

us in history, and on his work within us by the Spirit. Like Paul, it is possible to have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives us. And in that anticipation, how we should continually give thanks and rejoice!

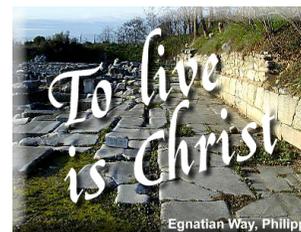
“Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles” (v. 14). The all-sufficiency of Christ’s provision doesn’t diminish Paul’s very deep appreciation of their kindness to him. We aren’t a collection of isolated individuals. Fellowship leads us to practical caring – strongly practised in the early church (Acts 4.32-35).

Their gifts to him are like “a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (v. 18). Our relationship with God can’t be separated from our relationship to one another. Just as Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God... Love your neighbour...”, so the sacrifice acceptable to God is seen in our caring and kind acts towards one another.

“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (v. 19). Because of our bountiful God, we can give and give and give again. We have received from him richly through all the benefits of salvation in Christ Jesus. We can trust him with all our needs. Remember the words of Jesus, “But seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt. 6.33).

Reflect:

- Jesus Christ the Son of God humbled himself to the point of death on the cross for our sake. The one strong desire of our life needs to be to know him and the power of his resurrection. The one compelling direction of our life must be to reach ahead to all that God has for us to become and to do. The one overwhelming attitude of our life will then be thanks and joy – no matter what the circumstances in which we find ourselves.
- What are we going to do about it? How can we align the desire, direction and attitude of our life with the mind of Christ?



Four Studies on Paul’s letter to the Philippians

by Peter J Blackburn

4. Rejoice!

Reading: Philippians 4

We were living in Childers when Gough Whitlam and his team won the election. The next day I had a 9am service at Howard, a small coal-mining town and strongly Labor. I came back for an 11am service at Childers – sugar country and strongly National. It was one of those situations where one had to “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep”!

I always feel for the two leading contenders in an election. For a successful campaign, each has to be totally convinced of victory – but one will lose! And for the winning party, there are jubilant celebrations!

We enjoy success. It’s great to be a winner. The euphoria can be quite heady stuff! But what if you are in prison, as Paul was when he wrote to the Philippians?

Of course, he set his own precedent on his first visit to Philippi with Silas. Remember? Beaten, imprisoned for healing a slave girl – “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a violent earthquake...” (Acts 16.25-26). Now Paul is in prison again and writing to the Philippian Christians. And what two words is he using again and again? “Joy” and “rejoicing”! Three times in chapter 1, four times in chapter 2, once in chapter 3 and three times in chapter 4.

Reflect:

- What is the difference between “joy” and “happiness”? To what extent does happiness depend on what “happens” – on our circumstances?

Rejoice!

Read Philippians 4.1-9.

In Chapter 3, Paul has been telling them “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (vv. 10-11) and “one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (vv. 13-14).

In Chapter 4, Paul goes on to express how special they are to him. He misses them. Like Paul they need to stand firm in the Lord.

Paul makes a special plea to Euodia and Syntyche, two women who had contended at Paul's side in the cause of the gospel. He begs them to try to agree with each other in the Lord.

In chapter 2, Paul urged his readers to be like-minded, having the same love, and being one in spirit and purpose. It does nothing to promote the spread of the gospel when Christians fail to agree with one another in the Lord. There may well be sincerely-held differences of opinion where the Scriptures can be understood in different ways. However, it is so easy for fellowship to be broken and the community about us to be prevented from grasping the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflect:

- In what way should a Christian group handle clashes of personality and opinion? What is it saying to the community at large when such clashes are left unresolved?

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (4.4) Joy ought to be a major characteristic of the Christian. It has to do with our awareness of the love and mercy and grace of God in our life – no matter what. It wells up within us because of our union with the Lord. Unlike happiness, it doesn't depend on our current set of circumstances.

“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near” (v. 5). The imminent return of the Lord was their watchword, but it was to lead, not to harshness or brashness, but to gentleness and caring.

Are you a worrier? Listen to what Paul says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (v. 6). Sometimes we find it hard to pray instead of worrying about our needs, let alone rejoice in the Lord, no matter what our circumstances. The secret? Always asking “with thanksgiving”. Remember what God has done for you in the coming of Jesus and in other details of your life. As you bring your requests to God, give thanks!

When we do this, “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7). Our idea of peace is so circumstance-dependent. There are those who seek peace by entering trance-like states which deny reality. God's peace is different. It is far beyond human understanding, but not irrational. When Jesus died on the cross for our sins, God was acknowledging all the reality, awfulness and consequences of our situation. There was no pretence, no evasion. The price was paid in full. That is the secret to God's peace which is able to protect us in both our thinking and our feeling.

Does that mean that all of us, because we believe in Jesus Christ, never have a care in the world? Hardly – or Paul wouldn't have written these things! Like

everyone else, we have to face traumas, disappointments and uncertainties. But we do have some conscious choices to make.

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things” (v. 8). Sometimes we think we haven't a great deal of control over our thoughts – worries and other negative thoughts just pop into our mind. Persist with making conscious positive choices. Giving thanks is one of these. Another is to be careful of the things that fill our mind.

“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (v. 9). It isn't just what fills our thinking that matters, but what fills our doing. Choose to be kind to another – do a kindness, take a cake, make a phone call, write a letter of encouragement, cultivate a friendship... Then you will experience it – the God who gives peace will be with you.

Reflect:

- “It isn't just what fills our thinking that matters, but what fills our doing”. Yet somehow each affects the other. Where do we have the greatest problem – “thinking” or “doing”? How do we make positive choices that affect both our “thinking” and our “doing”?

Thanks!

Read: Philippians 4.10-23.

The Philippians have given Paul the opportunity to do exactly what he has been telling them to do – they have sent gifts to him in the hands of Epaphroditus. This is one of a long line of acts of practical care that they have given him. So Paul is expressing his thanks to them for what they have done.

But he also shares with them an important secret – “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (v. 12). Thankfulness and contentedness are important twin qualities.

But Paul can have these qualities because “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (v. 13). His attitude towards life is positive. He isn't acquiescent but positive in the face of his circumstances. He knows that Jesus Christ is Lord (2.11). He has shared in the benefits of Christ's sufferings and wants to experience the power of his resurrection (3.10). He has confidence in the power that comes from the Spirit of Jesus Christ (1.19).

Sometimes we look at the Christian life as if Jesus is up there in glory, while we are struggling along down here to be his loyal and faithful followers. But it's not like that at all. The Christian life is based on who Christ is, on what he has done for