

Prayer

Praise be to You Lord Jesus, for You fill my soul with joy and gladness. Joy because I know that You will be alongside me in all I do, and gladness because You bring the best out of every situation that comes my way. Your gifts enable me to stand above the strife, suffering and evil in this world; for when these troubles touch me, Your love restores my soul, and leads me back again to You in joy and gladness,! Thank You Jesus; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Look around you, and use whatever the Lord brings to your attention as a trigger for your prayers.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for young people in church** Pray for the young people in your church, and their programmes of worship and learning
- Praise the Lord for the love of friends and family
- Pray about corruption and scandal in the life of your own country

Meditation

Give us space, Lord God, within this busy world,
To foster all that is good, and encourage those around us.

May we take time to speak to a friend who needs our help;
May we offer love and affection to all those in our families;
May we give attention to all our neighbours who need help;
May we present ourselves well, and speak no ill of others;
May we take care to conclude our work properly, for we do it for You;
May we bring our prayers to You, day or night, whenever needed;
May we speak to others about the Lord who is our joy and strength.

And in everything, may we give you honour and praise;
Giving glory to You, the source of our strength and happiness.

Bible passage - Philippians 3:4-11

Paul's great testimony of faith; he has his set past life in Judaism aside, and has accepted a new life through the death and resurrection of Christ, leading to righteousness and eternal life

⁴ Look, I have every good reason to trust in the flesh, and if anyone else thinks they have any other good reasons for this confidence, I have yet more: ⁵ I was circumcised on the eighth day, one of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; in respect of the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, one who persecuted the church; as to righteousness based on the law, faultless. ⁷ Yet whatever benefits I had, I now consider them lost because of Christ.

⁸ More than that, I even consider everything as lost compared to the supreme value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost all things for his sake, and I regard them as rubbish, so that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is based on faith.

¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share in his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if by some means I may obtain the resurrection from the dead.

Bible Study

Review

Our reading today is a forthright and personal account of the Gospel, and Paul writes passionately about his faith in defence of the Gospel. He does this because at Philippi, others were teaching that Christians needed to be circumcised if they were to be obedient to God's call, and this was contrary to the Gospel Paul preached. He treated such teaching as a personal attack because he had been the first to preach the Gospel in Philippi (Acts 16), so his defence of the Gospel is both personal and theological.

This passage contains some powerful writing, and at its heart lies Paul's conviction that the Gospel is already defined and needs no addition. He insists that the Gospel is based on Christ and Christ alone, and needs no connection with Judaism other than that provided by Jesus Himself. Of course, this is broadly what Christians believe to this day, but we do so because Paul's writing has been recognised as presenting the true Gospel. Paul fought for the truths of Christian doctrines such as Christ's unique saving grace, and through his writing (and that of others), the Lord has established the heritage of faith we have received.

Paul begins by offering his personal testimony, using this to make his point that circumcision is not necessary for salvation. He knew what he meant, because he had been brought up a strict Jew, (3:4-6). Indeed, he lists a perfect number of seven qualifications, beginning with his heritage as a Jew by birth and circumcision. Remarkably, he confesses that he was a Pharisee (3:5), a small but powerful Jewish sect set on wresting religious authority away from the High Priestly family of Jerusalem. In the first century, the Pharisees established control of Judaism across the Roman Empire by preaching relentlessly and teaching their strict codes of conduct developed from the Laws of Moses, and insisting on circumcision. Paul openly declares that he was one of their number, indeed, to the point of persecuting the church (as he frequently confessed - Acts 22:5ff, 26:12ff, Gal 1:13ff).

Paul's testimony is extraordinary and there is much passion in his words; he speaks of bundling up this past and throwing it away! Moreover, he who should know most about the importance of circumcision included even this in the bundle of things he gladly threw away '*because of Christ*' (3:7), and exchanged for '*the supreme value of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord*' (3:8)! These words are full of warmth, and we who read this know that Paul was speaking from personal experience.

From this point onwards, Paul offers a remarkable testimony, and this has become a standard for Christians ever since. It is centred firmly on Christ, and is set against the scenario of God's final judgement, when faith is tested and eternal life is sealed (3:9-11). He longs to be '*found in Christ*' when facing his God, and be made righteous with God. Nothing is worth more than this eternal reward (3:8f.), which is found only through the redeeming work of Christ, in His death and resurrection (3:10,11).

Paul's testimony here is a forthright expression of faith in Jesus Christ. He speaks here of basic Christian faith, and his words are clearly influenced by his own experience of conversion on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1f.). Yet God has chosen to use Paul to convey an important truth of the Gospel, which is that Christian faith is not a change of direction, it is a totally new life. Eternal life cannot be tacked on to our experience as an 'add-on', it is found through life-changing submission to Christ. Through the death of Christ our own lives change forever; life can never be the same again and the prize of the '*resurrection from the dead*' is won (3:11)!

The main Bible study will look further at some of the powerful words and phrases of Paul's great testimony, but we should be cautious about one thing. This is a powerful example of Christian testimony, but it does not attempt to say everything that can be said about faith. The purpose of this testimony is to honour Christ as the sole means of our salvation

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Paul's heritage as an Israelite
- Paul's prior life experience
- The supreme value of knowing Christ

Going Deeper

Paul's testimony is a wonderful scripture, and deserves our most careful attention; Christ is our salvation, and in the light of this, everything else is of little relative value, however important something may be to the sustenance of life here and now. Spiritual truth lies in making sure that we know the difference between what is of passing interest and value, and what is immortal and eternal and a means of our salvation.

Paul's heritage as an Israelite

Paul's first argument against the Judaisers in Philippi was that he knew more about Judaism than they did! He was at pains to explain that his qualifications as a Jew were more impressive than anything they could muster! The things Paul mentioned in the seven points which followed are interesting. The first four are all hereditary qualifications, and were of great importance to a Jew; no-one could call themselves a member of God's people without a specific Jewish heritage. The first of these was circumcision, the subject which was causing the controversy, but Paul emphasised that he was circumcised 'on the eighth day'; in other words, he was a Jew by birth. In those days, many people became Jews through conversion, later in life, either because they were impressed by the Jewish faith and lifestyle in the midst of the excesses of the Roman Empire, or because the Jews had privileges assigned them by order of Emperors; some 'Judaisers' were converts such as this, but Paul was a 'real' Jew.

The next qualification Paul gave was that he was 'one of the people of Israel' (3:5), that is, one of the covenant people who had a special relationship with God through history; a proud privilege if ever there was one! He then spoke of his being of the 'tribe of Benjamin' (3:5), the famous southern tribe associated with the tribe of Judah, and bearer of the first king of all Israel, Saul. This tribe of Israel was regarded as one of the smaller tribes, but one of the most fiercely loyal not only to Saul but also to the lineage of David and the city of Jerusalem. The next qualification was that Paul was a 'Hebrew amongst Hebrews'; this strange expression means that Hebrew, the ancient language of the Bible, was Paul's mother tongue. Many Jews living in Israel did not speak Hebrew in those days, they spoke Aramaic, a 'common language' of the day; it is normally reckoned that Jesus spoke Aramaic, for example. Paul, however, had learned Hebrew in his youth from his parents, who were Pharisees (living in Tarsus, north of Antioch), and the Old Testament history of God's people was deeply rooted in his conscience and his spirit.

Paul's prior life experience

Paul, because of his parents, was therefore a born Pharisee (3:5). In talking about what this meant, Paul did not try to explain the difficult relationship Jesus had with Pharisees or the antipathy that there was between Christians and Pharisees because of Jesus' death. He confessed his life as a Pharisee because this showed his opponents the extremely high level of Jewish religious observance with which he was familiar; they could not match it. Paul had grown up learning and living thousands of religious rites covering every aspect of life, and was expected not only to keep them all, but to be even better! It was also as a Pharisee that Paul saw it as his duty to persecute the followers of Jesus by mandate (3:6), his mission before the Lord called him on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1ff). His extraordinary zeal for God was such that he practiced his faith to perfection, even regarding himself even as 'faultless' (3:7).

Being 'faultless' was, for a Pharisee, a high yet achievable claim and one that many believed they attained; Paul certainly did! Yet having confessed this extreme religiosity, Paul's testimony changed dramatically; he did not recite the famous story of meeting Jesus on the Damascus Road, rather, he explained what it meant in a way that was designed to demolish the arguments of the so-called Christians who had disturbed the church at Philippi. In two brief verses, he described the radical transformation of the spirit by which his life was changed, for he had found God not through these things, but through Christ.

Still speaking passionately, Paul described every one of the supreme gifts of life he had received as a Jew as 'lost because of Christ' (3:7). He then expanded this with a sentence which is one of the most compelling testimonies of faith in the whole Bible; 'More than that, I even consider everything as lost compared to the supreme value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' (3:8). He then dismissed his lost Jewish benefits as 'rubbish'; meaning quite literally, 'rotting refuse!' We can be in no doubt as to what Paul meant. When weighed in the balance, all the benefits of the highest religious standards ever known counted for nothing against the privilege of knowing Jesus Christ; this was the key to Paul's relationship with God. It was Paul's key, and our key.

Some people question what Paul meant by 'knowing' Jesus Christ. The Greek word here means something more like 'intimate involvement with' rather than just knowledge in an intellectual sense, but Paul is never ashamed to include the 'mind' and the 'intellect' in his descriptions of our relationship with God. Neither does the word have sexual connotations, as some cynics assume from the well known Old Testament phrase 'Adam knew his wife Eve and she bore a son ...' (Gen 4:1 – Authorised Version). The idea of 'intimate involvement' means different things in the various real circumstances of life in which it is used; for example,

intimate involvement with a lover is indeed sexual, and intimate involvement with an academic subject is intellectual, but intimate involvement with God is spiritual; this is what 'knowing Christ' means. Underlying everything Paul wrote is the assumption that what every human being needs is an intimate relationship with their Creator God. Nothing can ever be more important than this.

The supreme value of knowing Christ

There are many important themes within the next three verses of this text, verses 9-11. One of these is the idea of 'being found'. When Paul, having testified, speaks of being 'found in Him' (3:9), it looks as if he is talking about the end of time, when Christ will come again to 'find' his servants (Matt 24:36ff). This appears to be born out at the end of Paul's testimony where he states that his personal goal was 'to obtain the resurrection of the dead' (3:11), another way of saying that he would find eternal life through Christ. Being 'found' in Christ Jesus does however mean more than this. For Paul it was a reality of his life at the time he wrote the letter, before his death. His testimony was that he was to be found 'in Christ' from the moment that he made the transition of faith and ditched all the trappings of religion and accepted the call to follow Jesus.

What Paul wanted all his readers to know was that all Christians could be 'found' righteous before God even now, before death, because of the call of the Lord Jesus, and their response to that call. This was the heart of Christianity and it replaced the extraordinarily complicated structure of religion the Jews had hedged around the God who chose them. He did not place before the Philippians and the Judaisers in their church the idea that everything would be sorted out in eternity; he was concerned to say by his testimony that we discover our righteousness before Almighty God not through any religiosity, but through following Jesus. He emphasised this powerfully by concluding his testimony with the personal affirmation that he wanted to be identified with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection not simply in a future sense, but here and now (v10). We should have no doubt about this, for this is what lies behind everything Paul says about Christian baptism in the letter to the Romans (Romans 6).

Application

This 'righteousness ... based on faith' is, in every letter of Paul, the centre piece of everything he says about what it means to be a Christian and to discover, by the grace of God, that we are 'saved'. Of course it does secure for us a certain hope of our own resurrection and eternal life, but the 'power of the resurrection' (3:10) is what Christians need now, and 'to share in his sufferings' (3:10) is not some alternative super-religious experience, but the reality of living sacrificial Christian lives now. Whilst reading through this passage of scripture in different commentaries, it seemed to me that many good authors were so taken up either by the majesty of Paul's words and its exposition, they forgot that Paul was attempting to encourage ordinary Christians to stand firm against a pernicious religious elite trying to take over their church by false teaching. By giving his own testimony, Paul powerfully refocused the Philippians back on the truths of the Gospel he had taught them when he first went to Philippi and founded the church (Acts 16). Their defence against false teaching and the problems of the church were to hold fast to the truths of the Gospel they had received.

The same is true for us today. Whilst this passage of scripture can certainly be used to expound and explain the Christian faith, its purpose is to encourage and refocus, to strengthen and to empower. It is my observation that in too many churches I have visited, I meet disempowered people. This happens through the evils that have crept into the church which are quite different from the problems of the church at Philippi. For example, the erroneous or dogmatic use of liturgy, theology or music (of any sort), the domination of congregations by overzealous pastors who think too much of their own abilities, or of leaders who utterly refuse to lead their flocks or pastor them at all. I have also observed good Christian people disempowered by things within the church and also pressures from outside, from family or work or health. Satan will use any method possible to keep faithful people away from doing God's work in the church (which is His Kingdom on earth) and in the world (our mission field). What Paul shows us in these remarkable words is not just a beautiful and poetic exposition of the Christian faith, but the power of testimony to enliven, inspire and empower God's people.

Who can read words such as this and not be inspired? After reading a passage such as this, do you not feel that all things are possible in Christ Jesus? Paul wanted his words to have this effect on the Philippian Church.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. As you read this passage, what does Paul say which is close to or similar to your own experience of faith?
2. Think for a moment about how the church at Philippi would have felt upon reading this. Write a list of things they may have felt upon reading this part of the letter.
3. How do people respond to talk of the future life of eternity in your church? Who likes it and who does not, and why?

Personal comments by author

There are two ways to respond to this passage of scripture. Firstly, you can look at the way in which Paul found faith after throwing away all religiosity, and examine yourself to see if there is any religiosity in your life which needs to go (religiosity is giving anything 'religious' a higher priority than Jesus Christ). I have often had reason to help people let go of their attitudes to buildings, music or people, for example, so that they can be free to be fully committed to the Lord. The second response is to read this passage again and again; and let its power enrich and inspire you, and hopefully empower you, for with your life totally focussed on Jesus, everything of God's purposes for you will be possible that previously seemed impossible.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read verses 8-11 and choose a part or all of this passage as specially significant or descriptive of your own faith. Write this out slowly or artistically; perhaps create a graphic display using your computer and print it off. In this way, you will be blessed through these words of scripture.*
- *Pray and fast for those who do not know the saving love of Christ Jesus.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, Your presence is the greatest treasure we may possess. Banish the fears, troubles, woes and anxiety that clog up our lives, and graciously stay with us on the pathway of life. Your nature is love, and we praise you for showing this love despite the frailties of our humanity. Thank You Jesus. AMEN
