

## Prayer

Lord Jesus, You understand all people, and You understand me. On some days I offer You praise because I am happy and on other days I pray to You in sorrow, so I submit these feelings to You who loves and me knows all things. Give me faith to trust in You through joy and sorrow, and guide me through life on an even path, for Your name's sake, Lord Jesus I pray; AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Look at the way light works, producing colour, creating shadows, enabling life, and much more. Use your observations to praise God the Creator.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for young people in church** *Pray that the young people in your church will be helped to make commitments to Christ as Saviour*
- *Give thanks to God for His compassion and healing power*
- *Pray about the political concerns for Iran and its nuclear programme*

## Meditation

The beauty of life is variety,  
and the endless diversity of what may be found on earth.  
God save us from human greed,  
and the way it destroys everything that is good in our world.

The wonder of life is love,  
and its wondrous link to bearing children, and family life.  
God save us from demeaning sex,  
and the immense damage it does both to people and society.

The marvel of life is learning,  
and the truth that motivated people have incredible potential.  
God save us from poor education  
and the limits it places on vast numbers of people in the world.

The miracle of life is faith,  
and the fact that most people living know that a God must exist.  
God save us from blinkered secularism  
and its failure to give a moral basis for a life of peace and love!

The expectation of life is the future,  
And the awesome destiny Christ offers to each through His love.  
God save us from failing to pass on  
The amazing truth that Christ waits to greet us in His heaven!

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## Bible passage - Philippians 3:17-21

<sup>17</sup> Friends, join together in following my example, and set your standards by those who live according to the pattern you have seen in me. <sup>18</sup> For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have frequently told you of them, and now do so with tears. <sup>19</sup> Since they are preoccupied with earthly things, their end is destruction; their god is the stomach; and their glory is in their shame.

<sup>20</sup> However, our citizenship is found in heaven, and it is from there that we eagerly await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>21</sup> By means of his power through which everything comes

under His authority, He will transform our degraded body and make it the same as His glorious Body.

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## Bible Study

### Review

On the surface, this is an extraordinary passage. In summary, what Paul says is this; 'copy me and the standards of my life; if you don't, you are an 'enemy of the Cross of Christ', and if you do, you will be saved.' It would seem impossible for any of us to say anything like this today and it is hard for us to understand how anyone can. Paul is amazingly bold to say 'follow my example' (3:17) because Jesus is our example, not the apostle Paul! However, this is scripture, and we must remember that Paul would argue that all he has done is to hold up through himself an example of what God wants of His people. He is not the Saviour, but an example of faith.

In fact, Paul did us a great favour by speaking in this way, for such boldness exposes reality and truth. Just like the Philippians who first read this, how we react to these words depends upon what we think of the message Paul preached and the life he lived, and his words force us to think about the standards he set and the example of his life. At this point in his letter, there is little doubt that Paul is talking about the example he has just given in his testimony; of one who puts everything aside to follow Christ (3:7,8) and is wholly committed to the path of Christian discipleship with single-minded vigour until death (3:12f.). Lying behind this testimony are Paul's absolute beliefs in the supremacy of God, the unique revelation of the Father through the life of Jesus Christ, the imperative of the Gospel of salvation and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, frequently written about in all his letters. In whatever way we interpret these beliefs ourselves and whatever opinion we form from them about Paul himself, it is impossible to say that this is not what Paul taught and based his life upon. In addition, he asked his readers to join together with him (3:17) in believing and living this Gospel.

Despite much confusion amongst scholars about the meaning of several words in this text, which are in some cases virtually invented by Paul himself, this passage is a direct appeal from Paul to the people of the Philippian church to live according to the standards of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, no less. This Gospel is focussed on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, as can be seen in verse 18, where Paul warns 'for many live as enemies of the Gospel of Christ ...'. Then in the comparison that forms the rest of our passage, Paul does not mention himself at all; he was bold enough to use himself at the beginning of this text. However, he did this as an example, not out of arrogance, but in the absolute belief that the church could not survive unless its members copied the kind of devotion to Christ that governed his own life. Now that Paul's words have been accepted as Christian scripture, his example is also valid for us today. It is not good enough for us to like or dislike any character in the Bible such as Paul; their story or their part in Scripture; every part of God's Word has something important to say, and the letters of Paul give an essential explanation of how the Gospel is to be lived. We are to follow Paul's example.

The rest of the text powerfully follows on from this. Paul's description of people's preoccupation with earthly things (3:19) stands as a condemnation of the material world in which we live, and his analysis of our 'citizenship ... in heaven' (3:20) is a reminder of the heavenly responsibilities we have, even in this life. The passage ends with a reminder from Paul of the glorious resurrection, but the body he speaks of is not that of an individual, but of the church. Christ, the focus of Paul's life, our lives, and the life of the whole Church of God, will overcome all problems and false teaching and change His Church to make it 'the same as His glorious Body'.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The importance of 'copying'
- The enemy within
- An eager expectation

### Going Deeper

Our study continues with a further look at what this text says about copying the good examples of faith that are set before us, and also the examples Paul gives of evils which penetrate God's people. The concluding verses of our text are rooted in the glorious hope of the Gospel. A truth which comes from heaven but is made real on earth.

### ***The importance of 'copying'***

In asking the Philippians to follow his example, Paul therefore asked them to follow Jesus Christ. In general, the only way that we learn anything is from other people, so the only way to learn about how to put faith into practice is from the example of others. In everyday life, a child learns from its parents and then, at school, from a range of people, including both teachers and other children. So also, all of us learn about Christian faith from others, who pass on to us the basics of how to live the Christian life once Christ has called us and we have responded. Christian children learn from their parents and eventually from others at church; but in our unstable world today, when few children learn about Christianity, faith, or the Bible, it is only when they come to faith in later years that they face the detailed challenges of how to put faith into practice. They will pick this up casually from other Christians unless they are helped.

It is therefore very important that we choose the right people to learn from! There are good examples even today, but there are also bad examples. In his letter, Paul asked the Philippians to copy his example because his life was given over to Christ and the Gospel. At the end of verse 17, he appealed to them to copy others as well; people whose lives were similarly given to the Lord, such as Timothy and Epaphroditus, for whom he had just given glowing references (2:19-29). He was not prescriptive in what he said, though, and left it open for those of real faith to understand what he had said, and copy those who demonstrated Christ in their lives.

Implicit in everything that Paul said is firstly the wisdom of knowing who are the good examples of Christian faith, perhaps even the best examples, and secondly of Christians 'joining together' to follow these examples. We all learn best when we do so together, as all learning theory confirms, and although it does not make this clear in all translations, the strange Greek word which comes at the beginning of this verse does indeed emphasise the coming together of the Lord's people in order to learn about how to live a life which examples Christ.

Today, learning and copying of faith is, of course, an important process. Good examples are to be found in the work of church fellowship groups, in the mentoring of young people not just for leadership or ministry, but for life as a Christian, and also through reading about great Christian figures of the past. It is all a matter of the quality of the 'examples' and leaders used for such leadership and mentoring. Looking forward, these are the things the Spirit uses to take the Church of God into the future; looking back, all that is authentically passed on comes from Christ (not Paul, personally), and that is the touchstone of our faith.

### ***The enemy within***

In the context of the letter Paul was writing, one would expect Paul to focus on the issue of circumcision as he turned, with emotion (3:18) to speak to the Philippians about what upset him in the alternative examples of faith to be found within the church. His focus however was on Jesus, and he swiftly identified what lay at the heart of all opposition to the Gospel; the 'enemies of the Cross of Christ'. In proceeding to explain what this meant Paul spoke directly to every age, and ours is no exception.

There will always be those who dislike the key element of discipleship of 'suffering' for the sake of Jesus (3:10). We know from people who wrote about the life of early Christians that this was true then as it is now. The prevailing moral standard without the suffering of the 'Cross of Christ' was, and is, 'do what you want, just don't hurt others'. It hardly takes a genius to work out that living by such license does not work; for with the best of intentions, if you do whatever you want, you quickly offend others. Secondly, such 'freedom' is the antithesis of Christian faith (see Romans 3 and 6:15ff). Paul comments that those who are in this way 'preoccupied with earthly things' will discover that there is no future for them, for 'their end is destruction'.

Two other 'enemies within' are identified by Paul which strike at the heart of true faith. When Paul wrote 'their god is the stomach' (3:19) he was referring not simply to greed, which is obviously the opposite of Christian morality, he was bringing up the real differences between Christians of those days about eating food. Firstly, the ritual laws of cleanliness from the Old Testament which some felt should be applied to the church (despite the pronouncement of the Council of Jerusalem on this which cancelled the obligation – see Acts 11). Secondly, many ordinary people had concerns that the meat from the market may have been sacrificially offered to other gods, and refused to eat it (Paul talks about this extensively in Romans 14 and 1 Cor. 7). Disputes like this have often been used by Satan to prevent the Lord's work, and Paul had had enough of these disputes, and said so plainly to the Philippians.

Paul's last comment (3:19) was 'their glory is in their shame'. Using a subtle word play obvious to those who heard it, Paul dismissed the Judaisers and the havoc they had created in the church. Their key argument about continuity with the Jewish faith (their 'glory', as Paul put it) was circumcision. Now, when a Gentile convert accepted circumcision, he had to present himself naked to a Jew, and the word for 'naked', was similar to 'shame'. Yet Paul's comment was no 'pun'; one has the impression that although he respected the rite of circumcision for Jews, he was disgusted by its shameful advocacy to Gentile Christians by these Judaisers.

## ***An eager expectation***

It is with relief that Paul then turned to speak of what the faithful Christian might expect as a result of learning the path of Christian discipleship based upon Christ. In a famous verse, Paul spoke of the 'citizenship ... found in heaven' which is the spiritual birthright of every believer. Whilst the idea of citizenship may seem unremarkable to us, in Paul's day it was very important. Philippi was an important Roman colony, and many people living there were Roman citizens, although they lived in a Macedonia, a region north of Greece and a long way from Rome. They would have held their Roman citizenship as very important, just like any 'ex-patriot' today who keeps strong ties with their home country.

Paul explains that our life is like that of an ex-patriot, for once we have become Christian, our true homeland is not to be found on this earth, but in heaven; and we look forward to being 'repatriated' to heaven with our Lord Jesus Christ (3:20). This is, in truth, far from an easy or casual picture of Christian belonging, and it would be fair to say that many Christian people struggle to accept this. Yet this is not a scripture that should be ignored because it is 'difficult'. Those who follow Christ with the intensity and devotion that Paul was trying to example would know, he said, that they did not have a home on this earth any more. Jesus said a very similar thing as he addressed the disciples 'foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Matt 8:20). This is indeed the point at which many stumble on the Christian path. They love their homes and their lives too much to go this far; heaven is for them a quite satisfactory hope for the future, indeed, they are happy to aim for it. However, it takes real commitment to the Lord to openly confess that your 'home' is in heaven, and your life and all you identify with now is like a 'colony' from which you expect to be removed!

Yet although it is important to apply what Paul says about our 'citizenship' personally, the text asks us to remember that these things are possessed collectively. A colony is only a colony when there are many people who make it up! And we do not live alone in this life or the next. Paul concludes this part of his letter with the affirmation that all this is ultimately in the hands of Christ, who will 'transform our degraded body and make it the same as His glorious body'. This awesome picture is typical of Paul's use of the word 'body' in his writings in general, referring to the Church of God. Because our citizenship is in heaven, Christ will make perfect his body the Church in due time, and by holding firm to Christ and the example of His life that has been handed down to us, we will be part of it.

## **Application**

Implicit within these words of Paul are several challenges to all who read. Firstly, there is the call to make sure that we each model our lives on those who demonstrably have Christ at the centre of their lives. Some find this difficult and complain that there is no-one near them with whom they can enjoy such fellowship, at whatever level, in fellowship or in formal mentoring. This may seem to be the case, but sometimes our eyes are blinded to the possibilities. I have had cause to observe many dignified and elderly people who model the truth of the Gospel, but for cultural reasons, some their experience. We must challenge our cultural presumptions if our eyes are to be wide open enough to be led by the Lord on this. It is also worth noting that reading about Christians of the past can be a good substitute, with minimal guidance, when such mentoring is unavailable or impossible for practical reasons.

Although it is right for us all to make sure that we take the right 'model' of Christ into our own lives, there is a further challenge we should face. If we are wholly committed to the Lord, who should we be mentoring? Should we be consciously attempting to offer ourselves to others so that they may learn of the life of Christ from us? Many will stand back from this and protest that they are not worthy; yet I fear that to do this is often evidence of a false humility. We must take Paul's example and if we know in our hearts that we are completely committed to the Lord, then there is no reason why we should not say, appropriately and sensitively of course, 'follow my example and I will point you to Christ'. Sometimes this is evident from how we lead our lives and we need not say it. Sometimes it needs to be said.

All of this is possible, and much more if we know our citizenship is in heaven, if we know that our hearts are right before the Lord, and we are prepared to do His will. The world is aching for God's people to demonstrate Christ in the world today; no more, no less.

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## **Discipleship**

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Try to write a list of what you believe to be the best standards of Christian living, based on Christ. Are these this possible? If not, why not?

2. Discuss the issue of mentoring. How could mentoring work as a way of helping people grow in Christ in your church?
3. How do we express our 'citizenship of heaven'? Is it just a spiritual thing, or is it something that we can show to others in some way?

### ***Personal comments by author***

*We often copy other people almost unthinkingly, and this text challenges me to be more discerning about who I admire and seek to follow. It reminds me that the earthly examples I see are never perfect, but helpful in so far as they point to Christ. It is not good if I seek to emulate various people and end up copying their faults!*

### ***Ideas for exploring discipleship***

- *Write a list of who have influenced your life, and alongside it a list of what you have learned from those people. This can be revealing. It is more challenging however, to write a list of people you know who might benefit from your own time, attention and influence. What can you give to others?*
- *Pray to the Lord and place before Him all those people who have been a great influence on your life. Ask the Lord to help you continue to learn from them, but to turn away from any earthly or godless feature of their lives. No-one except Christ is perfect.*

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## **Final Prayer**

Bring us, Lord Jesus, to the place where we can look back and be happy that we have learned from the past, look forward and anticipate with joy the future you have in store for us, and be content that our lives reflect the Faith that has been handed down to us. Bring us, Lord Jesus, to that place of peace. AMEN

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