

Prayer

We talk to You each day, Lord Jesus, because You are there. Even when it feels as if You are distant, the reality is that You are as close as the clothes we wear and the ground under our feet. Talk to us as we talk to You, we pray, and may our inner ears hear the voice of the Spirit as clearly as we feel our emotions and know our thoughts. May our conversations be of real value, the treasures that sustain us through each day; thank You, Lord Jesus. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Set a clock to give you a reminder to pray several times in the course of a day. Three times a day would not be much, but more than many offer!

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the air transport industry.** *Pray for those responsible for maintaining the standards of air travel throughout the world*
- *Praise the Lord for His love and mercy found in each moment of life*
- *Pray about the education of small children in your country*

Meditation

Bring us joy, Lord Jesus Christ,
The unbridled freedom of authentic delight.

Bring us faithfulness, Lord Jesus Christ,
The undeserved grace of dependable love.

Bring us mercy, Lord Jesus Christ,
The unrestrained kindness of a generous heart;

Bring us patience, Lord Jesus Christ,
The unquestionable resilience of persistent hope;

Bring us peace, Lord Jesus Christ,
The unspoilt tranquillity of the undisturbed breast;

Bring us grace, Lord Jesus Christ,
The unearned reward of the Father's approval.

Bible passage - *Philippians 2:12-18*

Paul urges the Christians at Philippi to hold on to the heritage of faith they have received and shun all wickedness and evil, so that they will be an example to all of 'Word of Life'

¹² So, my dear friends, because you have always been obedient, not just in my presence but even more so in my absence; I urge you to make good your own salvation with reverence and fear; ¹³ for God does his own will and work through you, according to His good purposes. ¹⁴ Do everything without complaining and arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may be without fault and pure, children of God with no imperfections in the midst of a twisted and perverted generation, where you shine like stars in the world. ¹⁶ Because you hold firmly to the Word of life, I have reason to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain. ¹⁷ But even if I am being sacrificed on account of the worship and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all ¹⁸ and so should you be glad and rejoice with me.

Bible Study

Review

In the previous passage, we read a wonderful description of the work of Christ. This describes His extraordinary humility, and the fact that as a man, He was also God. Paul wrote all this for a good reason, and he chose his words carefully. He did not write just in order to provide the Philippians with a watertight argument about the nature of Jesus as God and man, he wrote to remind the Philippians of the standards of humility and service to which they should aspire. He appealed to them to live a life worthy of the One who had saved them (2:12).

It seems that although Paul loved the Philippian church, it was experiencing considerable problems. They had once been strongly committed to the Gospel (1:15-18, 27-30), but the Philippians had become distracted by dissension, strife, and a resulting lack of unity (1:15,17,28). Paul therefore sought to point them back to Christ. In His life and death, Jesus had demonstrated the very opposite of the attitudes that created trouble and division. So Paul urged the Philippians to rise above their petty squabbles and live by Christ's example of true godliness, humility, obedience and service.

This advice has proved helpful ever since it was written. Now, it is part of human nature for people to be argumentative and divisive, and unfortunately, this is just as true in the church as elsewhere. Paul's advice seems to call Christians to be perfect, like Christ; but no one can be perfect by following a set of guidelines. Therefore, his advice was given to help the Philippians work towards overcoming their problems and not just accept them, and the heart of his message is straightforward. He urges Christians to give a priority to dealing with their own problems (2:12), and make sure that they are right with God before they deign to comment on the salvation of others.

This is what Paul says; *'I urge you to make good your own salvation through fear and trembling'* (2:12). It is a famous passage of scripture, and those who would like to stop people from engaging in wider debate have misused it, but this is not Paul's agenda here. His call is not to stop ordinary church members debating the things of God, it is to leaders of the church who have created division by forcing their own views on others. He calls on them to look at the quality of their own lives, and ensure that they were living out the Gospel values of humility and obedient service; in other words, they were 'like Christ'. Leaders who create division by expressing their own strident views should be sure where they stand with the Lord before inflicting contentious views on others. As with all leaders, they speak under the gaze of an awesome God.

In the middle of this passage, Paul develops this theme to make a related point, urging that people should not complain (2:14f.). Just as before, Paul did not say this in order to forbid people from dealing with difficult issues, so we should not use this passage to prevent people from raising objections to things that have gone wrong in the church. We should all know the difference between raising objections and complaining, and we should certainly not accuse people of complaining when they are only trying to raise important issues. The one who complains is one who has ceased to see the good in others and it is this attitude that is destructive of fellowship. The example of Christ asks us to be motivated by the good in others, not the bad.

Today, we sometimes imply that people are excused from complaining because we believe that this is a natural trait to be accepted. We also excuse those who are divisive in their behaviour on the same grounds and ask people to accept this because such a person may be perceived to have great gifts. This is not God's way, for we cannot excuse godlessness. We should expect all to examine themselves and live by the standards of Christ, and accept in Christian love that although no one has arrived at perfection, we are all striving for the same goal of Christ-likeness. Christ is our guide.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Obedience
- The purpose of the church in the world
- Paul's confidence in the Philippian church

Going Deeper

This scripture has much more to say which follows on from this (2:13,14), and about the relationship of the Church of God to the world (2:15). It concludes with a remarkable personal statement of Paul in which his love for this church in particular shines strongly, and for the second time in this letter, he appears to

anticipate death and its consequences. The range of emotions felt by those who first read this must have been overwhelming!

Obedience

Once each of us has heard the voice of the Lord calling us to respond to his love, and once we have accepted what He has done for our salvation and eternal life, the consequences of faith are made clear to us. Our eyes are opened to see that we owe everything to the Lord and we must therefore be obedient to Him, in our attitudes and thoughts (our minds – see 2:5) and in everything we do. This is what Paul explains to the Philippians in his letter; he does not try and impose a religious system on them, but he does try to show them that only God's ways, as shown through Jesus, are capable of releasing them from their problems.

Paul was speaking strongly to the Philippians, of that there is little doubt, as he charged them to be obedient to the example of Christ (2:12). Nothing meant more to him than the life, death and resurrection of our Lord, and he could not see how anyone could foster malcontent and disagreement amongst the lives of those who accepted, as he did, that Jesus was God's way of salvation for all people. He spoke to the church of their obedience when they first heard the Gospel, remembering how the jailer's family had stood firm with him and other Christians as he demanded an apology from the magistrates for throwing him into prison on trumped up charges (Acts 16:25-40). He also remembered what he had heard of from others who had visited the church on his behalf ('in my absence – 2:12), but there is no doubting the force with which he told them to have a mind for their own salvation (see above) and allow the bigger picture to be governed by Almighty God (2:13). God's purpose was to establish His Kingdom on earth and to overcome evil; so who, Paul argued, had any right to pursue arguing and complaining (2:14) given our relatively small place in the greater plans of God?

The problem the Philippians faced has been true of churches down through the ages, which is that the pressures of daily life tend to obscure the ability of even good people to live out the values of the Gospel. The only remedy is to be reminded in the strongest terms of what Jesus has done for us so that we submit ourselves again to Him, which is what Paul did.

The purpose of the Church in the world

It may seem to us that arguments and bickering are all a part of life, and you would be forgiven for thinking this was accepted as the norm if you attended a church meeting today; but scripture will have none of this. Although we do not know what the problems at Philippi were, Paul saw in them something so wrong he had to write about it and speak to them in stern tones. Why was this so? Surely, we might say, there is always division amongst people, saved or not, and these divisions and disagreements must have their place if they are to be worked out within the life of the church. If the example of Jesus and our unity in Him was not sufficient to persuade people of the fallacy of this, then Paul had another point to make to the Philippians.

He began by calling directly for an end to the complaining and arguing (2:14); if Christ was in charge of His Church and was also our inspiration, what was there to argue about? He moved on swiftly to make a comparison between the Church of God and the rest of the world (2:15) which illustrated something fundamental about the work of God in the world. He wanted the people of the church at Philippi to understand that they had a function and a purpose in God's eternal plan and that complaining and arguing prevented that task from being achieved.

Paul was an Old Testament scholar and knew from his studies that the People of Israel had failed in their task to be a 'light to the nations' (Is 42:6; 49:6,7), a phrase which expressed Abraham's calling for his offspring to be the people through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen 12:2,3). Indeed, virtually the whole of the Old Testament contains the history of this failure and points forward to the time when God would resolve the problem. It was an urgent issue for without the light of God, the 'darkness' which entered the world at the 'Fall' (Gen 3) controlled the world. Paul called on the Philippian church to 'shine like stars in the world' (2:15) because they had received the light of Christ, and they could fulfil the call of God originally given to Abraham. He also asked the church to present themselves as 'without fault and pure' (2:15), words which conjured up the ritual requirements of the Old Testament made to all who came to offer worship and sacrifice to the Lord (e.g. Psalm 24:4ff; Isaiah 52:11). By using these words, Paul reminded the Philippian church to take seriously their call to show the world something different; an example of godly living which was true and successful because Jesus Christ was their light and guide. This could not be found anywhere else in the world!

It hardly needed saying, given the great poetic eulogy Paul had just given to the life of Christ just previously (2:5-11), but none of this was achievable except by following Jesus' example. Two thousand years of Israelite history had shown there was no other way, and this remains true, however many times the church tries to reinvent itself apart from genuine renewal by the Lord Himself!

Paul's confidence in the Philippian church

Even though Paul spoke so firmly to the church at Philippi about these matters, he showed in these verses that he had a 'soft spot' for them. At the beginning, as he launched into his strong words about obedience, he addressed the Philippians with affection, using a common word for friends held dear; hence my translation 'my dear friends' (in older translations, 'brothers'). Towards the end of the passage, he spoke warmly to them of his 'boast' that the Philippians would, despite their problems, hold on to their faith in Jesus Christ and demonstrate it in practical, peaceful living.

It is sad that the English language has no other word to use here but boast, for what is described is not open arrogance, but something more like the feeling any parent has when their own child steps forward to perform at a school concert. In those circumstances a parent wants to say, 'that's my child', not to boast with arrogance but because the joy of parenthood is expressed precisely in the deep happiness and pride of knowing that they have brought their child to the point where they can take their place amongst their peers and perform in this way. Paul was there at the 'birth' of the Philippian church, and he had that sense of parental joy and privilege. Despite the problems, he held them with an affection which was itself a testimony to the truth of what he was saying to them about humility and service. Although what he was telling them was the sharp truth, he had done so with warmth and affection, in the firm belief that what he said and did was not 'in vain' (2:16).

Indeed, Paul seems to have been overcome with a sense of his possible death in verse 17, because of his work for the Gospel. In a strange phrase, Paul likened himself to a sacrifice or 'drink offering' (strictly called a 'libation' - 2:17) poured out to God because of the 'worship and service of your faith'. This is not easy to unpick, but it seems that Paul saw the threat to his life which led to his imprisonment as being something which had happened as a direct result of his work. He was captive because the churches he had founded were alive and successful, including that at Philippi. Indeed, he would stand trial before the Emperor because of his preaching of Christianity, and the reigning Emperor (probably Nero) would have to make a judgement about whether the churches he founded posed a threat to the peace of the Empire. A cynic could say that Paul was obviously concerned that the churches he founded did not engage in public disorder or strife on these grounds alone, but that would be to defame one whose whole life was given for the service of the Gospel in ways we can barely comprehend. Such cynicism would merely demonstrate our ignorance!

Paul called the Philippian church to rejoice with him, even though what he was talking about seemed less than happy. Nevertheless, what example could Paul give of everything he had been trying to say about obedience and humility unless he was able to express it all in joy? Joy is itself the very antithesis of disputation, arrogance, complaining and arguing, and no joy can be had except on the common ground of fellowship. Paul has more to say about joy later in the letter, but his call for joy at this point is a cry for unity of the Spirit within the church, and he wanted his words to be heard and received in the spirit with which they were given.

Application

Dissent and strife amongst God's people has always been one of the most difficult things. Christian people feel deeply about their faith, and sometimes feel it necessary to take stands and dispute issues within the church as if they were defending the faith itself. How sad this is. Paul would have told us that God does not have to be defended by us, we need to be defended by Him from the works of Satan to which we are all prone; disobedience, complaining, arguing, failure etc. The Church of God is made up of those who accept their own place as equal before the Lord with all believers, and show this in their actions.

Much work needs to be done in our own day in helping God's people to reclaim the traditional ground of faith which unites the Lord's people. The church is rife with divisions and arguments based upon denominations, music, culture, worship style, theology, age, and almost every imaginable feature of worldly life. As I see it, ONLY the Gospel of Jesus Christ can draw people together. It is revealed in God's Word the Bible, is witnessed to within the history of Christianity through two thousand years, is practised by those who make it their business to live according to the truths of the Gospel, is revealed to those who are in contact with their Lord through prayer, and is testified in the lives of people who come to know the Lord every day. All these bear witness to the qualities of humility, obedience and service shown by Jesus, which lie at the core of Christian living. Beware of anyone who avoids these truths of living or destroys the fellowship of God's people for their own benefit and gain, however wonderful their claims sound or however godly they may appear.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you find it easy to speak the truth about the Gospel when you believe that others in church have avoided it, or not acted in love? How can these problems be overcome?
2. What do you understand by the phrase 'work out your salvation through fear and trembling'?
3. Is the Gospel worth dying for, and do you know of those who have made that sacrifice, like Paul?

Personal comments by author

It is wise to consider all that Paul says in this passage because we can conquer trouble and sin, when we know how they will affect us and the whole body of Christ. Satan will always attack the church with arguments and division, and he has done so for centuries. The best defence for all of us is to understand what is happening, be sure of our own salvation, and demonstrate the life of Christ in what we do and say. This is our call, and we would be wise to keep this in mind and not just imagine that being a Christian and going to church is an easy thing to do.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Consider what issues have caused the greatest division and argument within your church. Is it possible that an appeal to the qualities of Jesus' life would make any difference? What is it that entrenches people so firmly in their religious convictions and creates havoc in the church today?*
- *Write down a list of positive things you have learned from this text and negative things. Then write down how you can learn from both lists.*

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, give us that joy which comes from You alone. Joy which lifts our hearts, opens us up to give and receive from others, heals us from all manner of problems and diseases, empowers us to do things we had not perceived, and brings us alive in You. Jesus Christ, give us joy; again and again! AMEN
