

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE PHILIPPIANS

- NOTES FOR PRIVATE OR GROUP STUDY – PART FIVE

In this final chapter Paul was concerned that his readers, whom he hoped had now become excited about how they could have the joy of Christ, would know exactly how to hold on to this joy in good times and bad, and so stand firm against the worst the Devil or the world could do to discourage them.(4:1)

Before moving on to more general observations he wanted them to try out what they had learned in one simple human situation. Two of the leading Christian lady workers in the church were in conflict. There was a danger that this would affect the whole fellowship and therefore their witness in Philippi. First he appealed to Euodia and Syntyche to 'live in harmony' or literally 'be of the same mind'. He wanted them to re-read 2:1-5 – and do it! If they rediscovered all they had in Christ, they would rekindle their joy and they would see each other differently. We are not told what they were fighting over because it did not matter. All that mattered was that they returned to rejoicing in Christ. He made the whole group responsible to help and appointed Clement as chairman. It is all too easy when others are in conflict to look the other way, which is cowardly, or to take sides, which is foolish and divisive. Our joy in Christ means that we can take responsibility to make peace.(4:2-3)

Twice more Paul commanded Christians to rejoice. He was not giving up on his theme. Joy, he said, led to a 'forbearing spirit'. 'Forbearing' in Greek is 'epieikes' which is not just 'yielding', but super-yielding! Most of the issues we argue over simply do not matter. Joy means we can let them go and concentrate on what does matter. It was not just Euodia and Syntyche who needed to learn the freedom that comes with forbearance. Paul took them step by step through the process of replacing anxiety, which lies behind conflict, with real prayer. Jesus reminded us of what we needlessly worry about in Matthew 6:25-34 – our needs, our image and the unknown future. Prayer is to replace anxiety. 'In everything' is to replace 'for nothing'. 'Prayer' means literally 'desire on behalf of'. It involves letting God replace our mind, emotion and will with His own, as Paul has already described in chapter 2. God wants us to see the problem His way. 'Supplication' is the empty-handed pleading of a beggar. Of ourselves we can do absolutely nothing about the problem. 'Thanksgiving' recognises that God has already, by His grace in Christ, provided all the answers. 'Let your requests be made known' is the word elsewhere translated 'ask' in the sense of claiming what is ours, like our suitcase in the baggage claim area.(Matt.7:7; 21:22; Jn.15:7; James 4:2; I Jn.5:14,15) We can confidently claim what God has already shown us is His solution. The outcome of replacing anxiety with prayer will be an inner peace beyond understanding or words which will keep us safe in the toughest situation, as Paul well knew. This is joy in action.(4:4-7)

Prayer clears out anxiety but must not leave an empty mind, a vacuum, into which worries will quickly flood back. Paul used eight terms to describe the new positive way of thinking which will replace the previous panic. Test them out by applying these eight phrases to a Christian you have not previously liked and see how it changes your view of that person. Imagine Euodia or Syntyche starting to think this way about the other one and how different the relationship would have been next time they met. Now, said Paul, knowing that I have done this when I have been with you, you do it!(4:8,9)

Paul's final example of grace giving rise to joy was his own situation in which the Philippian Christians, his readers, had played a central role. They had sent a generous gift to him in prison through Epaphroditus who would now return to them, presumably carrying this letter.(2:25) This very practical expression of God's grace was a source of immense joy to Paul. At the same time his joy was not dependent on whether they gave or not. His inner joy gave him contentment regardless of the circumstances. He could have been anxious when times were tough and he was going hungry but instead he practised the principle he had taught back in 4:6,7, and experienced God's peace instead. He knew joy when they gave, and joy when no-one gave. Consequently he was reliant on God not the Philippians though he certainly thanked God for them. This was the source of his strength in the face of the worst the Romans could do to him. He had the strength to be content, not necessarily to be Superman and break out of jail. His strength was for God's programme not his own. Paul knew that his readers had joy in giving to him, particularly when they were the only church sensitive enough to God to know what to do at the moment of greatest need. He wanted them now to have a double joy, first as they were re-united with Epaphroditus, about whom they had had much anxiety until they remembered to pray. Secondly he reminded them of God's grace to them in guaranteeing to meet their every need. They too would face the uncertainties of life when sometimes they had plenty and sometimes they struggled, even to the point of going hungry like Paul. Knowing what God promised in every situation would be their joy. Since God alone was their provider, as He was Paul's provider, God alone should receive all the credit for providing through whomever or whatever means He chose.(4:10-20)

Paul closed with a variety of greetings from him and those with him. When Christians who are enjoying the Lord Jesus Christ meet together there is a special dimension of celebration. Paul offered just a clue to the extent to which the gospel had penetrated the Emperor's inner circle, not just the palace guard.(1:13) This may well have been Paul hidden agenda in appealing to Caesar before Festus and Agrippa when he could well otherwise have been released.(Acts 25:8-12) He had realised that the only way he would be able to bring the gospel to the heart of Roman government was as a prisoner. He sought this opportunity at huge personal cost, but out of joy not fear.(4:21,22)

For one last time Paul reminded his readers, just in case they had already forgotten, of the source of joy, the grace of God!(4:23)