

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## A Look at Philippians: The Knowledge of Christ - Philippians 3:1-21

I well remember many of the delightful little hymns that we sang in our local Sunday School when I was little more than a toddler. Simple words, but expressing most profound spiritual truths. Among my many favourites, one included these lovely words:

*In truth and grace I want to grow  
Like Jesus day by day;  
And scatter sunshine where I go,  
Along my pilgrim way.*

And then the rousing chorus:

*Like Jesus, like Jesus,  
I want to be like Jesus;  
I love Him so, I want to grow  
Like Jesus day by day.*

*(Ida Scott Taylor 1820-1915)*

If, in those early days, I had been introduced to Philippians 3, I would probably have assumed that the writer, the Apostle Paul, had been a scholar at the same Sunday School as me. Ah! The innocence of youth!

The question frequently arises, "Am I a normal Christian?" Sometimes, as we read the Scriptures, we might get the impression that certain parts are only for "special" people - high fliers, specially gifted. In fact, all scripture is for the attention and response of ordinary Christians, you and me. Not "average" in any arithmetical sense. No! No! The issue is this. What sort of life should be lived by all those who have personally confessed the Name of Christ as their Lord and Saviour? Philippians 3 deals with this in a very sweet way.

Philippians 2 traces the path of Christ Himself, the supreme example of everything that is good, as he lived here in this world. Philippians 3 traces the proper path of the earnest Christian through the same world. Warnings are given about things that the devil would use as he seeks to prevent believers from shining as lights in the world (Philippians 2:15), holding forth the word of life (Philippians 2:16). Paul also includes a brief autobiographical sketch (Philippians 3:7-10). He doesn't press any exhortation or challenge on anyone else that he hasn't faced up to himself.

The word joy and its synonyms are like threads of a golden cord, or watermark, running through the whole Epistle, occurring at least 17 times in the text. Paul is very careful to begin in Philippians 1 by setting the Lord before us as the only One in Whom true joy is found. The Apostle had already been in prison for some time. He was about to be tried for his life. But, whatever his personal circumstances he can say, "Rejoice in the Lord" (Philippians 3:1). The joy Paul speaks of here is not dependent upon or affected by circumstances. He is content to tell the Philippians this same thing time and time again. He knows it is for their benefit and stability. Christian joy rides high above the waves and billows of our ever-changing lives.

Philippians 3:2 reminds us that we need to be aware that there are those around who might spoil our joy. They can impede our progress toward the "prize" which is a highlight of the chapter (Philippians 3:14). Three terms are used for these terrible people. Dogs, evil workers, and the concision. They were false teachers who undermined the assurance of simple Christians. They introduced elements that suggest that the work of Christ is not in itself sufficient to secure and maintain a full salvation. The great danger was that in many ways they appeared to be true believers on the Lord Jesus Christ. However, their teaching and their actions were clearly contrary to the true Christian Gospel given in the Holy Scriptures. Paul says plainly, "Have nothing at all to do with them."

In contrast to the systems of these false teachers, Paul sets before us in Philippians 3:3 the outstanding features that mark true Christians. True believers refuse the theory that natural qualities, however attractive, can in themselves contribute in any way to the work of God. They boast, or glory, in Christ Jesus. They have no confidence in the flesh.

They accept God's condemnation of the flesh, our old nature. They put their trust in God. They find their all in Christ. They have the capacity to worship by the Spirit of God. Theirs is true, spiritual worship, not mere repetitive ceremonies.

True Christians do not pride themselves in their personal attainments, their cultural background, or their faithful maintenance of sacraments. They do not expect any good to come from the old nature they inherited from Adam. They are therefore not disappointed when they find none. Prior to his Damascus road experience (Acts 9:1-9), Paul had imagined himself to be outstandingly good (Philippians 3:3-11). Quite suddenly, he discovered himself to be outrageously wrong. How grateful he was that the Lord had led him out of that attitude and into the full revelation, liberty and joy of Christianity proper.

Paul provides a self-painted portrait of himself as a Pharisee. If anyone could have confidence in "the flesh", that is, to look at what had been achieved in his life and on which he might be able to depend for spiritual blessing, Paul could. Relatively speaking, everything that could be demanded from a religious Hebrew was fulfilled in his life. This is detailed in Philippians 3:5-6, in which He gives seven reasons why he might have confidence in what he himself had done. At the end of the list, he pronounces himself "blameless". In the eyes of men, he had surely done enough to satisfy the valid claims of God.

I do not think that we could ever find a more significant profit and loss account than Paul gives in Philippians 3:7-9. Having summed up all the many things that could be said in his favour, he says in Philippians 3:7, "What things were gain to me [as a natural man], those I counted loss for Christ". Why? "In comparison with what I found when Christ found me!" Just listen to what he goes on to say. "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them refuse, that I may win Christ, and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."

The assessment he had made when he first came to Christ, over 30 years previously, is repeated now with renewed emphasis. He updates his initial conviction from "counted" or "did count" to "do count". He upgrades his assessment from "these things" to "all things". It is a personal, individual assessment of the One he speaks of as Christ Jesus **my** Lord. It was one thing to count all things loss (Philippians 3:7), quite another to suffer the loss of all things (Philippians 3:8). In Paul's case, he was not unduly worried to suffer the loss of all things, for he had already esteemed everything as loss. Moreover, in Christ he had infinite gain, in comparison with which all else was but waste or refuse (Philippians 3:8). He then tells us of other gains that he had obtained when he accepted Christ. Seven more, making eight in all! They are well worth following through. The eighth is the resurrection out from among the dead (Philippians 3:11). What he had gained in Christ far outweighed what he had given up for Christ. But, unless Christ had risen out from among the dead, none of them would have been available to Paul.

The order of the words in Philippians 3:10 is deeply significant. Paul's ambition was to model himself completely, stage by stage, on the pattern laid down by his blessed Lord. He was not only willing, but zealous; to suffer as Jesus had suffered. He was anxious to die as Jesus had died, realising at the same time that only the death of Jesus could put away our sins.

Furthermore, He was thrilled with the expectation to be raised out from among the dead as Jesus had been raised. Then to go to heaven as Christ had gone to heaven, to be with and like his beloved Lord forever! Until that happy sequence of events came about, he wished to be able to live on earth as Jesus had lived, to the glory of God, and as an example to any who observed him. The historical order in the Lord's case was first of all sufferings, then death, and, after that, resurrection. With Paul, the first reference is to resurrection. Why? Because neither Paul, nor any of us, can contemplate achieving anything as a Christian, save as we are fortified in the power of His resurrection.

How could he do it? By what power? There is but one! The power that raised up Jesus our Lord out from among the dead! The greatest display of power the universe has ever seen (Ephesians 1:19-20). That same power works in believers now. It empowers them to walk in the same moral path that Jesus did. Paul personally would gladly follow in that path. He realised that he is not yet at the end of that path. Glory with Christ above! Fully assimilated to his Lord and Master, spirit, soul and body! He had not yet reached that goal.

Long before, Christ had taken hold of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-9). Having seen Him first of all in heaven, Paul had ever since then had the burning desire to get to know Him better, day by day (Philippians 3:12). For what purpose? That Paul might thereafter be a pattern-saint! That God might show through him what Christ can do with and in a human life on earth! Then, when this life is over, to be with Christ, and like Christ, in heaven above, for evermore! That was his goal, his target in life.

"One thing I do" (Philippians 3:13). A single purpose in life! Paul concentrated on that one thing - to press on toward the mark and reach a glorified Christ. To what extent do we follow his example? If we do, we shall then be enabled,

with God's help, to keep the old nature in check. To allow, too, and encourage the new nature to express itself. We shall live not for self, but for Christ. We shall live increasingly in His moral likeness. Certainly, we shall never achieve sinless perfection in this life. However, with God's help, and in the power of the Holy Spirit Who dwells within us, our motives, and our lives too, can follow the pattern laid down. Perfectly, first of all, by Christ Himself! Then, in his own measure, by the Apostle Paul, as a very good example for us to follow.

In Philippians 3:14, we come to the practical climax of the chapter. "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus". In all that we do in life, we must never lose sight of that point to which we are heading - "the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus". What a prize! So, whatever happens, we must keep our eye on that goal, and that prize.

Philippians 3:15-16 challenge those who are recognisably spiritually mature. "Let us therefore, as many as are mature, be thus minded". This is not only for the Apostle Paul. It is the way of life for all of us who would call ourselves committed Christians. Paul has been led to lay down the path for everyone who can say, "The Son of God loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Let us not shirk the responsibility to be true to our Lord and Master. The very best testimony any of us can give to the power of Christ is to follow the pattern of His life over again, to reproduce the moral features of it in our own lives.

Paul could say to the Philippians as he did to the Ephesians at the close of his ministry to them, "I have showed you and taught you..." (Acts 20:20). In Philippians 3:17-19, once more the Apostle urges the Philippian church, and all who read this letter, to follow him, as their role model in life. What a blessing that Paul could write this. He accepts that grace, the grace of God, had enabled him to follow the Lord Jesus fully. This was the whole purpose of his life and his living. He was in a good position to encourage his readers to do the same.

It is a happy thing when a servant of God is so assured that he is in the path marked out for him by God that he can exhort and encourage others to walk in that same path with him. Paul is careful to include others with himself. He speaks of other mature Christians as joint-followers - those who keep in step and keep rank, living a good example for less mature believers to follow (Philippians 3:17). As Paul and his companions have given a pattern to us, so should we be a pattern to future generations, until Jesus comes again.

By way of contrast, he found it necessary to refer also in Philippians 3:19 to the many, even amongst those who would claim to be Christians - who mind earthly things - "things below". They were bringing dishonour on the Name of Christ. Their lives were self-centred, earth-centred, rather than Christ-centred and heaven-centred. These are denounced fearlessly, yet with great sorrow. Paul was not being vindictive. He was showing a commendable spirit of compassionate grief.

Philippi was a Roman enclave. It was a miniature Rome, planted in Macedonia, populated largely by former Roman soldiers and their families. They had been granted full Roman citizenship, with good pensions, enjoying the privileges and protection of Rome. They had a dignity to uphold, even though they were remote from their capital city of Rome. Paul uses their unique position as a figure of the heavenly citizenship of the Philippian Christians. They would understand this better than any other local company of Christians.

We Christians do not really belong here in this world any more. "Our conversation [or rather citizenship] is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). We are citizens of heaven. We are members of the commonwealth which has its headquarters in heaven. It is from this vantage point we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Object, the supreme object of our lives. And we look for Him to come. Until then, Hebrews 6:20 affirms that His presence in heaven is the guarantee that we shall also be there. This is the grand, final destiny of every believer!

In His death, our Saviour delivered us from the penalty of sin. At the present time He is alive in heaven, delivering us from the spiritual and moral perils encountered along the way. Our vital associations are in heaven. Soon, any day now, He will come again to deliver us out of this world altogether. At His coming, He will change and fashion these "bodies of humiliation", making them radiant with His glory. There is nothing vile or evil about the body itself. The evil lies in the wrong uses to which it is put.

Whether living or dead at the moment of His return, we will receive from the Saviour a body "fashioned like unto His body of glory" (Philippians 3:21). That body will not be subject to decay or death, nor to the strictures of time. It will be a real body, perfectly suited to the conditions in heaven. Then, in His likeness, we shall enter into all that our heavenly citizenship involves. Each of us shall, of course, retain our own distinct identity.

What an incentive to seek to be like Him morally, in the way we live! To have Him as the supreme object of our lives and very existence, while we look for Him, the Saviour, to come!

Let us go back to my little hymn. Another verse says:

*I want to live a life of love  
Like Jesus day by day;  
And point some soul to heaven above,  
Along my pilgrim way.*

Surely that, and the chorus, is exactly what Philippians 3 recommends:

*Like Jesus, like Jesus,  
I want to be like Jesus;  
I love him so, I want to grow  
Like Jesus day by day.*

*(Ida Scott Taylor 1820-1915)*

May that be our prayer, and ambition, as long as we live here on earth! We shall then undoubtedly grow and mature in our own souls. We shall “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ”. We shall then be a blessing to others we meet while we wait for the coming of the Saviour, as we go along our pilgrim way. God grant that it might be so!

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