

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 21 November 2010

No. T0652

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A Look at Philippians: The Strength of Christ - Philippians 4:1-23

Music students, in particular, like to study the works of past classical composers. While there are different forms of composition, some works commence with a theme in the music. Over the course of the composition, the music returns to the original theme. Perhaps it will then take a different direction and again return to that theme. All this adds interest to the music. In a similar way, we find the Apostle Paul following the same pattern in the letter to the Philippians. Matters mentioned in the beginning of the letter again come back into his writing to meet the purpose he has throughout. We will notice some of these in Philippians 4:1-23 which we consider today.

We have been considering over the last three weeks the letter to the Philippians.

- Philippians 1 reminds us that Christ controls the life of the believer. Christ is our life and indwells the believer so true Christian life experience is to be fully controlled by Him. This is gain.
- Philippians 2 shows us the mind of Christ and we see in Him the believer's pattern.
- Philippians 3 tells us of the bright hope and object we have in Christ and through Him we gain the knowledge of all that is before us.

In Philippians 4:1-23, we learn that Christ is enough in all circumstances, meeting every need for the path ahead so, like the Apostle, we can say "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me", Philippians 4:13. We can rely on the strength of Christ. Now let us look more closely at Philippians 4 as a whole. We will divide it up as follows:

1. The Believers' Encouragements (Philippians 4:1-4)
2. The Believers' Challenges (Philippians 4:5-9)
3. The Apostle's Rejoicing (Philippians 4:10-20)
4. Closing Greetings (Philippians 4:21-23)

1. The Believers' Encouragements (Philippians 4:1-4)

One thing impresses us through Philippians 4; that is, the very happy and relaxed way the Apostle speaks to the Philippians. He, himself, is full of joy for them and with them and this comes out clearly in this chapter. This is the first theme repetition we can note. His joy appears throughout the letter from Philippians 1:4 and each following chapter.

It is clear from this chapter that Paul was aware of some difficulty in the assembly but he first speaks to them with warm expressions of affection: "my brethren, dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown", Philippians 4:1. The Philippian believers were a great joy to him at that time. The Apostle John also knew the same joy: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in the truth", 3 John 4. As Paul looks forward to standing before the judgement seat of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:10), with his beloved Philippians there, they will be his crown. The Apostle wrote similarly to the Thessalonians, 1 Thessalonians 2:19. As he looks forward, those believers won for his Lord will be his "crown of rejoicing" then.

The second return theme is also mentioned in Philippians 4:1, "Stand fast in the Lord". We had this in Philippians 1:27: "Let your [conduct] be as it becometh the gospel of Christ ... that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel ..." This is a firm basis for church life. Now Paul returns to this theme as he once more encourages the Philippians to "stand fast". Now the Apostle continues, "stand fast in the Lord", that is to say both to the Philippians and to ourselves who read the letter, we stand fast in the strength the Lord will give, relying on His grace and not depending on ourselves. The Lord is constantly with us. When Peter found himself sinking in the sea, he cried to the Lord for help. The Lord supplied the strength to lift him up and return him to the ship, Matthew 14:28-32. Let us depend on Him!

Having shown his love for them and while thinking of this unity, the Apostle introduces another theme, the state of mind, occurring in each of the previous chapters. Two sisters in the assembly, sterling workers for the Lord, were missing out on this joy and unity. They had fallen out over some matter. It is almost as if Paul is putting his arms around their shoulders and gently encouraging them to be of the same mind in the Lord, whatever the difficulty (Philippians 4:2). This did not mean that they were to agree on everything. But if both had the "mind of Christ", which

is the lowly and humble mind of Philippians 2:5-11, they would wish to be subject to their Lord, and would respect the view of one another. They would not wish to force their own opinion. This would bring dissension to an end and their joy would return. But they were not alone; help was also at hand. One who was a yoke-fellow of the Apostle, who had worked together with Paul in just the same way and for the Lord's purpose, was encouraged to give assistance and so were others. In fact, most of these are not named but the importance is that their "names are in the book of life", Philippians 4:3. How much better to be known at least to the Lord Jesus Christ! That book of life is maintained and not one name is missing, not one will be lost eternally. Unity within the church is paramount to blessing. May we find the same response in our own hearts to help in any time of similar need!

There is yet one more challenge the Apostle has for his beloved Philippians and this is far from easy but it brings results. Now he says, "Rejoice in the Lord always", Philippians 4:4. The believer must have all his joy centred in the Lord at all times and in all conditions. To press this point, the Apostle continues, "again I say, Rejoice" (Philippians 4:4). Paul was one who knew the meaning of this. While in Philippi, in prison, beaten and sore, he and Silas were singing praises to God at midnight (Acts 16:25). What rejoicing! It was then that the Lord acted in a remarkable way, releasing His servants from their chains and bringing salvation to the prison keeper, Acts 16:33. Rejoicing brings peace to the heart and courage to the faint. What strength we have in the Lord Jesus Christ!

2. The Believers' Challenges (Philippians 4:5-9)

1. The first challenge is in Philippians 4:5, "Let your moderation", yes, moderation, "be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand". Moderation has been variously described as yieldedness, gentleness, consideration, forbearance. All these terms are helpful to the meaning. One commentator uses the term "sweet reasonableness". It is the opposite of being harshly dogmatic or self-determined, which is quite opposite to the humble mind of Christ. "Sweet reasonableness" brings with it a readiness to appreciate the views of others. It has been pointed out also that this word was unknown in classical Greek and perhaps Paul coined it for this occasion, the only place where the word is used in the scriptures. How much better we would be if this were always part of our vocabulary!

The verse ends with the brief sentence, "The Lord is at hand", Philippians 4:5. This is linked to the previous sentence and reminds us that the Lord is near. He is standing by. He looks for that moderation and hears all that is taking place. If only we would remember that, we would soon change our behaviour and bring matters of difficulty to an end.

2. Next we come to our anxieties. "Be careful [anxious] for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God", Philippians 4:6. The Apostle puts his finger on one of the difficulties we all have. Problems arise, difficulties come along and there is no ready answer to them. Perhaps we do not see our way through. After a time we get anxious, we worry over them, perhaps because of the responsibilities we have. What is the answer? Paul tells us not to be anxious about anything. These matters have arisen through no fault of our own so we do not need to be over worried. Instead, pray about them; approach God with worship and a humble petition for His help and - we leave them there. The following words are so important too: "with thanksgiving" (Philippians 4:6) - for past blessings. Our strength is in One who delights to care and bless!
3. We can be sure there will be a result which is the will of God. Yet there is added help. "The peace of God", beyond that we can understand, will surround us as an army garrison surrounds a fort, "to keep our hearts and minds", notice these two parts, "through Christ Jesus", Philippians 4:7. My heart describes me and all I am, my weaknesses and concerns included; my mind describes my thought processes and all I have thought out. By committing these problems earnestly to God, all is taken care of and will bring me peace. This is surely what we all need in times of stress. Paul assures us; "God ... shall keep ..." (Philippians 4:7). There is no doubt about it if we trust Him - and if we leave matters with Him.
4. Lastly, in this section, we have Philippians 4:8 which ends with the words, "think on these things". What should we be thinking about?
 - "Whatsoever things are true", true to fact, not half truths or doubtful suggestions.
 - Matters which "are honest", noble, honourable and attract a dignity with them, not things of the gutter!
 - Things which "are just" or righteous, how easily we entertain unjust thoughts!
 - Things which "are pure" and keep us from temptation; the world is full of impurities.
 - Things which "are lovely", pleasing, agreeable and, by doing so, we will raise interest from others.
 - Then there are matters of "good report", sounding well, and winning approval.

Some newspapers sell on the sad failures of mankind. Now, the Apostle says, if you work on these lines there will be “virtue” which will flow out of the energy of the work of the Holy Spirit within and “praise”, a commendation of that virtue that is going forth (Philippians 4:8). We are all encouraged to practise these things. They will make us more attractive to all we meet, saving us from the mind problems which we have been considering earlier.

How does the Apostle himself measure up to this standard? He reminds the Philippians of his own methods. They had witnessed the way he lived and he commended himself for them to follow. What a blessing it is to find someone like that to whom we can relate and use as a role model. Note the progression in Philippians 4:9: Learned - received - heard - seen. These are vital stages for all to follow. How many celebrities today, taken as role models, fall at the first hurdle! But Paul only lived for Christ (Philippians 1:21) and encouraged others to do the same. He was able to assure those to whom he wrote that “the God of peace shall be with you”, Philippians 4:9. My friend, let us not discount this advice for Christian living. This assurance is certain and worth having. It is an example to follow!

3. The Apostle’s Rejoicing (Philippians 4:10-20)

Paul was delighted to welcome Epaphroditus back from his visit to Philippi (Philippians 4:10). He not only brought news but he brought practical evidence of their concern and care for the Apostle. It was not so much the gift but the concern they showed which caused Paul to rejoice. There are several aspects to this.

1. His personal thankfulness. He noted that their care for him “had flourished”, Philippians 4:10. He had not heard from them for some while and now, he says, your thought of me revived or bloomed afresh. What a joy to the Apostle! Yet he knew that all along they were thinking of him but had no opportunity to show it. This is the real key to the gift. There are active missionaries today in many parts of the world, sometimes going through times of stress, who would rejoice to know that we, at home, are thinking and praying for them. Are you one of these? I listened once to a missionary giving a talk. His story told of a missionary who was distressed by the affairs which surrounded him and eventually returned home for some rest. He first visited the local prayer meeting and he heard the many prayers offered. After that meeting he returned to his house and reflected that he now knew why he had been involved by so many problems. Not one prayer mentioned any missionary and their service! Your prayers for Christian workers need to bloom from today!
2. However, as Paul saw himself, he never considered himself to be wanting. His wonderful attitude was one of trust in God and he was “content”, Philippians 4:11, that is, satisfied and able to meet the shock of any circumstance. In times when he had only little, he was able to accept that frugal position. At other times he abounded and rejoiced. He tells us he has learned the secret to live at both ends of the scale, both to be full and to be hungry, Philippians 4:12. In all circumstances he had Christ, who filled him with strength, Philippians 4:13.
3. Now for the Philippians’ part: “Ye have well done that ye did communicate (or take part) with my affliction”, Philippians 4:14. This is the right thing to do. They not only thought of him, but out of this care came the gift. How could they leave the Apostle in need? This was the only church which had done so and their help had been regular, Philippians 4:15-16. It has been said that “a missionary minded church is a living church” and the one in Philippi lived up to this very well. They showed real care and deep concern for the servant of the Lord who might be in much need, so much so that they contributed to that need and the Apostle was deeply thankful. Does your church responsibly support Gospel activity?
4. There is a further reason in the mind of Paul. It was not that his need had been temporarily met. It was that the Philippians had become involved in outreach for the Lord by their giving and so were entitled to be sharers in the results, the fruit, Philippians 4:17. The result may not be known in this world but, in the coming day, all would be made known. Will it not be wonderful to learn of the results of the giving, of every kind, to the Lord when we appear before the Lord in that coming day?
5. As the Apostle sees the gift received through Epaphroditus, he likens it to a sacrifice offered to God, with its perfume, with which God is well pleased, Philippians 4:18. In this way the Philippians had acted as royal priests in accordance with 1 Peter 2:9.
6. Lastly, the Apostle assured them that they would never be losers by giving to the Lord. He would always supply all their need, Philippians 4:19. His riches are sufficient to meet all their concerns, and Paul had found this true. God is no man’s debtor. From His abundance every need is met. Are you satisfied with what you are doing for your Lord?

Here, then are the claims of Paul. They show that the Lord was his strength, Philippians 4:13. Let us take courage too.

4. Closing Greetings (Philippians 4:21-23)

The letter ends with Closing Greetings, verses 21-23. Paul's only desire is to add glory to God the Father for the wonderful Person He is. He then goes on to send warm salutations, not only from those travelling with him, but also from all the local believers, including those converted in Caesar's household (Philippians 4:22). What a close-knit circle believers worldwide should be! Do you feel a part of that great testimony for God here in this world? Let us think of it again and, like the Apostle, rejoice in all the fellowship enjoyed with the people of God wherever possible.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen", Philippians 4:23.

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