeable. It seems probable that he was indeed released after writing the letter to Philippi, but later in life was arrested again, and at that time put to death.

Philippians – 1:27 – 2:11

Lesson 4

A. Unity – Chapter 1:27

1. When it comes to INDIVIDUALS, we have a fairly clear idea what the results of a strong faith would look like: such a person would be gentle, courageous, truthful, pure, and full of the power of the Spirit.
2. But if you were to describe the perfect CHURCH, what would you expect to find first of all? Should it be lively? Should there be excellent worship and challenging sermons? Should there be an atmosphere of awe and holiness? An effective outreach programme? What do you think would be the most important thing in God's eyes?

Look at Paul's words: what makes us worthy of the gospel of Christ? "Stand firm in one spirit", "contending as one man for the faith of the gospel". Paul's answer to our question is: UNITY.

(Under C we shall see what the secret of unity is: it is humility.)

B. Persecution – Chapter 1:28-29

1. **"Those who oppose you"** (verse 28). Even though Christians bring good news to the world and some receive it, on the whole the world is antagonized by it. This antagonism arises in two camps:

- a) THE UNBELIEVING WORLD SYSTEM, which sees pleasure, money and power as of the highest priority. They see the values of Christianity as a threat to theirs.

Jesus was opposed by the Sadducees. They were practically unbelievers (Acts 23:8) and sided with the world system of the Romans. Jesus was condemned by Pilate as a threat to the secular power. Paul was opposed by craftsmen and businessmen as a threat to their profits (Acts 19:23-27). Peter points out that unbelievers are offended when Christians no longer join them in their pursuit of pleasure (1 Peter 4:3-4), and tells Christians to expect persecution.

- b) But we must also expect persecution from the ESTABLISHED RELIGION.

Jesus encountered His first and heaviest opposition from the Pharisees, who were the pillars of the Jewish faith, in which Jesus Himself had grown up. Paul was persecuted by the Jews wherever he went (Acts 13:45; 14:5; 14:19).

- c) Give students an opportunity to share from whom they experienced persecution.

2. **"Not frightened" – 1:28.**

- a) How can a Christian avoid being intimidated by persecution? The answer is to

love his persecutors with the love of God, “for perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). It is not possible to fear a person if we love him with the love of God. This was the secret of Jesus' peace of mind and lack of fear when He stood before the high priest and before Pilate.

- b) The fact that persecution cannot intimidate Christians is in itself something that causes fear in his persecutors. It shows them that they have no real power over their victims. (See lesson 3, D2.) It shows that love is a greater power than intimidation. It shows that ultimately the persecutors are the losers, the Christians the winners.

3. Suffering to be expected – verses 29-30.

How suffering can be a privilege will be further explored in lesson 6. At this point, let us only ask: does Paul promise believers that God will keep them from all persecution and save them from all danger? No, just the opposite: just like Paul himself, they will have to go through it. But what counts is the attitude with which they meet it. If they consider it a privilege, then they can turn defeat into victory.

- a) Paul himself shows them how this is possible. His being kept in chains seemed like a severe setback, but he accepted it as the will of God, and that turned it into something good.
- b) Jesus' suffering and death looked to the world as the end of His ministry and the final success of His persecutors, but on Gethsemane He accepted it as the will of God and thereby turned a disaster into the definitive conquest over the enemy.
- c) This may be a good time to ask for one or two testimonies from the class, to prove that we can turn apparent setbacks into blessings.

C. The secret of unity – Chapter 2:1-4

1. Why we must be united – 2:1-2.

Paul makes a heart-felt appeal for unity, and he gives four reasons:

- a) “Being united with Christ”. Paul says: "Each one of you is united with Christ. How then could you be divided among yourselves?"
- b) “You have experienced the love of Christ”. Paul says: "With that love in your heart, how could you not love your brothers?"
- c) “You have all experienced the gifts and working of the Holy Spirit”. Paul says: "With those gifts you have blessed each other. How could you now be working against each other?"
- d) “Tenderness and compassion”. Paul loved the Philippian Christians as a mother loves her children. How does a mother feel when her children fight among each other? Paul says: "I hold you in my heart, and I know your affection goes out to me, too, as I sit here in chains. So, out of compassion for me, don't fight. Be at one".

2. **Causes of disunity – 2:3-4.**

a) Selfish ambition.

We often think of the early church as a paradise of harmony and love, but here we see that they had problems too. Were there people who wanted to be elders and deacons because of the prestige of the position?

b) Conceit.

Were there people who thought they ought to be asked to preach because they could do it better than the regular preacher? People who wanted more time on the platform because of their great spiritual gifts? People who wanted opportunities to sing solos because of their wonderful voice? Human nature was the same in Paul's day as it is now!

3. **The cure of disunity: humility – 2:3-4.**

What is humility? It is not having a low opinion of ourselves, but rather having a high appreciation of others. If we can see the good in others, it is easier for us to make room for them. However, if we have doubts about our own value, we tend to be jealous of others and work against them.

D. Jesus, our great example – Chapter 2:5-11

Introduction: This is a very well-known passage. It corrects a mistaken idea that Jesus' existence began as the baby in Bethlehem. Here, in one breath-taking sweep, Paul describes the existence of Christ: from eternity to incarnation on earth, from incarnation to extreme humility, and from humility and death to an eternity of glory and honour.

1. **In very nature God – verses 5-6.**

Other translations use “form” instead of “nature”; the Greek word has both meanings.

Jesus existed before His birth as one of the three divine persons who together are the One God.

Because man is limited to time during his life on earth, he cannot completely understand the nature of eternity; therefore the eternal existence of Christ must remain a mystery. It is stated here beyond any doubt, however, and all we can do is to receive its truth with reverence. After death, when we ourselves enter eternity, we shall be able to understand it fully.

2. **Divine glory laid aside – verses 6-7.**

a) Jesus partook of the full glory and majesty of God. As God the Son He was entitled to this.

b) But God's desire to rescue man, who was lost in the consequences of his sin, brought before Jesus the costly necessity of becoming man Himself, so representing mankind, and so bearing the consequences of sin in man's place.

c) In order to become man, He determined not to cling to His divine glory, but to lay it aside voluntarily.

3. Human glory laid aside – verse 8.

- a) As a man, He could have chosen to be a powerful personage with great honour. He certainly had the ability for that. However, He chose to become a humble servant instead.
- b) His humility was so great that He even permitted men to make fun of Him, to beat Him, and finally to execute Him like a criminal. As He hung on the cross, He had been stripped of the last remains of human dignity.

4. Humility leads to supreme honour with God – verses 9-10.

His self-humbling – necessary to carry out God's will – was reason for God to raise Him up to a position of the most exalted glory in the universe. Precisely because He was willing to let go of all honour, God bestowed on Him the greatest honour possible.

5. The great lesson to us.

What is the reason that Paul gives us this overview of Jesus' existence at this particular point? His subject is unity (1:28; 2:2).

- a) To preserve unity, we must not act out of selfish ambition or conceit, but instead love each other. We must not be preoccupied with our own interest and success, but also with that of our brothers.
- b) To motivate us to do this, he shows us the pattern that Jesus followed: His love for us made it possible for Him to set aside His own glory, and even His elementary human rights. This was exceedingly pleasing to God the Father, who rewarded Him with the place of highest honour in the universe.

This, then, is the lesson: for the sake of unity, we too must be willing to be humbled and not insist on our rights and our honour. This will greatly please God, who will honour us for it.

6. What enables us to do this?

- a) We find it hard to surrender our rights and honour – it is against our nature. How can we do it?
- b) The answer is in verse 5, which, translated literally, says: "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus". In other words: Jesus lives not only in your heart, but also in your mind. Give up the rule of your mind to Him, and you will find that your attitudes become the same as His. Praise God! He will make us like Christ if with our whole being we say "yes" to Him.

Memory verse

Philippians 2:3, *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves”*.

Teachers' notes

Concerning the Deity and eternal existence of Christ:

Some false teaching holds that Jesus was a created being, but earned god-like status by His perfect life.

Many secular people think Jesus was merely an unusually good and wise teacher.

However, Philippians 2:6 leaves no doubt that Jesus was (and is) fully God. Other passages that confirm this:

John 1:1 "The Word was with God, and the Word was God". It shows Jesus ("the Word") on the one hand separate from God the Father ("with God"), but yet fully divine ("was God"). This touches on the mystery of the Trinity.

John 8:58 "Before Abraham was, I Am". In saying this, Jesus claimed equality with God, because "I Am" is God's name (Exodus 3:14). (This is the reason why the Jews wanted to stone Him – John 8:59.) At the same time, Jesus stated His eternal existence: He was before Abraham. Finally, He touches here on the mystery of eternity, because He does not say: "Before Abraham was, I was", but "Before Abraham was, I Am".

John 20:28 Jesus shows Himself, after His death, as alive to Thomas, and Thomas calls out: "My Lord and my God!"

This shows us why we can never accept any teaching which presents Jesus as less than fully God: only God, and no created being, is worthy of our complete trust and worship. But Jesus is God. Therefore it is safe to put our faith fully in Him, to entrust Him with our eternal destiny, and to worship Him.

Philippians – 2:12-30

Lesson 5

A. God at work in you – Chapter 2:12-13

1. Introduction.

- a) As Christians, we know that our salvation is entirely the work of God: His grace has done what we could never do ourselves (Ephesians 2:8).
- b) This is God's sovereignty. At the same time, we are aware that in life we make decisions: we can decide between something good or something not so good. This means that we can, ultimately, make a choice between salvation and perdition. This is human free will.

The question then arises: In the Christian life, what depends on us, and what depends on God?

2. "Work out" and "God at work".

- a) "Work out your salvation".
We have already seen that salvation is a free gift from God, but what we do with that gift, is up to us.

Illustration: A boy received a beautiful professional soccer ball from his father on his birthday. His father's intention, of course, was that he should go and play soccer with it with his friends. However, instead of that, the boy put it on a little stand in a prominent place in the house, to show his friends what a wonderful soccer ball he had. He had received a free gift, but he did not "work it out".

When we receive salvation, we receive much more than assurance of going to heaven when we die. We receive the power of God to make us new men, but just as one time we decided to receive that power, we must now renew and confirm that decision day by day. Otherwise that power of God just "sits on a stand": we can believe we have it and talk about it, but it makes no real difference in our lives.

- b) "With fear and trembling".

When do men "fear and tremble"? When they are in the presence of God (see Isaiah 19:16).

- c) "For God is at work in you".

Here is the reason for our "fear and trembling": in our daily salvation we are dealing with the living God! That fact we must not take lightly.

Does our salvation mean that at one time we received Jesus as Lord and Saviour? It does mean that.

Does our salvation mean that God will let us into heaven when we die? It does mean that also.

But above all it means that God is dealing with us now, in the present. We may live day-to-day lives that seem very ordinary, but the fact is that the greatest power of the universe, the “I AM” Himself, is at work in us. If we think of salvation only as something that happened in the past, or as something that will happen in the future, the greatest reality of life will pass us by unnoticed: “God at work in us”.

- d) "To will and to act for His good pleasure".

All this responsibility may seem overwhelming to us: “working out our salvation”, being in “fear and trembling”! How can we, ordinary and sinful people, ever succeed in this?

But here is the good news: the real work is done by God. God is at work in us, to will and to act through us. If we sincerely receive His Lordship and entrust ourselves to Him day by day, we find that His will becomes our will. To do God's will becomes less and less a duty, and more and more what we want to do. That is God at work in us!

3. Summary.

- a) Here we have, in just two Bible verses, the secret of successful and powerful Christian living. It is the same secret that got us saved in the first place: simply to accept (but now from day to day, and even hour to hour) God's saving power in our lives.
- b) As we permit Him to rule, we find our lives being filled with holiness and an effectiveness that is not ours by nature. We recognize it is God's. Yet it is ours, too, because our will is now one with His.
- c) How then shall we define our responsibility in this process? It is not to struggle, not to try hard, not to be dutiful. That would be to do it in our own power, and that leads only to failure and discouragement. No, our responsibility is to respond to God's desire to rule our lives. He desires to rule our lives because He loves us. He wants us to be in full fellowship with Him, which is our fulfilment and satisfaction. What we need to do is to say “yes” to Him.
- d) At every turn Satan and the flesh will try to seduce us into holding out. The enemy will not question our decision for God in general any more, but he will prompt us to have our own way in the details of life. He will let us go to church and worship God sincerely on Sundays, but he will encourage us to think that the rest of the week we can live according to our own impulses, depending on our own strength.
- e) When God comes into our lives, He comes to stay. But in too many ways we keep Him in the background. Our job is to invite Him into the foreground, every day, in every way.

B. Like stars in the universe – Chapter 2:14-18

1. “No complaining or arguing”. (verse 14)

By nature we like to complain. The Greek word, like the old-fashioned English word “murmuring” means “complaining behind the leaders” backs. Does this happen in today's churches?

2. “Without fault”. (verse 14)

Complaining and criticizing are blemishes on the church. They dim the light of the churches.

3. “As stars in the universe”. (verse 15)

This may be better translated “as lights in the world”. What makes the Church into a light in the darkness is not primarily the truth it proclaims (though that is very important), but its behaviour. It is our unity, our harmony, our humility towards each other that the world needs to see. As Jesus said (John 13:35): "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another".

4. Paul's pride and joy. (verses 16-18)

Paul feels that his greatest reward will be a united, bright body of Christians. That will make all his suffering worth-while. Even if his apostolate will cost him his life, he will offer it up to God with joy, for it will have been more than worth the sacrifice.

C. Timothy – Chapter 2:19-24

1. Who was Timothy?

Was he, as verse 22 suggests, Paul's son?

- a) Use a concordance or cross-reference to turn to Acts 16:1, which shows Timothy's father was a Greek. Paul was, of course, Jewish.
- b) Also look up 1 Timothy 1:2, which tells us Timothy was Paul's son in the spiritual sense.

2. Training Timothy.

This passage sheds light on how young men were trained for Christian service. Could this method be used today?

- a) Timothy accompanied Paul on his apostolic travels. He had done so in the past (verse 22), and evidently was with Paul in Rome at the moment (verse 19).
- b) Paul sent Timothy off on his own, to act as his representative (verse 19).

- c) In first and second Timothy, we see that Timothy had been given independent responsibility, though Paul still kept in touch with him (2 Timothy 1:2).
- d) This was exactly the same method Jesus used with His disciples: they learned by spending time in His presence, but then were sent out on short missions of their own (Luke 9:1-2). Finally, they were sent out independently as Jesus' representatives, but with the assurance of ongoing contact (Matthew 28:19-20).

D. Epaphroditus and his friends – Chapter 2:25-30

1. Who was Epaphroditus?

Using our concordance or cross-references, we encounter him again in Philippians 4:18. There we see that the Philippians had sent him to Paul with a gift of money.

2. Study this passage to see how Paul, Epaphroditus and the Philippians felt and cared for each other.

- a) Epaphroditus towards the Philippians (verse 26): He longs for them and was troubled because he knew they were worried about him.
- b) Epaphroditus towards Paul (verse 30): He risked his neck for Paul.
- c) Philippians towards Epaphroditus (verse 28): They will stop worrying and will be glad to see him again.
- d) Philippians towards Paul (verse 25): They sent Epaphroditus to take care of Paul.
- e) Paul towards Epaphroditus: “my brother, fellow-worker and fellow-soldier”.
- f) Paul towards the Philippians (verse 28): Eager to relieve the anxiety of the Philippians.

Summary: In passing, we get a snapshot of the affection these Christians had for each other.

Memory verse

Philippians 2:13, “*It is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose*”.

Teachers' notes

Again, this book is not only about the Philippians, but also about how to study the Bible for oneself. It is suggested that time is given for students to use their cross-references and concordances, and also to give them the opportunity to answer the questions that are asked throughout this study.

The practical question is asked under A1: “In our salvation and sanctification, what part is played by God and what by us?”

The answer to this question is made difficult by the fact that at times we can clearly see that it is all a question of God's grace and providence; yet at other times it is clear we have the choice to obey or to disobey God, to receive His grace or to reject it.

A helpful illustration is a gate at the entrance of the Kingdom of Heaven. As we enter, we see a sign: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21). Once through the gate we look back and see this sign on the inside: “He chose us before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4).

Philippians – 3:1-11

Lesson 6

A. Judaizers – Chapter 3:1-3

1. Rejoice in the Lord – 3:1.

Paul tells his friends to find their joy in the Lord, to enjoy their relationship with Him. We remember the context in which he is speaking: the joy of the Lord is the secret of his own optimism even though he may be facing execution, and he wants the Philippians to face suffering with the same attitude (1:29-30).

It is the secret of victory not only in persecution, but in all difficult circumstances we encounter in life. We may be robbed of all earthly happiness and security, but no one can rob us of God's closeness and love.

2. Circumcision – 3:2-3.

a) “Mutilators of the flesh”.

Paul is talking about a problem that followed him everywhere, which threatened his message that we can only be saved by putting our faith in God's grace. He deals with this problem fully in Galatians, and it can be studied in the manual of that title.

Briefly, it was this:

The Jews of Paul's day believed that their standing before God was based on God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:7). The sign of this covenant was circumcision, and it was possible, as a non-Jew, to enter this covenant by having oneself circumcised (Genesis 17:12-13). Once a person became a Jew, he was subject to the Law of Moses.

The first Christians were all Jews, who had accepted Jesus as their Messiah (Christ). However, as they understood the Messiah to be the Saviour of the Jews only, they thought that Gentiles who wanted to be saved had to become Jews first. Circumcision was therefore necessary for salvation.

Paul saw that this was a fatal mistake. He taught that on the cross Jesus had done all that was necessary for our salvation – that there was nothing man could add. It was all God's grace, and man had only to put his trust in that. To say that Gentiles needed to be circumcised to be saved, was saying that what Christ had done was not enough. That would not only be a great affront to God's mercy, but would lead man back into the hopeless idea that he had to earn God's favour by working for it.

To see how serious Paul thought this error was, we only have to look at his very strong language of condemnation: "dogs, evil-doers, mutilators".

b) “The true circumcision”.

The reason God was pleased with Abraham was not because of the physical act

of circumcision; it was for a spiritual reason: Abraham trusted God (Galatians 3:6). In just the same way, God is pleased with us when we put our trust in Jesus and in His death for us. That is what makes us the spiritual and true descendants of Abraham, or “the true circumcision”.

Illustration: To understand why God chose to save us by grace rather than by works, we could describe the Jews' view of God as that of a strict father, who demands perfection from his children. The children try hard to please him, but they fail repeatedly. As a result, they feel guilty, insecure and also unloved. However, Paul, without saying that God is satisfied with imperfection, presents God as a parent (perhaps more mother-like) whose greatest desire it is to put her arms around her child and to feel its trusting love. Even though the child has hurt her through its disobedience, she is willing to bear the pain so that, when the child repents, she is ready to receive it back into her love without first punishing it. (How God can be both insistent on perfection and forgiving at the same time, is explained in Romans 3:21-26.)

B. No confidence in the flesh – Chapter 3:4-6

Introduction: “THE FLESH”.

It is important to see what Paul means by this term. Sometimes (for instance 3:2), he simply means our physical part (here, the foreskin), but in verse 4, when he speaks of confidence in the flesh, he means something different. Let us see what he has in mind.

1. “Circumcised on the eighth day” (that is, exactly as required by the law); “of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews”. In other words: from pure Jewish stock, from the best of tribes, without any Gentile contamination in his ancestry.
2. “In regard to the law, a Pharisee”. The Pharisees were a Jewish party that greatly revered the Law of Moses. They honoured it, defended it, and went to great trouble to obey it. For this, they were greatly respected by the Jewish population (Luke 11:43).
3. “As for zeal, persecuting the church”. In Acts 7:58; Acts 8:1-3 and 9:1-2 we see Paul as a young man persecuting the Christians, with authority from the highest Jewish officials. Clearly they saw Paul as a very promising young man.

Conclusion: here by “the flesh” Paul means his natural, well-bred, ambitious, successful and respected self. He means his natural being apart from God.

4. A good definition of the flesh is: human nature without the influence of the Spirit.

C. Confidence in Christ – Chapter 3:7-11

1. Profit turned to loss – verses 7, 8a.

- a) All Paul's assets: good family background, good reputation and success early in life, he now considers as rubbish.

- b) Why? Because he found something far better: knowing Christ. That was for him the most important and desirable thing in life. As Jesus Himself had said: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 7:3).
- c) However, could he not have come to know Christ and kept his worldly honour at the same time?

Some people seem to be able to have both, but it is very difficult to please God without displeasing man, and vice versa. As for Paul, he had experienced the truth of Jesus' words: "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35).

Illustration: How is it possible to lose everything in life for the sake of Jesus, and be happy in spite of it? On a human level it may happen when a girl wants to marry a man whom she loves, but of whom her parents and friends strongly disapprove, maybe because he belongs to the wrong social class or tribe, or to a different faith. If she marries him, she will be cut off from her family and her whole community. Nevertheless, her love is so strong that she is willing to pay that price. She marries her beloved and never regrets her choice.

2. Loss turned to profit.

- a) "Gaining Christ" – verse 8b.
Paul had lost everything in life, but now he had Christ. He had Him for his constant companion, to give him inspiration, encouragement, wisdom, faith, joy. This friendship with Christ was infinitely better than all he had ever had before.
- b) "Be found in Him" – verse 9.
Illustration: Going back to the bride of the previous illustration: if somebody had been looking for her at her parent's home, he would have been told: "You will not find her here any more. You can find her with her husband". Paul's life was now completely wrapped up in that of Jesus.
- c) "The righteousness that comes from God" – verse 9.
Paul had tried so very hard to achieve righteousness, but the harder he tried, the more he failed. (He wrote about this terrible frustration in Romans 7.) But now the righteousness he could never reach was being given to him as he trusted Christ for it (see our discussion in Lesson 5 on Philippians 2:13).
- d) "Sharing His sufferings" – verse 10.
Jesus set the example: the way to resurrection life leads through death, the way to honour with God leads through humility in this world (Philippians 2). Paul did not seek suffering – he was a human being like us – but when it came he was not surprised, nor did he shrink from it. He did not think God had forgotten him. He saw it as "losing his life" for Jesus, who had found resurrection life through losing His life for others.

- e) “To attain to the resurrection of the dead” – verse 11.
Of course Paul never doubted that he himself would be resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:22). It was rather that he wanted to experience that resurrection power already now, in this life, and he was willing to “lose his life” for it.
- f) Conclusion:
When we were baptized, we acted out our decision to die to our old life, and to be raised to a new life in Christ. In that sense, our death and resurrection is already accomplished; it is past.

When, after our death, the Lord returns, we shall all be resurrected. In that sense, our death and resurrection are future.

But in between, our Christian life is an ongoing process of death and resurrection. Problems and suffering that are the death of some pleasure or hope or ambition always come our way. We must not be surprised or try to escape, but rather accept it as a way to become smaller ourselves, so that Christ in us may become bigger.

Memory verse

Philippians 3:8, *“I consider everything as loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”*.

Teachers' notes

This may not be an easy lesson to teach because everyone, believers not excluded, likes to receive things, but not many are willing to give up things they value. However, there can be no successful Christian living without the readiness to give up things.

Nevertheless, this third chapter of Philippians is an ideal place to teach it, because Paul's joy in giving up the old life for the new is so fresh and obvious, that it becomes contagious. So rather than presenting our daily death to self as a solemn requirement, we must show it as a happy exchange for something better.

Illustration: When we are sick, we do not enjoy the pain of an injection, but the prospect that it will make us better makes us willing and even eager to receive it.

The illustration of A.2b is meant to show that God longs for our repentance and reconciliation. He greatly desires to have us back in fellowship with Him, even more than we ourselves desire it. It is that longing of God for us that moved Him to bear the penalty of our sin, in the person of Jesus. It enabled Him to maintain justice, but at the same time to draw us back towards Himself.

Philippians – 3:12 – 4:7

Lesson 7

A. Pressing on – Chapter 3:12-16

1. “Not that I have already obtained all this” – verse 12.

Is it not reassuring that even the great Paul knew that he had not yet “arrived” – that he was still on the way?

Thank God that He does not wait for sinners to become perfect before He uses them and works great things through them!

2. “Christ Jesus took hold of me” – verse 12.

In Paul’s case this was true in two ways:

- a) On the road to Damascus Jesus met Paul and claimed him for His service (Acts 9:5). Not every believer has such an experience.
- b) But Jesus had already made Paul His own when He took Paul the sinner into Himself and died on the Cross as if He were Paul. In that sense, Jesus took hold of each of us and made us His own.

3. “Forgetting what is behind” – verse 13.

Did Paul feel guilty because of the sins he had committed in the past? Did he wish he could undo the mistakes he had made? Did he consider himself unworthy of God's service because he was a sinner (1 Timothy 1:15)?

No. Those sins and those wrong decisions were all paid for by Jesus on the cross. Any accusation, including self-accusation, had to be false and could come from only one source: the devil (Revelation 12:10). Paul would not listen to him, and neither should we, because through Jesus' work we have a clear conscience (Hebrews 10:22). Some Christians who fall into sin think it pleases God if they punish themselves by feeling guilty. But the opposite is true; it displeases God because it shows we do not believe Jesus paid the penalty for ALL our sins, even the ones we repeat.

4. “The prize”.

Paul sees life as a race, a long-distance race. When he reaches the finish line, he will receive a prize. What is the prize? Was it to finally be recognized by everyone as a great Apostle? Or perhaps to retire honourably from his hard and dangerous career to enjoy a peaceful and well-deserved retirement?

No, Paul knows that he will not receive his reward on this earth. His prize is to be in heaven with his Saviour, whom he loves more than anything or anybody in this life. That will be his great reward.

Was Paul's preoccupation with heaven too great? Did it make him lose sight of the realities and limitations of this existence?

On the contrary. It focused his energies in a marvellous way, so that he was able to overcome those realities and limitations, instead of having to compromise with them.

B. “The mind set on earthly things” – Chapter 3:17 – 4:1

1. Introduction.

Some Christians think: “Paul's attitude is wonderful, but it is extreme. No doubt only such a very zealous man could have spread the Gospel, but then he was a special figure, who had had a special calling. As for me, I am an ordinary human being. I have to get along with non-Christians at work and I have to look after a family; I cannot afford such high and lofty ambitions”.

Let us see if the present passage has anything to say about the question of what ordinary Christians should pin their hopes on.

2. “Enemies of the Cross” – verses 18-19.

Who are these enemies? The Roman authorities? The Jewish religious establishment? Let us see what the context tells us about them.

- a) Paul is speaking about them “with tears” (verse 18). Their condition fills him with great sadness. This must mean these people are very dear to him – they must be Christians, and probably his own converts.
- b) “Their mind is set on earthly things” (verse 19). They expect their satisfaction and rewards in this life. In verse 15 he has just said that believers should be like himself: willing to suffer in this life for the great reward in the next.
- c) Conclusion: “Enemies of the Cross” are people who still carry the name of Christian, but who are now aiming for what this world offers, and have forgotten about their heavenly prize.
- d) “Their glory is their shame” (verse 19). Not only have they lost sight of their true reward, but they are proud of being earthly-minded. Many Christians realize they are not as single-minded as Paul was, but they are not proud of it. They remember that Jesus said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me". They hope, by God's grace, to become better followers of Jesus; to become more single-minded, more focused on heaven.

Not so these “enemies of the Cross”. They have rejected Jesus' way; they have chosen the pleasures of this world as their reward.

- e) “Their destiny is destruction” (verse 19). Destruction is the opposite of salvation. We can choose to respond to God's grace and be saved, but we can also choose to stop responding. When we entered the open gate of the Kingdom,

it did not slam shut behind us; we are not locked in. We still have the option to walk out, though our Great Shepherd would do everything in His power to bring us back (Luke 15:4-5).

C. Heavenly citizenship – Chapter 3:20 – 4:1

1. “Our citizenship is in heaven” – 3:20.

Most countries allow their citizens to have only one nationality. If you want to become a citizen of a new country, you automatically lose your passport of the first.

It is the same with the Kingdom of Heaven. When we are saved and accept Jesus as our King, we are registered as subjects of His kingdom. When we approach the gate of heaven, our documents will show that we have heavenly nationality, and we will be admitted without a problem.

However, while still on earth as Christians, we are already heavenly citizens, and our loyalty is with our heavenly King. We have renounced our loyalty to the world and Satan, the ruler of this world. We cannot have “dual citizenship”.

2. “Who will transform our lowly bodies” – 3:21.

If we die before Jesus returns, our bodies will be resurrected at the time of His return, but they will be glorious bodies, no longer subject to illness or aging (1 Corinthians 15:42-43).

If we are still alive when Jesus returns, that transformation will take place there and then, and our bodies will be like that of Jesus after His resurrection.

3. “Therefore, my brothers my joy and my crown” – 4:1.

a) “Therefore”. When we see the expression “therefore”, we must ask ourselves: “What is it there for?”

In this verse we are told to “stand firm in the Lord”, so “therefore” tells us we have just been given the motivation for standing firm. What is that motivation? It is the fact that our hope, our reward and our loyalty are with Jesus in heaven. If we know that in our hearts then we can stand firm in difficulty and persecution.

b) What does this verse tell us about how Paul felt about his friends in Philippi? He is as delighted and proud as a father feels about a son who is doing very well in life.

D. Two who could not get along – Chapter 4:2-3

Euodia and Syntyche

We already know that there was lack of unity in Philippi, and here we get the names of two women involved in that problem. Think of it: for almost twenty centuries now countless millions of Christians have been reading that Euodia and Syntyche could not get along. We

can imagine how it is in heaven for them, when continually new arrivals meet them and say: "Euodia! Are you the one who was quarrelling with Syntyche?"

Our own names and deeds are not recorded in the Bible, but they are recorded in certain books in heaven that will be opened one day (Revelation 20:12). It is a good thing that our salvation (and the salvation of Euodia and Syntyche) is not determined by those books, but rather by our faith in Jesus. Nevertheless, we will feel much better on that day if those books reveal that we have been sources of harmony, not disunity, in the church.

E. The secret of a happy Christian life – Chapter 4:5-7

1. “Rejoice!” – verse 4.

In Chapter 3:1 Paul spoke of joy as a great strength, and here he actually commands us to be joyful – not once, but twice! What does that tell us about the place of joy in the Christian experience?

It tells us that God intends us to be joyful, that the normal state of the Christian is joyfulness. If we are lacking it, we should not be satisfied. God has better things for us than hopelessness.

Perhaps we think: “I wish I knew how to get this joy”. Paul goes on to explain it:

2. “Let your gentleness be known to all”.

The Greek word translated here as “gentleness” means “forbearance”. In other words: do not insist on your rights, make way for others. We already saw that this attitude is essential for unity (2:3), and now Paul recommends it also as a way to joy.

3. “Have no anxiety” – verse 6.

This is the same as saying: “don't worry”. Again we may think: “this is easier said than done”, but Paul explains how to do it:

- a) Prayer and petition: Place every need and concern at God's feet and leave it there. We know He will take care of it – He loves it when His children trust Him (1 Peter 5:7). Would He do any less for His children than an earthly father does for his (Luke 11:13)?
- b) Thanksgiving: Recognize the care and the blessings God has already given us, and thank Him for those. Earthly parents love it when their children express their gratitude to them, and our heavenly Father is no different. He responds to thankfulness! In our relationship with God, it is primarily God's role to give to us and to care for us; our role is primarily to receive from Him and to thank Him.

4. The peace of God – verse 7.

- a) The peace of God (which is closely related to the joy of the Lord) will therefore be ours when we take care of our part of the relationship, by placing ourselves completely in God's care, looking to Him for everything, and by thanking Him

for all His goodness.

- b) This peace is not just some good feeling: its effect is to keep us safely in our relationship with Christ Jesus.

Memory verse

Philippians 4:6, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God”.*

Teachers' notes

More about Euodia and Syntyche:

Will our sins follow us into heaven? Some people say they will not, because God promised He would blot out our transgressions and remember them no more (Isaiah 43:25, Jeremiah 31:34).

However, there are many references in the New Testament that show a record is kept of what we do on earth, and that we shall be shown the absolute truth about it all.

This will be a time of rewards (2 Timothy 4:8, 1 Peter 5:4, James 1:12), but also a time when we shall be shown the true value of our actions (1 Corinthians 4:3-5, Romans 2:16, 1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

How can this be true if we are also told that God remembers our sins no more? The answer is that God forgets our sins in the sense that He no longer holds them against us, but since He is omniscient it is clear that He cannot forget them.

When we reach heaven we shall see Jesus as “a lamb, looking as if it had been slain” (Revelation 5:6). In other words: He is still bearing His wounds, just as in His post-resurrection appearance to Thomas (John 20:27). These wounds are the permanent reminders of our sins, for they caused those wounds. But would we have it any other way? We are forever tied to Jesus because He bore our sins. Would we ever want to forget that?

Philippians – 4:8-23

Lesson 8

A. Think of the positive – Chapter 4:8-9

1. Why does Paul write these verses at this particular point? Consider the context:

- a) It is at the end of the letter. This makes it likely he wants to summarize what he has said before.
- b) We already know his main concern: unity in the church (2:2).
- c) We also know the obstacles to unity: selfish ambition and conceit (2:3).
- d) We know the prescription for overcoming those obstacles: “in humility consider others better than yourselves” (2:3).
- e) In this context, Paul's intention here must be to say: "See the good things in each other. Emphasize the other's good points".
- f) This may be an opportunity for the teacher to ask his class to reflect a moment and to think of the fellow church member they like the least, and then to challenge them to write down true things about that person that are noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable.

2. “Put it into practice” – verse 9.

How can we experience the presence of the “God of peace”? By desiring it strongly?
By praying for it?

Those answers are not wrong, but Paul gives a different answer: "Do what I showed you. Act on it. Follow my example". Action comes first – the feelings will follow.

B. Giving and receiving – Chapter 4:10-20

1. Introduction.

This is a delightful passage about giving money and also about receiving it. Giving is spoken of not as a Christian duty, but as an expression of love; not as a legal requirement, but as something joyful, flowing out of the concern Christians have for each other, and their love of God.

The right spirit of receiving money is also shown: it is part of the loving relationship of Christians, not a matter of demanding it as a right, and certainly not as a way to become wealthy.

In the following passages, both the spirit of **giving** and of **receiving** will be considered.

2. Chapter 4:10-13.

a) How is the spirit of giving described here?
It is an expression of the Philippians' concern for Paul (verse 10). They loved him and therefore were concerned about his needs and comfort. In giving, it is important that we personally know and care for the person receiving it.

b) What about the spirit of receiving?
Paul makes it very clear he was not complaining of being poor in order to get their money (verse 11). His happiness does not depend on it.

It would be wonderful if all Christians could have this attitude, although being responsible for a family makes it more difficult (1 Corinthians 7:32-34).

c) Twice Paul says he is content. Earlier, we saw that he refused to get discouraged because he was confined (1:12), and also that the loss of worldly honour and success meant nothing to him (3:7-8). Now he says he knows how to be content whether he has plenty of money or none. Once again: Paul is never the victim of circumstances. His secret? Jesus gives him strength (verse 13). Everything turns on his close relationship with Jesus.

Illustration: On the human level we see this when people fall in love. A visible change comes over them: they are more cheerful and optimistic, they hum or whistle tunes to themselves, and though their problems are the same as before, they are no longer defeated by them.

Christians can expect to enjoy the love of Jesus, and the strength that flows from it, throughout their lives.

3. Partnership – verses 14-15.

The word “sharing” in these verses can also be translated as “becoming partners”. In giving, partnership is mutually established:

a) **Giving:** By sending Paul money the Philippians became his partners, both in his confinement (4:14) and in his spreading of the Gospel (1:4). What a privilege we Christians have! Perhaps we cannot be apostles or missionaries and evangelists ourselves, but we can become partners with the ones we support financially. We will share in their rewards and honour.

b) **Receiving:** By receiving the Philippians' gift, Paul feels bonded with them. When Christian workers receive financial support, it means much more than just money to them: it means love and encouragement. When they take that attitude they never have to feel obligated or burdened by gifts they receive; instead, they feel blessed.

4. “Credited to your account” – verses 17-18a.

a) **Giving:** The money which the Philippians gave away was not lost to them; it was credited to their account. Where is this account kept? In Matthew 19:21

Jesus tells us: in heaven (the verse reads: “Jesus answered: If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven”.)

We all know the saying: “you cannot take it with you”, and in fact Jesus stressed this in the parable of the rich man who was piling up treasures on earth, but then suddenly died (Luke 12:16-21). But here we learn that though we cannot take money with us to heaven, we can send it on ahead by giving it away in this life!

- b) **Receiving:** “Amplly supplied” (verse 18a). Paul is a gracious receiver, just as the Philippians are gracious givers. Though he has just said that he was not looking for money, he now tactfully gives the Philippians the satisfaction of knowing that their gift was very generous and provided for all his needs.

We see here that if we love others, it automatically causes us to have good manners!

5. **“Pleasing to God” – verse 18b-19.**

- a) What we give away to others in love also becomes a sacrifice (that is a gift) to God.

This is the truth which Jesus teaches in Matthew 25:40, where on Judgment day the sheep learn that what they did for believers on earth, they did for Jesus Himself.

Illustration: Why a gift to a brother in Christ becomes at the same time a gift to God is easy to understand for human parents: when they see that their children are loving and considerate to each other, it pleases them as much as it pleases their children.

So here is yet another principle that makes giving such a happy thing for Christians: the value of our gift is doubled. Our gift makes our brother happy, but it makes God equally happy.

- b) “God will meet all your needs” – verse 19.
A final reassurance to the givers: there is no need to worry that because of their gifts they will not have enough left for themselves. What they have given to Paul they have given to God, and He, from His glorious riches, will make sure all their needs are met.

Do we catch the joy and the light-heartedness of Christian giving? Let us make sure we always give out of the abundant supply we have in the love and the riches of God. That is so much better than to give with reluctance, out of a sense of duty.

Memory verse

2 Corinthians 9:7, *"Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver"*.

(This verse is not found in Philippians, but it summarizes exactly what Paul is saying there.)

Teachers' notes

1. "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (4:13). This verse is sometimes used unwisely to suggest to defeated Christians that if they would only rely more on God, they would not have the problems they are complaining about. While this may be true in itself, it usually does not encourage a struggling Christian but rather makes him feel condemned.

To a person who feels condemned by this verse we should point out that:

- a) The context of the verse speaks about being content equally with having plenty of money and with poverty. Paul does not say in general that no problems ever bother him. In fact his strong language in 3:2, for example, suggests that certain things were big problems to him.
 - b) The context also makes it clear that Paul does not intend to condemn anybody. On the contrary, he is encouraging people
2. "Credited to your account" (4:17). We use this passage to suggest that we can send money ahead to the Bank of Heaven. To make sure poor people do not feel discouraged by this (because they have little money to give), it may be wise to refer to Mark 12:41-44, which speaks of the poor widow who, with her small copper coins, put more into the treasury than the rich people.
 3. "God will meet all your needs" (4:19). In order to motivate people to give, some teachers say that it is financially to our advantage to give, because God will make us even wealthier as a reward. This is usually based on Luke 6:38 "Give, and it will be given to you" and 2 Corinthians 9:11 "You will be made rich in every way".

It is true that Christians never have to regret being generous, because God blesses them for it. However, we must be very careful not to tell people to give money in order to get more money back. This would encourage materialism. Jesus says very clearly and frequently that riches are spiritually dangerous. Some examples: Matthew 6:19-21, 13:22, 19:23-24; Mark 4:19; Luke 1:53, 6:24, 12:15; 16:19-26; 18:18-23.

It would be even worse to suggest that poverty is evidence that God does not bless. Jesus says that it is the poor that are blessed (Luke 6:20), and set us an example of poverty Himself (Luke 9:58).

The right Christian attitude about money is not to be absorbed by it, nor to be anxious about it (Matthew 6:25-34), but to be generous, in the assurance that God will be pleased and will enrich us for it in every way – not just materially (2 Corinthians 9:11).