

Timothy and Epaphroditus

Read: Philippians 2.19-30.

In the last section of this chapter, Paul writes about Timothy and Epaphroditus who illustrate so clearly the attitudes he longs to see.

In chapter 1 Paul spoke of his deep affection for them and his great desire to have news of them. His hope is that he will be able to send Timothy to them. Timothy shares Paul's genuine interest in their welfare. So many others are only concerned with their own interests, not with the cause of Christ. And that is the whole point of what Paul has been writing. What is life? To me, it is Christ. Christ is not optional or secondary. He is central to our being, pivotal to our thinking, fundamental to our actions.

The Philippians sent Epaphroditus to take care of Paul's needs. Paul describes him as one who has worked and fought by my side and has served as your messenger in helping me – a fellow-worker and fellow-soldier and also their messenger (*apostolos*). Epaphroditus has been seriously ill – almost to the point of death. Paul is glad for his own sake as well as theirs to return Epaphroditus to them. He is to be welcomed with great joy and honoured – he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life in order to give the help they could not personally give.

Both Timothy and Epaphroditus were outstanding because, having centred their lives on Christ, they had this great desire to reach out to others.

It has been said that a person wrapped up in himself/herself makes a very small package indeed.

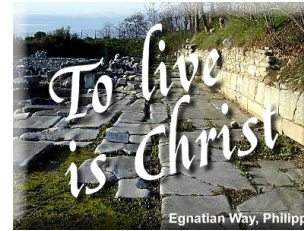
How “big” are we? Centre our life on Christ. Acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Lord. Be open to the changes in attitudes and priorities that he wants to work out in our life. Then with humility and genuine caring love be open to our Christian brothers and sisters and open with the message of life to all who live about us.

Reflect:

- The “balanced” life – the humility that receives and depends on God's grace and the service that works it out in practice. How do we ensure that we truly keep the balance?

Study 3. Pressing toward the Mark. Reading: Philippians 3

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Four Studies on Paul's letter to the Philippians

by Peter J Blackburn

2. Humility and Service

Reading: Philippians 2

A few years ago our Mitsubishi Express reached that stage that most modern cars do between 80 and 100,000 kilometres – the cam belt needed to be replaced. The other minister in the parish had the cam belt go on his Toyota Corona while he was out on the highway – with some serious results. So I made sure that our service man knew when to do the right thing.

The car went in, and at the appointed time I walked down to pick it up. The three-block drive to our manse was terrible. At thirty kilometres an hour the vibration was almost unbearable. I dared not drive any faster for fear of doing some damage. What was the problem? The Astron engine has two balance shafts – designed to make it run smoother. And it was only on the third try that the mechanic got these shafts set up correctly. Apparently three marks have to correspond, but he could only find two of them! The result was an engine that was badly off-balance.

In Philippians chapter 1, we noticed that Paul was able to live with real thankfulness in the midst of circumstances that were far from ideal. His secret was expressed in v. 21 – “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”. Centred on Christ, his life was “well-balanced” and he was able to cope – no matter what!

Reflect:

- What is the evidence that a life – and a society – is “off-balance”?
- Name some of the most “well-balanced” people we have known. What has been their secret?

Humility

Read: Philippians 2.1-11.

If our life is truly centred on Christ, then he is Lord and one of the marks of our life will be humility. This will be reflected in all our relationships within the church community.

Paul begins chapter 2 by writing about the commendable things he observes among them. Their life in Christ makes them strong, and his love comforts them. They have fellowship with the Spirit, and they have kindness and compassion for one another. Being a Christian has given them personal encouragement and comfort. Isn't that what Paul had experienced in his adverse circumstances? Encouragement and comfort. Their life in Christ is also fellowship with the Spirit.

The Christian life is only possible because of the reality of the Holy Spirit and his life within us. And this life in Christ – this fellowship with the Spirit – was already making them more caring, with kindness and compassion. Paul had experienced this in the gift they had sent with Epaphroditus. If all this is so, then – “complete my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose”.

In Philippians, Paul wasn't confronting the threat of false teaching as in Galatians and Colossians, nor the excesses and divisions that existed among the Corinthians. His letter is warm and encouraging. Yet he does have a concern that they have genuine oneness in purpose and love, not acting “out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility considering others better than themselves”, looking after one another's interests, not just their own.

So it isn't just a question of how well we cope, but how we relate. Our Christian life centres on Christ, and it is important that we humble ourselves, that we consciously allow Jesus Christ to be the Lord of our lives.

Reflect:

- To what extent is the life of our society based on “selfish ambition” and “vain conceit”?
- “In humility consider others better than yourselves”. How easy do we find it to be truly humble in this way?

Jesus himself has given us the supreme example of humility. Verses 6-11 are widely regarded as either an early Christian hymn or creed.

Christ Jesus had the very nature of God from all eternity. He could say, “I and the Father are one” (John 10.30). The Jews knew what Jesus was saying. They understood what he was claiming. They picked up stones and would have stoned him to death for blasphemy. Within the one godhead there is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Son gave no thought to usurping the place of the Father.

Jesus “made himself nothing, took the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness”. Luke records that at the Last Supper, an argument broke out about which of them should be thought of as the greatest. Part of Jesus' reply was “I am among you as one who serves” (Lk. 22.27c). John records that at that last meal Jesus shocked his disciples by taking bowl and towel and washing their feet. When he had completed the task, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have just washed your feet. you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done for you...” (Jn 13.12-15).

Jesus took “the very nature of a servant... He humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” Having become a man, he didn't opt out

of that universal human experience, death. In fact, he died a death which was a cruel and violent rejection of him – death on a cross.

But that wasn't the end of him. “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name...” He was received back to all of the glory that he had humbly laid aside to come to earth into our human history.

The “name that is every name” is the name of the Lord himself. In Isaiah 45.23 we read – “By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear”. It is Jesus, God the Son who came as the final revelation of God in our human history, at whose name every knee is to bow and every tongue confess. In confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord, we give glory to God the Father.

Reflect:

- Consider the glory of Jesus as the Son of God from all eternity. Think of the life of Jesus and his humility as a human being – he “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness”. What does it mean to us that “he made himself nothing”?
- He “became obedient to death – even death on a cross”. That's saying more than just that “he died”. What does it mean to us?
- “...exalted to the highest place”. How do we think of Jesus now?

Therefore...

Read: Philippians 2.12-18.

Paul now goes back to the theme of the opening verses. The signs of Christian maturity don't remove the need to “continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling...” We need continual humility – depending on God who is always at work in us “to will and to act according to his good purpose”. The Christian life is a continual response to God at work within us.

Because of this we are to live and act without complaining and arguing. In this way we become “blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation”. It isn't enough to be able to say, “I don't murder. I don't steal. I don't commit adultery...” We can only come to God – as sinners in need of divine grace, allowing that grace to work out into every aspect of our lives. Only then will we “shine like stars in the universe as [we] hold out the word of life”.

Reflect:

- “The Christian life is a continual response to God at work in us”. What is “God's work” in us that only he can do? What is our response to God's work by which we “work out” our salvation?