

The secret of Paul's life – and of his attitude in very adverse circumstances – is Christ. The Christ who died on the cross for him, the Christ who is his Saviour, the Christ who shares his life with him, the Christ who is his Lord.

Reflect:

- “For me, to live is Christ”. What did that mean for Paul? What does – or should – it mean for us?
- How does this change our attitude to our circumstances?

How to Live

Read: Philippians 1.27-30.

The Philippian Christians themselves had suffered hardship for their faith. Notice v. 29 – “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him”.

Whatever happens to Paul, it is important that their way of life is “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” – standing firm with one common purpose, with only one desire fighting together for the faith of the gospel (v. 27).

So what about those reasons for “not being a good Christian”? How do they look in the light of all that Paul went through?

What is life? For me, it is Christ!

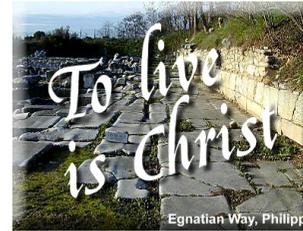
Think about our life in the light of what Christ has gone through on our behalf. He has loved us, given his all for us. Receive him as our Saviour and come alive. That is why he is the key to life! Now consciously allow him to be in the centre of our circumstances. Whatever they are, never forget that he has promised to be with us always. He is our Lord, and he loves us and cares for us – no matter what may happen to us! In all circumstances, be thankful to him – we will be amazed at just how much there is to thank him for and at the joy that will well up in our being – no matter what!

Reflect:

- Why is it possible to thank God – no matter what!
- What will a thankful spirit do to us in our particular personal circumstances?

Study 2. Humility and Service. Reading: Philippians 2

© Peter J Blackburn 2004. Permission is given for this to be reproduced for individual or group use. Scripture quotations are taken from the *New International Version* © International Bible Society 1984.



Four Studies on Paul's letter to the Philippians
by Peter J Blackburn

1. Thankful - No Matter What!

Reading: Philippians 1

We human beings forever make excuses for ourselves. I suppose Adam and Eve set the precedent when questioned by the Lord in the garden – “Lord, the woman you put here with me...”, “Lord, the serpent deceived me...” (Gen. 3.12-13).

It is all reminiscent of the parent who commented, “I could be a good parent, if it weren't for the kids!” At some time we have all had that kind of feeling!

And we can look at our Christian life with a lot of if-only's! It seems just so hard for us to be a good Christian because... we weren't brought up in the right family, didn't attend a lively church, had a set of tough circumstances to face, had a job with a lot of extra responsibilities, had a difficult marriage, had to face unemployment or military service... It has all added up to a life that has made it very difficult for us to believe, to pray, to read the Bible, to put it all into practice...

Reflect:

- “If only...” What are some of our own personal if-only's?
- To what extent are our personal life and happiness dependent on our circumstances?

Paul's Situation

Read: Philippians 1.1-11.

When Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians, he was in prison – in all probability in Rome. On his third missionary journey he returned to Jerusalem where he was attacked in the Temple by a Jewish mob, rescued by the Romans, then incarcerated at Caesarea for two years while the Roman authorities hoped for a bribe. He finally set off for Rome as a prisoner to have his case heard before the Emperor – a right he had as a Roman citizen. On the way they were shipwrecked on the island of Malta. Now he was living under house arrest in Rome – thankfully, people could come and see him.

Imagine the feelings of frustration. A sense of urgency, an important commission to fulfil, all this wasted time and all these restrictions. Add to all that the situation he describes in this chapter – there were some jealous and quarrelsome people who were preaching Christ from a spirit of selfish ambition, deliberately setting out to cause Paul distress while he was in prison. Would we do any better living the Christian life if we had Paul's circumstances?

Paul's Prayer

As Paul thinks of his Philippian friends, he has vivid memories of his association with them. That was the first place they visited after Paul's vision of the man from Macedonia, the first preaching of the gospel on European soil. The first converts were a group of women who met regularly for prayer (Acts 16.13-15).

Later, as Paul and Silas were going to that place of prayer, they were followed by a slave-girl possessed by an evil spirit and screaming out, "These men are servants of the Most High God! They are telling you the way to be saved!" This went on for many days, until finally Paul ordered the spirit to come out of her. The healing had economic consequences for her owners and they had Paul and Silas arrested as Jewish troublemakers, severely flogged and locked in the inner cell. In the middle of the night they prayed and sang hymns to God! There was a great earthquake – the jailer was converted – the magistrates were embarrassed with the discovery that they were Roman citizens – they were asked to leave the city (vv. 16-40).

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil. 1.3-5). Their "partnership in the gospel" is literally their fellowship in the gospel. Fellowship is sharing together in something. They had shared together, first by faith in their common Lord, and then by their involvement in reaching out to others with this same gospel. A notable and recent example of this had been a gift sent to him in the hands of Epaphroditus, a gift to which Paul refers later in the letter. "...whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me" (v. 7).

But Paul is thankful, not just because of their identification with him in the gospel. He is thankful because he is confident that God will bring his work of grace in them to completion. The Christian life is not just making an initial response of faith in Jesus Christ – it is a life in which we are to mature and grow and change into the people God means us to be. It is the life of a lifetime!

So Paul expresses his thankful confidence in prayer for them – "that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God" (vv. 9-11).

This is very striking. More and more love together with knowledge and insight – an important combination of qualities! In Paul's great hymn of love in 1 Corinthians 13 – if I can "fathom all mysteries and all knowledge... but have not no love, I am nothing" (v. 2).

Reflect:

- Sometimes the church has been divided into two groups – the ones who despise knowledge and seek only to be filled with love and the ones for whom knowledge and insight are everything almost to the exclusion of love. How can we maintain a proper balance between love and knowledge?
- The result will be discernment of what is best, leading to lives that are pure and blameless – filled with the fruit of righteousness. The end result – "the glory and praise of God". To what extent are our lives "to the glory and praise of God"? If they aren't, what should we do about it?

To Live is Christ

Read: Philippians 1.12-26.

Paul had his earlier experience in jail in Philippi – they had prayed and sung hymns and been released. But this present business has gone on and on – first in Judaea and now in Rome.

But Paul is still thankful – "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel" (v. 12). Memories of Joseph revealing himself to his brothers – "it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Gen. 45.5).

Does that mean there had been a revival in the jail? Paul doesn't say so. But at the very least "it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ" (Phil. 1.13).

And Paul's imprisonment has given most of the other Christians the confidence to preach the message boldly. Now that is really something! Paul's imprisonment hasn't sent the others into hiding! Paul sees this reaction as great cause for thanks. And he is thankful that Christ is being preached – even though some of the preachers have the wrong motives!

Paul is thankful for their prayers for him – and for the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ – believing that, whether he lives or dies, Christ will be glorified.

In our own thinking and praying, we tend to limit what God can do with our circumstances. We tend to think that the only true answer to our praying is when our circumstances change for the better.

So what is Paul's secret? "For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain!" (v. 21) – as the Good News Bible puts it, "For what is life? To me, it is Christ. Death, then, will bring more". Christ is the source of Paul's life, the centre of his life, the goal of his life. To die will mean to be with Christ forever, without the restrictions that this present life puts on us – and that is far better. But Paul believes that he will for the moment be spared to continue with them (v. 25).