

Prayer

What can we give You, Heavenly Father, Creator of the world, Saviour and Redeemer of all, and the One who holds the future of all things in His hands? We give You honour and worship, and we give You our lives in the service of others and in the service of Your Kingdom. Receive us and use us for Your greater glory, through Jesus Christ we pray; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Give thanks to God for your past, and set before the Lord all your treasured memories. Set before His also your past trials and let Him help you deal with them

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the air transport industry** Pray for the major airlines of your country, especially any state airline
- Pray about corruption and scandal in the life of your own country
- Give thanks to God for the faithful love of Jesus

Meditation

Renew our hearts, Friend and Comforter;
Let the fire of love burn brightly for ever.

Repair our bodies, Healer and Deliverer;
Let the joy of wholeness fill our lives.

Refill our minds, Master and Teacher;
Let the truths of knowledge not pass us by.

Remove our sins, Saviour and Redeemer;
Let the beauty of peace with God, ever reign.

Restore our zeal, Encourager and Guide;
Let the path of adventure be brightly lit.

Rebuild our strength, Great and Mighty Lord;
Let the challenge of action, thrill and excite us.

Revive our spirits, Counsellor and Lord;
Let the promise of our future, beckon us on.

Bible passage - Philippians 3:1-3

The tone of the letter changes suddenly, and Paul attacks those who seek to disturb the peace of the church with false teaching; but who are these false teachers and what do they teach?

¹ Therefore, my dear friends, rejoice in the LORD! It is no trouble for me to write these same things to you, and it gives you security.

² Watch out for the dogs, watch out for the evil workers, and watch out for the mutilation! ³ For we who worship in the Spirit of God and take our pride in Christ Jesus are the true circumcision and we place no confidence in the circumcision of the flesh.

Bible Study

Review

These three verses mark a complete change of direction in Philippians. Up to this point, Paul's letter has had a warm tone, and although he has mentioned various problems in the church, his positive teaching about the imitation of Christ overshadows this (2:5-11). The first verse of our reading continues in the same vein, encouraging the Philippians to '*rejoice in the Lord*' (3:1), and it therefore comes as a complete surprise to read what Paul says next; '*watch out for the dogs ... the evil workers ... the mutilation!*' (3:2).

So what lies behind this outburst? Despite all his affection for the Philippians, Paul had decided to speak out and expose the erroneous teaching and opposition he had heard about (1:15f. 28). His words seem rather shocking, but his attack is entirely consistent with his other writings, for Paul believed that the Gospel was essentially simple and based on Christ alone, and he had no time for any teaching that might suggest otherwise.

To begin with, we are faced with something of a puzzle in trying to understand verse 1 and 2. On the face of it, there is a break after verse 1, as if Paul had stopped writing and come back later only to continue in a very different frame of mind! Over the years, scholars have suggested that Philippians is made up of more than one 'letter', perhaps two letters put together as one!

Personally, I believe there is another explanation that makes more sense. Verse 1 begins by encouraging the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord, but it goes on give a warning about potential trouble in the church, he says, '*it is no trouble for me to write these same things to you, and it gives you security*' (3:1). Being aware of the dangers of false teaching, Paul had reached a point where he felt that he had to deal with these things head on, and he does not mince his words (see something similar in Galatians 3:1).

So who are these trouble makers? The clues to their identity lie within Paul's words. He calls the enemies '*dogs*' and warns about '*mutilation*' (3:2). Now the term '*mutilation*' can only refer to one thing, which is the Jewish practice of circumcision. This means that the enemies of the church were Jews who sought to circumcise Christians and so keep faith with the O.T. covenant. Now, Paul had trouble with such teaching throughout his ministry, and he was deeply unhappy to find it in Philippi. His annoyance is confirmed when he calls these teachers '*dogs*', a word used by Jews to swear at Gentiles who they regarded as impure, but here, Paul turns the insult back on those who used it. People of the first century would have understood this instinctively.

We will learn more about the teaching of such people as the study progresses, but it is easy to see that obedience to the Old Testament laws (including circumcision) was an important issue in the life of the early church. Throughout his ministry, Paul sought to separate the church from such Judaism believing that God had sent the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles as proof that in Christ there was a new covenant, different from the old. He gained official approval for this teaching in Jerusalem (see Acts 15), and was heartbroken to hear that the first town he evangelised after gaining this approval (Acts 16) was now being targeted by people who had not accepted the official line.

The last verse in our passage turns it around from the negative to the positive. Paul declares that the true church is made up of those who worship God '*in the Spirit*' and are proud of Jesus Christ alone (3:3), and he confirms that the Gospel has nothing to do with circumcision. After this dramatic change of direction in Philippians, we can expect that the rest of chapter 3 says much more about the false teaching found in Philippi, and this is partly true. However, we will find out in the next few studies that Paul takes the opportunity not to dwell on false teaching but to reiterate and affirm the central truths of the Gospel. His intention is to build up, not to pull down.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Verse 1 – a connecting, not a disconnecting verse!
- Verse 2 – '*dogs*', '*evil workers*', and '*mutilation*'?
- Verse 3 – the true circumcision

Going Deeper

The main task of our study today will be to examine more closely these reasons for why Paul changed his tone of voice so dramatically at the beginning of this part of his letter. The words he used need our careful

attention, and they confirm that Paul's apparent anger were all part of his defence of the true and unchangeable Gospel.

Verse 1 – a connecting, not a disconnecting verse!

If you read almost any version of the Bible, you will find that Philippians 3:1 begins something like this 'Finally, brothers ...', and gives the impression that this verse is the 'end' of some part of the letter. The translation I have offered is quite different, and I must therefore explain it. The Greek word at the beginning of the sentence is 'loipos', and means 'that which remains', so I have translated it 'consequently', indicating that Paul now intends to say what remains to be said! In a few cases in scripture where the word comes at the very conclusion of a letter of Paul, it can indeed mean 'finally' because there is little more to be said (see, for example, 2 Cor 13:11). This confusion comes from the extensive scholarly opinion of recent times that the original letter of Paul ends at this verse, and verse 2 of chapter 3 begins a new letter. I doubt this assumption because a much simpler explanation exists, and there is no substantial evidence that the letter ever existed as anything other than one letter.

If you read verse 1 as a whole, what Paul says is straightforward enough. On account of everything he has said, he encourages the Philippians to 'rejoice' (see references above), and he adds the words 'in the Lord', as if to tell the Philippians that the work of the Lord Jesus in their lives is the reason for maintaining a heart of rejoicing and thankfulness. When he goes on to say 'it is no trouble for me to write these same things to you ...' he is referring to this same repeated encouragement of them to rejoice, which he has written several times before and makes no apology for so doing because of its importance. This is especially true in view of what he is about to say, so he concludes by saying that maintaining a heart of rejoicing in the Lord will give the Philippians a spiritual security of the heart.

This past phrase is important, for Paul knows full well that he is about to address the 'thorny issue' of those who have been upsetting the fellowship of the Philippian church. Joyful worship 'in the Lord' is uniting and spiritually releasing for God's people, and there is good reason for us to take Paul's advice and encourage each other to worship the Lord with joy, as expressed by the Hebrew word 'Hallelujah' which means 'praises!' The enemy of God's people cannot stand in the midst of these praises, and we can defeat him in this straightforward way. Paul knew the Philippians, and this verse encouraged them to be united in joy against the evils that had come upon them.

Verse 2 – 'dogs', 'evil workers', and 'mutilation'?

Verse 2 is a thrice repeated and dramatic warning to the Philippians, and whatever the translation you have, the word of warning in Greek is the same in each phrase ('blepo' – meaning, 'watch out' or 'beware'). Many translations use different words of warning for each of the three phrases, but you only feel the full force of what Paul is saying if you know that he uses the same word. This is because the 'dogs', the 'evil workers' and the 'mutilation' all refer to the same people; those who taught that circumcision was necessary for all Christians.

The interesting thing about this text is this. How and why would people come into the church at Philippi and teach this? It is true that in many places, Paul had set up churches based upon converts who had been Jews, and one can imagine that the issue of circumcision was hotly debated amongst people for whom respect for the traditions of circumcision would have been an issue. If you read Acts 16, however, you will discover that the Philippian church originated amongst Gentiles (for example, Lydia – Acts 16:13ff, and the jailer – Acts 16:33ff) and was not based upon any core Jewish converts. The clue to what was happening lies in Paul's second warning against 'evil workers'. The word for 'workers' is the word usually used by Paul for those who spread the word of the Gospel with him; like Timothy (2:22) and Epaphroditus (2:25). There is some evidence, outside of scripture, that in order to address the perceived threat of the early church, Jewish communities attempted to infiltrate churches with individuals who were capable of speaking well about the Messiah and God, but who insisted upon circumcision and the laws of Moses.

This is what Paul described as evil, for it was an evil work which sought to draw Gentile Christians into the world of Judaism. Paul himself seems to have been quite accepting of circumcision amongst Jewish Christians (see his insistence on circumcision for Timothy, who was a Jew by his mother, Acts 16:1,2), but he was vehemently opposed to its imposition on Gentiles. He not only turned the insulting word 'dogs' back on these infiltrators because they would have used the same insult against anyone who was not circumcised, but he took the word for circumcision (Greek 'peritome') and used an amended form of the word which was even more insulting; 'mutilation' (Greek 'katatome'). Why was he so powerfully opposed to this teaching at Philippi? The answer comes in verse 3.

Verse 3 – the true circumcision

Paul uses every part of his training in the Old Testament scriptures to state in this one succinct verse the eternal truth of God's work in creating a new people, a 'true circumcision' as Paul calls it. The church inherits from the Jewish people the Covenant promises of God and the privilege of worshipping Him and being His

servants in the work of the salvation of the world. We take this truth for granted today, but Paul was the first person God used to explain this to people in words they understood, and which were also a true reflection of scripture.

As you read the verse you will probably notice the connections it has with John's famous quote from Jesus 'But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.' (John 4:23). Jesus was talking, of course, to a Gentile woman when he said this, and it is no coincidence that Paul makes the same connections in this verse between 'worship', and 'spirit' and 'truth' whilst describing the new church of God made up of Gentile Christians.

It was the special privilege of God's people of Old Testament times to worship Him (Deut 6:12; 10:12), yet through allowing the law and circumcision to be regarded as the rights to this privilege rather than the signs of it, they had forfeited the privilege. The same Moses who proclaimed the original right also said, 'yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you . . . circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.' (Deut 6:15,16) It was clear from the start that what the Lord wanted was a relationship with people rather than any obligatory systems, and as prophets of later years so easily observed, the people of Israel failed in their relationship with God through slavish adherence to the religious systems they created around what the Lord had done for them (Is 1:11, 27ff; Jer 9:23-25 for example). The church at Philippi, founded by Paul was to be part of God's new people who had a relationship with Him through Jesus Christ, and as far as Paul was concerned, that was the unique spiritual heart of the Christian Church. As he concluded 'we place no confidence in the circumcision of the flesh'.

Application

From time to time, Paul found it necessary to burst out of the pleasantries of normal letter writing and even the joy of writing with affection to those he loved with words that have moved people for centuries (e.g. Phil. 2:5-11). As in this case, he spoke with specific and explicit venom against those who had infiltrated God's people in order to try to teach them something other than the Gospel.

How aware are we of the dangers of those who preach in our midst that which is different from the Gospel handed down to us? It is difficult, in an age when society calls on us to allow 'freedom of expression' and 'free speech', to appear restrictive in what the church allows and teaches; but the issue will not go away. I have known of several instances where churches have been disturbed by the preaching of people who have un-checked credentials, and they then deeply regret that they have allowed something other than the Gospel of Jesus to be preached. The issue is even more serious when those who are trained for the ministry of preaching and teaching in our churches are not themselves taught about the historic Christian faith and the Gospel upon which it is based; nor even the scriptural basis for the historic faith. They cannot then be trusted or assumed to preach the Gospel.

Whatever concerns you have about what is taught or preached in your church, I urge you to voice it to those who do preach, and to those who are in leadership within your churches. Even if you have never had formal training in theology or the Bible, if you have a spiritual relationship with God through Jesus, and you are in good fellowship with others in our own church, then you should have the courage to speak out. You should mention anything said from the pulpit which disturbs you or you believe to be different from the Gospel. It is right to give these things careful consideration and due time, but no good comes from keeping these things unexpressed, and the truth must always be sought. We may not feel that we have the standing of one such as Paul or the knowledge he possessed, but if we cannot fight for the truth of the Gospel within the church, how can we proclaim it to the world?

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you find it easy or difficult to rejoice in the Lord when things are difficult, particularly at church or at your fellowship? Why is this?
2. Is there anything taught within the life of your church which may be considered similar to the unspiritual teaching of circumcision in this letter of Paul?
3. Some believe it is too bold and assertive to say that 'we are the true church'. Is this so? In what ways is this true today?

Personal comments by author

Often, we find that when we complain about something which is being preached, then we are only voicing things that other people feel, and once we have expressed it, others will take it up with us. We are called by scriptures to deal with such issues openly within the church, so seek a way of doing this within your own church discipline. You may be surprised at the way God can bless what at first appears to be very hard.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Spend a few moments thinking about what you have heard preached at church over the years. Can you identify anything that you feel has departed from the Gospel? If you can, then the best thing you can do, particularly if it is recent, is to discuss it firstly with others, to see whether they agree, and then discuss it with the leaders.*
- *What are the major heresies taught today in the church? Pray about this and ask the Lord if there is anything you can do counter what you sincerely believe to be wrong.*

Final Prayer

I commit my day to You, Lord Jesus Christ. You can see the whole world in a moment, and yet You have taken care of me this day through the good and bad, the easy and difficult. I return the day to You, so that every thought, word and deed may be blessed according to Your will, wisdom and purpose. Thank You Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN
