

Prayer

Rescue us and restore us, merciful Saviour!

When we feel oppressed, Lord Jesus,
bring peace to our souls and free us from evil.

When we feel disheartened, Lord Jesus,
bring joy to our souls, and lift our spirits.

When we feel let down, Lord Jesus,
bring love to our souls and restore our lives. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray for those you see during your day. You do not know them, but do not let this be a barrier to your prayers.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for countries of different religious beliefs.** *Pray for those countries of the world with Buddhist beliefs, many of which are repressed.*
- *Pray about the world-wide efforts to curb national debt*
- *Give thanks to God for the great blessing of sight*

Meditation

Life is never perfect, but it can be wonderful,
When true godliness is put into action!

When days of trouble at work are transformed
Through good, hard and honest work;

When distress and pain is changed in an instant
By meeting someone dearly loved;

When personal difficulties are properly resolved
Through frank and open discussion;

When misunderstandings at church are overcome
Through care, understanding and love;

When illness of the mind, spirit or body is healed
After prayer that is loving and sensitive;

Life is never perfect; but one day, it will be,
When the Lord completes all things in Glory!

Bible passage - Philippians 1:27-30

²⁷ Conduct yourselves exclusively in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come to see you or hear about you in absence, I will know that you are standing firm in one Spirit, striving side by side and united for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and not made to panic by your opponents.

This is proof to them of their failure and of your triumph; for this is God's doing. ²⁹ He has graciously given you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering on his behalf as well, ³⁰ since you are having the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Bible Study

Review

Paul tells the church at Philippi to stand firm and united in the Gospel despite the troubles they experience at the hands of their enemies. God is surely at work amongst His people when their witness brings opposition!

Philippians chapter 1 is wonderfully informative, and it tells us a great deal about Paul and the church at Philippi. In the verses just before this passage, we read about Paul's firm intent to remain faithful to the Gospel despite his imprisonment (1:15f.), whether he lives or dies (1:20f.). He therefore encourages the Philippians to show the same fortitude and strength of character by refusing to let their earthly circumstances either dictate their faith or compromise their unity.

The passage begins with a powerful call to discipleship; '*Conduct yourselves exclusively in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ ...*' (1:27). This is a powerful reminder that the Gospel contains all the moral guidance necessary for living as God requires. Paul calls for his readers to be 'exclusively' focussed on this Gospel, by which he means not just the news of God's saving work in Christ, but also the teachings of Jesus, which set out the moral standards of all who would follow Christ, as in the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matt. 5-7). This focus is especially important when believers face difficulty, or have trouble with 'opponents' (1:28). Such problems might easily distract the faithful away from their calling, but Paul says that he is encouraged by the Philippians who were '*standing firm*' (1:27) in the face of opponents, and had not fallen into a '*panic*' (1:28).

Over the whole of chapter 1, Paul has gradually introduced us to the idea that the church at Philippi faces a certain amount of trouble. He does not allow this to cloud his friendship with the people there but he does not ignore it. Earlier in the chapter, he had spoken of '*envy and rivalry*' amongst those who preached the Gospel (1:15), then of their '*selfish ambition*' (1:17), and now of '*opponents*' (1:28). Later in the letter we read about '*evil workers*' (3:2) and those who '*live as enemies of the Cross of Jesus Christ*' (3:18), and in the last chapter we read about divisions between two leaders '*I urge Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind ...*' (4:2f.). Yet despite these problems, these opponents do not dominate Paul's letter, and he repeatedly turns back to the Gospel itself as the only way to deal with troubles within the church.

Paul does this because it is his own life's experience. He is writing from prison, and as he has just explained, he might well prefer to die rather than to face the future (1:20-26). He has nevertheless turned away from such negativity and accepted God's purpose for his life, which is to encourage the churches he has founded (1:24). The testimony of his life is that remaining faithful to the Gospel in the midst of sufferings is proof of God's ultimate triumph and the failure of his own opponents, and he therefore encourages the Philippians to do the same (2:28). Such a message encourages all God's people to view their circumstances, whatever they are, as an opportunity for the victory of the Gospel, and not defeat at the hands of opponents. This is not just 'positive thinking'; it is God's powerful work in the lives of those who will not yield in the face of suffering.

In the last two verses of this chapter, Paul mentions two things, each of which are important. Firstly, he says that suffering is a privilege, and that ultimately all suffering is bound up with that of Christ; to suffer as a Christian is to suffer on Christ's '*behalf*' (1:29) and to take part in the glorious work of the Gospel (1:29). His comments come out of his own experience of prison, of course, but he wants the Philippians to know that their own difficulties find their meaning in Christ.

Lastly, Paul hints strongly at another feature of the life of the church that will become of great importance in this letter, which is the unity of God's people (1:27). The Gospel is not divided, just as God is not divided and Christ is not divided. God's people are therefore called not only to stand against all opposition but to stand united; indeed, this is the only way that they can stand (1:27)!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Living the life of faith – a Godly citizenship
- Unity – God's doing
- Sharing in each other's sufferings and the sufferings of Christ

Going Deeper

Going deeper means that we must face the challenges of this text, and proceed to live in a manner worthy of the God in whom we believe. None of us finds it easy to say what this means because we all experience

suffering in different ways and we cannot make it any the less painful just by reading scripture. However, if we pay close attention to Scripture when it speaks to us directly about such matters, we will find that we are led to see things in new and different ways, and reconsider the important things in life.

Living the life of faith – a Godly citizenship

Verse 27 uncompromisingly tells us to live in a manner that is worthy of the Gospel of Christ. Interestingly, the Greek word Paul used for 'living' is a word that was associated with living according to the cultural rules and religious expectations of the Roman state. Paul himself was a Roman citizen because of his mixed upbringing in Tarsus, and used this fact when appealing to the Emperor (Acts 25:11) for justice. Few outside of Rome or the ties that linked the governing families throughout the Empire, could claim this citizenship. This privilege was possessed either by birth or through payment by those who had the means. Citizens were expected to be particularly loyal to the Empire and the Emperor and maintain high social standards, and this was known throughout the Empire.

Paul, however, even though he was a Roman citizen himself, called on all disciples of Christ to find in 'the Gospel of Christ' a higher citizenship and a greater calling (1:27). In using a word for citizenship that reflected the highest standards of the day, Paul was saying to his readers that they were called to a totally different standard of life from what they knew of Roman citizenship. It could not be purchased, for it showed itself not in social standing but moral and spiritual behaviour which was acceptable to God, indeed, its highest standard was the mark of the sufferings of Christ (1:29). This is what Paul wanted to see within the Philippian church.

At various places in the letter to the Philippians, we find either direct or indirect evidence that Paul was receiving regular communication from the Philippian church, and he specifically says that he hoped to send Timothy (2:19) and also Epaphroditus (2:25) to Philippi both to give and receive news. This is what he refers to, as he muses in verse 27 about whether '*I come to see you or hear about you in absence*'. But Paul longed to know from his emissaries that one key element of Christian citizenship was being upheld; this was the unity of '*standing firm in one Spirit, striving side by side and united for the faith of the Gospel*' (1:27). Paul describes this unity as the starting point of Gospel testimony to the world, and Satan has therefore worked hardest to destroy this over the last two thousand years! However, God's Spirit maintains the unity of the church, and this can be seen by the phrase '*standing firm in one Spirit*', found in verse 27. There is some argument as to whether Paul's letter intends the word 'Spirit' to have a capital letter here, meaning 'The Holy Spirit', or just a general reference to a uniting 'spirit' amongst Christians; but in reality there is no difference between the two. God works through His Spirit, and the Spirit alone brings about His purposes, which is clearly what we are talking about here.

Unity - God's doing

Unity of purpose amongst any group of people can only be achieved by agreed common goals and beliefs. Paul often uses military or athletic examples to illustrate the Christian life and the disciplines which are necessary for spiritual growth (see Phil 2:25, 2 Tim 2:3,4; 1 Cor 9:24 etc.). In this passage Paul does not berate the church for its lack of unity, something we can easily and perhaps need to do today, he talks about the fruit of standing firm and not being '*made to panic by your opponents*'. The word 'panic' is one that was used to describe a horse startled by the noise of battle or unexpected sights and sounds; so Paul calls the church to be more mature than to react like a frightened horse when facing its enemies!

Who were the enemies that the Philippian church faced? Some reckon that they are the Judaisers who infiltrated almost every church Paul founded, attempting to pull Christian converts back into mainstream Judaism by insisting on circumcision and the full application of Mosaic law (by which they really meant Pharisaic law). They are mentioned in Paul's letter to the Philippians later on (3:2ff) and were undoubtedly divisive. However, at this point, it is most likely that Paul was conscious of the powerful Roman civilisation that dominated every aspect of life in Philippi, a colony on the southern coast of Macedonia which controlled all the trade and business of the Empire conducted between the 'East' and the 'West'. If you read what happened when Paul first went there (Acts 16:11ff) it is obvious that strong passions were aroused by the introduction of Christianity into this strongly Roman garrison city, and it is more than probable that the young church in Philippi continued to face official opposition there. This could be one reason why Paul felt so close to the Philippian church as he himself endured the opposition of Roman authorities during his own captivity.

Paul did all he could to stand firm in his own faith under considerable pressure (see, for example, the failed attempts of the orator Tertullus brought in to accuse Paul by the Jews, and Paul's response – Acts 24:1-9), and he asked the Philippian church to do the same, knowing that by so doing his enemies would be defeated. Vindication in the face of foolishness or evil is a frequent Biblical theme and the Gospel Paul preached was no less confident. The continued existence and spiritual unity of God's people was, for Paul, the surest evidence of the failure of evil in the world and its ultimate defeat, and also evidence of the truth of the Gospel. This is a message that can encourage us today, for we live at a time when Christian divisions

are often acute, yet there is an increasing sense of spiritual unity amongst many, and this is the proof of the 'triumph' of the Gospel (1:28).

Sharing in each other's sufferings and the sufferings of Christ

In verses 29 and 30 Paul stated the Gospel directly and in unequivocal terms. He wrote that to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and respond by faith was the greatest privilege a person could have (1:29), and he went on to teach the awe-inspiring truth that our unity with God in Christ is through sharing in Christ's 'sufferings' as well as his victory. Why is this so? As Paul went on to write in verse 30 about the Philippian church sharing the same struggles as he faced, we realise that the cause of both Paul's suffering and that of the Philippian church was the Roman Empire, in other words, the very culture and human society in which they lived. Evil has existed in every culture and civilisation, and remains throughout the world except where it is opposed and defeated by Christ through His people, and until the coming of Christ in glory. We live in a world in which evil is ever present, but fading, because of Christ's coming.

Therefore, whilst Christ suffered on the Cross in order to defeat the powers of evil and death, this battle is one that has not been finished, and we live our lives either standing with Christ, or with the evil of this world. People today like to think there is some neutral ground in which we can live unaffected by evil, but there is none. We either stand and suffer with Christ, and with all who have fought evil throughout the ages, or we make our choice for the easy ways of the enemy. Paul appealed to the Philippian church to stand firm with him in the sufferings of Christ against the evils of the world, and the same appeal is addressed to us today.

Yet Paul's call is not simply 'against' the world and its cultures and values, it is 'for' the Gospel. As we read on in Philippians, we will soon find that Paul's message is not one of stoic doom and gloom, but one of reality and visionary joy. There is no escape from the sufferings of this world, but we can enjoy the '*privilege*' of believing (1:29). As Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians 'For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.' (1 Cor 1:18). The sufferings of Christ on the Cross enable the world to be saved, and the suffering we endure in this life can sometimes, through Christ, be a part of the salvation of the world. Every Christian who suffers, whether through direct opposition to the Gospel or through indirect opposition of the enemy for example in illness, or the trials of life as a Christian, contributes something to the redemption of the world! If God's people caught sight of this positive message then the enthusiasm and power of our testimony would light up the world!

Application

Suffering is a difficult subject, and even as I write today, I am personally having more difficulty with my own chronic pain than I have had for a long time. However, Paul's message that through our sufferings we are united with Christ in the salvation of the whole world is something that is profoundly exciting! It does not take away the pain I or anyone else has, but by giving it a spiritual meaning, the Bible encourages me to stand firm and not give in to the more desperate and depressing consequences of my condition. I pray that is true for all who read this who face severe trials of any kind.

There are many people who face suffering and trial for the Gospel at this time in ways that we can scarcely know or understand; in particular Christians who live in Muslim countries that are becoming more radical by the day, dismantling and destroying anything Christian they see which they believe is connected to the 'West'. If we can find practical ways of standing together with these people, then we demonstrate the spiritual reality that Jesus is the ultimate victor in all life, and his message is love. All who preach hate, slaughter, bombing, self-killing, social chaos and torture, do so as an expression of evil and make their choice for evil. We must all be careful about how we express these sentiments today, but unless the message of the Gospel of Christ and his sufferings for the world are made real by us in the midst of what is actually happening in our world, then our talk of faith is in danger of becoming little more than religious niceties. We are called to stand side by side with God's people throughout all ages, to stand with Christ in his sufferings, and to defeat the evil one by so doing and prove to the world that God's love for all will never be defeated.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Summarise the features of the Gospel that come out of this passage of scripture.
2. What opponents do Christians face today, whether cultural, spiritual or physical? How does this passage help us face these opponents?

3. Is it realistic for us to identify with the struggles of Paul or of Christ in our times when we know relatively little of what they experienced? What unites us with them?

Personal comments by author

The unity of God's people sometimes needs to be a unity of suffering, and when we realise this, we can grow the kind of fellowship that is essential for the work of God through His church. I am of the opinion that when people share their vulnerabilities and minister to each other, then great things can begin to happen. We have a ministry to others if we are people who know the Lord has dealt with our own sufferings.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Spend some time thinking about those places in the world today where the Gospel is a scandal, and preaching it would bring ridicule, opposition, or even death. Ask yourself, are these not the very places to which Paul would go to preach the Gospel? How can we follow in His footsteps?*
- *Discuss with friends at church the problems of preaching the Gospel in your own neighbourhood. Is the problem of suffering an issue? In what way? How can we best explain the Gospel given this background?*

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, save Your people from the comfortable places they make for themselves. Lead them to where they can testify to the love of God by making a public stand for the Gospel, and for the truth that there is an answer to suffering through Christ Jesus. Give Your people courage to proclaim the Gospel so that they might rejoice in Your work, we pray. AMEN
