

Shepherding Notes

Philippians

By Caleb Bunch

Welcome to the New Testament book of Philippians. You will very quickly notice the genre is that of an epistle — a letter. Narrative books, like Genesis or 2 Samuel, teach theology through stories of historical events. Epistles teach theology through direct doctrinal instruction. Philippians is a book that is flooded with imperative verbs — commands that we are called to put immediately and permanently into practice. Our focus today will be framed by just two of the myriads of possible truths in this chapter. Then, if you want a bonus, there will be an extra note regarding the history of Philippi.

Paul's Imprisonment

vs. 12–13

Paul was a notable preacher of the gospel and the most prominent apostle to the Gentiles. It was probably very troubling to the churches to hear that Paul had been imprisoned. By the way Paul writes in this chapter, it appears that some were doubting that God was still with Paul or working through Paul. This is why he goes out of his way to explain that his bondage "has really served to advance the gospel." (vs. 12) In fact, it was in this way that Nero's imperial guard was infiltrated with the good news. Two guards were stationed next to Paul at all times. They thought that Paul was trapped, but Paul saw it the other way around. He viewed those soldiers not as enemies, but as targets for evangelism. The truth of Christ spread "throughout the whole imperial guard." (vs. 13) So much so that when Paul closes this letter he states, "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household."

"Don't allow frustration, anger, sorrow, or self-pity distract you from using your trials for His glory. Difficult circumstances are not a distraction from your mission — God allows you to encounter them in order to incorporate them into your mission."

As a note of encouragement, you should know that even when circumstances are less than favorable from a comfort standpoint, they are always sovereignly designed by a good and wise King in order to bring about the advancement of His kingdom. Through his imprisonment Paul was able to evangelize the innermost circle of the household of the church's greatest enemy during that time period. While Nero was turning Christians into torches for his dinner parties, his own personal guard was being converted one by one.

God will never accidentally allow you to spend a couple of nights in the hospital or a few extra hours in the waiting room at the body shop. Every circumstance — both enjoyable and miserable — that God brings into your life is part of His intricate plan to save a people for Himself. Let that truth change the way that you view your trials.

To Live is Christ

vs. 18–26

I have heard that there is a rare sort of Christian that exists that is so interested in the idea of heaven that they ignore ministry in the present. I have never met such a person. Most of us are so overwhelmed with the present that we ignore the great promises of eternity. In verses 18–26 we find the appropriate balance. Paul's desire was to depart this earth and go be with the Lord for that is "far better." (vs. 23) Yet he fully understands the great value of remaining in faithful ministry during his time here because "it means fruitful labor," and serves "your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus." (vs. 25–26) Paul perfectly summarizes this idea by stating, "to live is Christ, to die is gain." To live does not mean to continue on doing whatever makes me comfortable; nor does it mean to merely stay alive to continue experiencing the earthly things that I enjoy (even good things like family). Paul reveals that for the Christian, every breath we take in this lifetime is supposed to be for the purpose of pleasing, serving, and enjoying Christ. When a Christian dies, there is no loss. Although the prospect of crossing that final river is daunting, there is no need for the Christian to fear for they are stepping into a limitless, sinless, painless, endless eternity with the Savior.

Historical Note

For those who delight in piecing together the historical events of Scripture, I hope you enjoy this fun little link that brings the Bible together. The book of Esther keeps the lens of the story focused on what was happening within the city of Susa. However, if you remember back to the early parts of the book, King Ahasuerus went on a military campaign between chapters 1 and 2. Some of the most famous battles in ancient history were fought between the Persians and the Greeks during that chapter break. When Ahasuerus's army was depleted by the Greek and Spartan forces, they withdrew and ceased their efforts to expand into the European continent. Those battles concluded around 479 B.C.

Nine years later, a child named Socrates was born in Athens who would become known as "The Father of Western Philosophy." It is not an exaggeration to state that if Ahasuerus had won the war against Greece, Western Civilization would not exist. Socrates had a student named Plato. Plato had a student named Aristotle. These two men serve as the central figures of philosophy to this day.

Aristotle worked for King Philip II of Macedon. In particular, Aristotle was paid to serve as a tutor for Philip's son, Alexander. Aristotle instilled principles of politics and civilization into the mind of Alexander. Alexander became the greatest military commander in history and traveled east to conquer the entire Persian Empire. Ahasuerus' Persian kingdom was eventually overtaken by the descendants of the very enemy that he had made in Europe.

So, what does this have to do with Philippians? In 356 B.C., the same year that Alexander the Great was born, King Philip II of Macedon conquered a city called Krenides. He specifically conquered them because of the nearby goldmines that would serve to enrich his kingdom. He renamed the city after himself, Philippi. Later Alexander the Great would use the gold from those mines to fund his army as they conquered the ancient world. 410 years later, Paul would write to the Christians of Philippi in this little epistle we hold so dear.

Philippians 2 contains one of the most glorious passages of high Christology in all of Scripture. Verses 5–11 describe the incredible humility of Jesus by describing His willingness to be brought down from the highest of heavens all the way down to the grave. Although we could easily put the entirety of our focus on that portion of the chapter today, I want you to see the underlying point that Paul is making.

Paul presents this glorious explanation of Jesus' obedient humility in the context of a command. Through Paul, the Lord is commanding us to "Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus." What mind? He is telling us to think like Jesus did — not to think that we are above suffering for the glory of the Lord, or for the good of others. The first four verses of this chapter present us with one of the strongest pleas in all of Scripture for true Christians to lay down comfort and self-interest for the sake of serving and loving others. Paul helps us to see that the power to carry out this command cannot originate from some well of goodness deep within ourselves. This mind is ours in Christ Jesus. He has not only provided us with a perfect example of humility and service, He also helps us love others in this same way.

It would be very easy for us to think something along the lines of, "Well, of course Jesus could humble Himself like that — of course He could prioritize the interest of others — He is God!" It is likely that Paul anticipated a response of that nature. He therefore provides two examples of common people who shined like lights in a dark world by displaying the mind of Christ. Timothy and Epaphroditus were sent as messengers to carry this epistle to the church at Philippi. Paul makes it clear that they were not sent because they were unhelpful to him. On the contrary, Paul sent his best because he knew that they would not only serve as faithful messengers, but that they would also serve and strengthen the people who received the letter.

Timothy

vs. 19–24

What does it look like when someone actually puts into practice the command that we find in verse 4? "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Paul makes it clear that Timothy is the closest thing that he has to a spiritual son. The defining trait that Paul highlights in Timothy — the characteristic that distinguished him from everyone else — was that he would be "genuinely concerned for your welfare." One of the greatest evidences of a life transformed by the gospel is that

you will, like Timothy, become increasingly concerned about the spiritual welfare of others.

Epaphroditus

vs. 25–30

What does it look like to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves?" Consider Epaphroditus. This man was sent by the church in Philippi to help Paul while he was imprisoned. While he was with Paul, he became deathly ill. Instead of being concerned about himself, Epaphroditus was worried about how much his sickness would bring fear and sorrow to his brothers and sisters in his church back home. His concern was not for himself, but for those that he loved. The mind of Christ was displayed in his life by the way that his concern was not for personal ambition or advancement. He simply wanted his life to be given for the glory of God and the good of His people.

"Growing in Christian maturity includes developing a heart that happily and humbly places the needs of others before our own. In the power of Jesus, have this mind in yourself."

Today we are going to examine Paul's explanation of how he viewed his own good works in relation to righteousness. Consider his résumé. Because circumcision is central to the Judaizer's false gospel, Paul leads with the fact that he was not only circumcised but that he was set apart and dedicated at a circumcision ritual on the eighth day of his life. This was in accordance with the Old Testament law and made his act of circumcision superior to any who would have come to that conviction later in life. 1 Point for Paul.

Secondly, he was of the people of Israel — a full-blooded Jew, born to two Jewish parents. Biologically, he was born into the nation that God had chosen out of all the world. God's Old Covenant people had God's affection set upon them, and God chose to bring Paul into this world as one of them.

He adds that he was of the tribe of Benjamin. Remember the 12 tribes? Do you remember that Joseph was the apple of his father's eye? But then when he was sold into slavery by his brothers, Benjamin became the clear favorite? Benjamin was the sweetheart tribe. It is no coincidence that Paul's Jewish name was the same as the most famous Benjamite of the Old Testament, King Saul.

Then we find a qualification that is a little trickier to explain. There is some debate as to the actual meaning of Hebrew of Hebrews. Some argue that it is a reference to the fact that Paul could have gone into the temple and showed the genealogical records of his bloodline stretching all the way back to Abraham on both sides of his family tree. It could also be a reference to the exemplary life that he had lived in regard to his memorization of and dedication to the law. Either way, this is another point of emphasis on Paul's righteous record.

But he doesn't stop there. He notes that his relationship to the law was to become part of the group known as the Pharisees. This was not just a lifestyle that someone pops in and out of. It was a commitment to a specific way of life. When it came to obeying the law, nobody outdid the Pharisees.

Paul had this kind of ritualistic dedication to following the rules. He was a better law keeper than anyone peddling this false gospel. This is explosively clear in his final two qualifications. He declares that he took religion so seriously that he was willing to persecute the church in order to keep them from teaching anything that would draw people away from his understanding of the law. He was willing to have people killed in order to do what he believed God wanted him to do.

Finally, as if that wasn't enough, Paul pulls out the big guns. He concludes, "as to righteousness under the law, blameless." There are three things that you need to wrap your mind around here.

- Paul is not exaggerating. He is stating with apostolic authority and under the instruction of the Holy Spirit that he was a blameless person under the Old Covenant Law.
- Part of what Paul is doing is highlighting the limitation of the Old Covenant and how the New Covenant is better in every way. Whereas the Old Covenant consistently dealt with outward actions, the New Covenant gets to the heart. That is why Jesus said so many times during the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard it said," and then would press the matter further — from actions to motivations. Thus, he explains that murder can occur in your heart when you hate, and adultery exists in your heart when you lust. Actions are only an outward expression of sin that already exists in the heart.
- "Blameless" is not the same as "righteous." "Blameless" means that nobody could look at Paul and pinpoint a way that he had fallen short of obedience to the law. Nobody could assign blame to him. It does not mean that God could not find sin in his heart or life. He is not indicating that he was perfect, as he makes clear moving forward. Paul's argument of his great record of righteousness would have landed powerfully with the Philippians — everything that the Judaizers were teaching about was personified in Paul's life before he came to know Christ.

Counting It All Loss

vs. 7–9

We could all populate our own lists of good deeds, and many of them would be pretty extensive. However, all of your combined efforts do not move you one centimeter closer to heaven. They do not add one drop to your empty bucket of righteousness. Consider what Paul has to say about his résumé:

"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ." — Philippians 3:7–8

When Paul rips up his résumé here, it is not just to be bombastic. He is screaming to us, "If you trust in those things, you are doomed." The only way to gain Christ is to view all of those works of righteousness as rubbish. They are of no value. Isaiah 64:6 tells us that

even our most righteous acts are like filthy, bloodstained rags. They are not just neutral to God — they are offensive to Him. And that is the best stuff that you and I do. Paul says that he counts all of the stuff that he used to view as valuable as a loss. Those things not only failed to bring his balance up, but they effectively dropped his level of righteousness even lower.

Alien Righteousness

When you imagine that you can earn God's favor, or buy Him off with a few days of acting like a good person, He is deeply offended. Your greatest need is righteousness. You do not have any of your own righteousness. You cannot produce righteousness. The argument that Paul is making has only one possible conclusion: you must receive righteousness from somewhere else — or to be more specific, from Someone else. This is the teaching that the Reformers referred to as alien righteousness. God provides what God demands. He demands that you have righteousness, but He gives it to us freely through Christ. He makes it incredibly clear — the law does you no good here. Righteousness only comes to a person when they have faith in Jesus Christ.

We must trust that His life of good works has been credited to us. When Jesus died on the cross, He paid for the sins of His people. But He does much more than to pay our debt and bring us to a zero balance. He also adds an infinite amount of righteousness to our account. It is a perfect, but unfair trade. He gets your sin; you get His righteousness.

"I have no other argument; I have no other plea. It is enough that Jesus died, and that He died for me." Your hope must be built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

Philippians 4:4 delivers a powerful command: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" To rejoice means choosing a lifestyle of joy, rooted in Christ, regardless of circumstances. As R.C. Sproul says, "Joy is not an option for the Christian; it is a duty, flowing from the reality of our salvation." Let's explore why this joy is essential and how we can live it out.

The Sin of Joylessness

vs. 4

Our minds are battlefields where sin, including joylessness, wages war. Joylessness isn't just a mood — it's a sin. It reflects a heart more focused on temporary troubles than on Christ's eternal work. We're adopted into God's family, yet we grumble like orphans. We know God works all things for His glory and our good (Romans 8:28), yet we complain when life disappoints. We're united with Christ, yet we chase fleeting possessions. C.J. Mahaney warns, "Joylessness is a subtle sin, robbing us of the delight God intends and dishonoring His grace." This sin is so common we barely notice it, but God commands us to rejoice — not in circumstances, but in Him.

The world ties joy to favorable conditions — winning games, gaining wealth, or achieving success. If our chief delight is anything less than Christ, our joy will falter when circumstances do. In his book *Enjoying God*, Tim Chester notes, "True joy is found in treasuring Christ above all, for only He is unchanging and eternally satisfying. To delight in God is to anchor our joy in His unchanging character, not in the shifting sands of this world." As Christians, our joy rests on the fixed reality of who God is and what He's done.

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Reasons to Rejoice

vs. 4–7

Paul's command to "rejoice in the Lord" points us to unchanging truths. God is sovereign — nothing escapes His control. He's not only all-powerful but good, merciful, and loving, guiding us like a shepherd (Psalm 23:3). He proved His love by sending Christ to die for us while we were sinners (Romans 5:8). Jesus bore our shame, canceled our debt, and nailed

it to the cross (Colossians 2:14). He didn't just erase our sin — He gave us His righteousness, peace with God, freedom from sin's power, and new life. As Romans 8:32 declares, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

These truths never waver, no matter our circumstances. God desires our joy, not in fleeting pleasures that promise much but deliver little, but in His unfading love through Christ. You must battle joylessness by fixing your heart on Jesus. Rejoice in His sovereignty, grace, and unchanging promises. Encourage one another to choose joy daily, delighting in the Lord who satisfies forever.

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