

James Philip Bible Readings

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The Epistle to the Philippians

Philippians is one of the four 'Prison Epistles', written by Paul from his prison in Rome (Acts 28), the other three being Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon. Throughout it is characterised by an unmistakeable spirit of rejoicing, and exemplifies the apostle's own words in Romans 8:37, 'In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us'. The purpose of its being written was to thank the Philippians for a gift they had sent to him (4:10-19), to give news of himself (1:12-26, 2:17-24) and to encourage them to rejoice in Christ. It is the most affectionate of all the writings of this affectionate man, and reminds us how effectually the discipline of the cross and his sufferings for the gospel wrought in him the gentleness and tenderness of Christ.

1) 1:1

The affectionate spirit in which Paul wrote this epistle is evidenced by the fact that he deems it unnecessary to use his official title of 'apostle' as in the Galatian epistle where his authority and his doctrine were being challenged. Here he is on terms of intimate fellowship with the Church at Philippi, and an appeal to his authority as an apostle would be unnecessary. We have only to remember how this Church was established to realise how true this was. The apostle's experience at Philippi was memorable in every way. He was directed there (Acts 16) through the vision he had of the man from Macedonia saying 'Come over into Macedonia and help us'; his first convert was Lydia, the seller of purple, whose heart and home were opened to the gospel; the second was the jailor whose grateful kindness to the apostle in his sufferings seems to have set a pattern for all subsequent relationships with him. These incidents surely have something to do with the fragrance of this epistle. Born in travail, it grew in sweetness and tenderness. Someone has said 'Paul sang praises to God at midnight, and carried on doing so, setting the note for this epistle. A singing and rejoicing prisoner was the means of their conversion, and here a singing and rejoicing prisoner is the means of their sanctification'.

2) 1:1-2

Two things may be said about the word 'bishop' or 'overseers' (ESV & NIV) as it occurs here and in the New Testament generally. First of all it has little in common with the meaning and importance given to the word today, in that it always refers to oversight within a particular congregation, never authority over a group of congregations. In the second place, the word is generally agreed to be interchangeable with the word 'presbyter' or 'elder' in the thought of the New Testament. For example, in Acts 20:17, Paul is said to have called for the elders of the Ephesian Church to come to Miletus to meet him, while in Acts 20:28 he refers to these same men as 'overseers' (the word in the Greek being our word here 'bishops').

This should help to clear away misunderstanding when we read of 'bishops' in Paul's writings. He is thinking of 'elders' as we understand the term.

We note once again, as in other epistles, the two worlds in which the believer lives - 'in Christ Jesus' and 'in Philippi'. The new life in Christ is to be lived in the old order, amidst its sin and antagonism to God, yet the grace (2) we find 'in Him' is such that it enables us to live that life in the heart of the old order, battles and pressures notwithstanding, in perfect peace (2) - not freedom from conflict, but peace in the midst of it. How wonderful.

3) 1:3-5

The phrase 'upon every remembrance of you' is better rendered 'in all my remembrance of you' and its force seems to be that he could never think of the Philippians without thankfulness to God arising from his heart for the way in which they had both responded to the gospel and committed themselves to its glad service. We have only to recall the kindness shown him by Lydia and the facilities she put at the apostles' disposal to realise how deeply he had won the affection of these Philippian converts. We have before remarked upon the personal devotion Paul seemed able to inspire, and we can scarcely doubt that it was because Christ was so manifest in him, making him attractive and lovable to those with whom he came in contact.

Notice particularly the words 'from the first day until now' (5). So far as the Philippians were concerned, conversion had set them on the right road, and at no point had they faltered or looked back. What volumes this speaks about the consistency of their experience! When we think of the fitful and spasmodic progress of our own lives, it makes us want to discover what was their secret. A careful study of the rest of this epistle should reveal this to us. 'To know Him in the power of His resurrection' (3:10) - this is what they learned from Paul to be the heart and core of everything. God grant that we may learn it too.

4) 1:6

The 'good work' referred to here is the fellowship in the gospel that the Philippians had shown towards the apostle. It is this that he is confident will continue, and consequently is the ground of his constant thanksgiving. But by implication these words have a deeper and more fundamental meaning. Their 'fellowship in the gospel' is sure of continuing because something else is also true, namely, that God's good work of redemption had begun in their souls, and what He begins He performs without remission until the day of Jesus Christ. This is the true ground of Christian assurance; the deepest truth about the spiritual life is not that we should make progress in Him (although of course this is a true way of describing growth in grace) but that He should be working so incessantly and making progress in us. Indeed, it is only because this is so that we can go on in the Christian way. As Paul puts it later in the epistle (2:12, 13), 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of His good. This is a great mystery, but it is one which brings not only assurance, but re-assurance to our hearts in times of discouragement and seeming setback. For if such a Mighty Worker is at work, can we ever ultimately Fail?

5) 1:7

It is remarkable how often, when Divine sovereignty is expressed, human responsibility is set alongside it without any suggestion that this might be a contradiction in terms. Not only, as in 6, is their responsibility for spiritual growth recognised, but also Paul's responsibility for them. 'The ground of my confidence that this good work will continue', says the apostle, 'is that I have you in my heart'. This is something very important. Within the idea of the divine sovereignty at work in the salvation and sanctification of men there is a fundamental place for the prayers of God's people, and if this word means anything here must mean that it is prayers that God uses - as well, of course, as preaching - to begin and continue the work of grace in the souls of men. Luther once said 'The prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work'. It is in this sense that Paul can speak of the Philippians being 'partakers of my grace' - i.e. the grace given him on their behalf through bonds, sufferings and afflictions in the gospel.

"My 'death' worketh life in you", he says. And in this 'death' he includes his ministry of prayer. In the truest sense Paul stood between the living and the dead and prayed men into life. What possibilities this unfolds for those who are willing to submit to the costly discipline of intercession for the work of God!

6) 1:8-11

Paul's prayer for the Philippians is 'in the bowels of Jesus Christ'. The N.E.B. renders this 'with the deep yearning of Christ Jesus Himself', and it speaks of the identification of Paul's heart with Christ's. As Lightfoot puts it, 'The believer has no yearnings apart from his Lord; his pulse beats with the pulse of Christ; his heart beats with the heart of Christ'. This is very moving, and reveals something of the travail of soul that Paul experienced in his desire that Christ should be formed in them (see Gal 4:19). The content of his prayer indicates his concern that the lineaments of Christian character and true godliness should appear in them. It is very comprehensive, and little is left unsaid. One commentator has suggested a fourfold division: prayer for the heart (9), prayer for the mind (10a), prayer for the life (10b), and prayer for the character (11). The important thing for us to notice is the need for all-round, balanced development in the Christian life. Love must abound, but it must be in knowledge and in all judgment, that is, there must be nothing unreal or sentimental about it. To love, for example, does not mean to force oneself to think that everybody is 'nice', when in fact many are not. Love is very realistic, and not in the least blind or lacking in judgment. Nor does it mean mere emotional effervescence or mystical rapture. Still waters run deep, and the most powerful currents in a river, far from being found in the bubbling shallows, are often in the less obvious places, where gorges and steep-sided banks give depth and direction to its flow. And who will doubt that the often unthinking enthusiasms of courtship give way after years of marriage to a much deeper and infinitely more satisfying - and more enduring - bond of love and loyalty?

7) 1:8-11

To 'approve things that are excellent' speaks of spiritual discernment, and this also is a mark of maturity in Christian life. Our minds need to be educated to appreciate the mental and spiritual excellencies this gospel, and where the Spirit of God is truly at work this kind of breadth of vision will surely develop in us. We should ask ourselves, as often as we read this word, whether our 'Christian taste' is improving. The prayer for sincerity becomes all the more pointed when we realise how desperately easy it is to allow our lives to become 'spread over' with a thin veneer of religiosity and forget that religion is vain if it does not touch our deepest hearts. Insincerity is inexcusable in the Christian life, and cant and humbug are a fearful slur on the Name that we bear. Finally, the fruits of righteousness surely refer to character. We must ask ourselves, 'is our faith building character in us? Is it making men of us, men of integrity, honour, wisdom, judgment?' This is the aim and purpose of God's good work in us, and none of us has any real ground of assurance concerning our spiritual state until we are first sure that these marks of grace have at least begun to appear in our lives (see 2 Peter 1:5-10).

8) 1:12-14

It will help us to see the tremendous implications of Paul's words in 12 if we compare them with those spoken by Jacob in Gen 42:36: 'All these things are against me'. There are two ways of reacting to 'the things which happen to us' - one is to allow them to overwhelm us, as Jacob did; the other is to recognise that 'in all things' (Rom 8:37) we may be more than conquerors through Him that loved us. This was Paul's way. First of all he realised that whatever came upon him, not excluding temptation, he could always say to it, 'Thou shouldst have no power over me except it were given thee' Since this was so, since events took place by divine permission they were also in God's sovereign control, and therefore to be regarded, not as misfortunes but as opportunities which by His grace He will turn to good account. This, then, is the teaching of these verses: a certain attitude to misfortune and seeming setbacks will pluck flowers from the most barren soil, and we may therefore lay everything that happens to us under tribute and compel it to yield fruit for God's glory and our own good. Paul's 'bonds in Christ' were indeed manifest in the sense that they 'furthered' the gospel, and wrought mightily for the kingdom of God. That prison house in Rome meant untold blessing for the Church, for out of it came the four 'prison epistles' - Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon. The furtherance of the gospel indeed.

9) 1:15-18

This is an interesting and instructive passage Paul is referring to 'brethren in the Lord' (14) who were waxing confident by his bonds. There are two points in particular to note. One is that some were taking advantage of his imprisonment and were boldly preaching the gospel in such a way as to woo his converts to an adherence to the Law (these were surely the Judaising teachers who caused Paul so much trouble in all his missionary work). Thinking that Paul was now out of the way, they lost no time in subverting these Christians, hoping, (as J.B. Phillips puts it) 'to make my chains even more galling than they would otherwise be'. There is something essentially mean and unworthy about such a partisan spirit, but then the point about a partisan spirit is that it is prepared at times to stoop very low in the accomplishment of its ends. They were intent on making capital out of the fact that Paul was so restricted, and, as they thought, 'down'. What they did not realise was that Another was also intent on making capital out the situation, though in a very different way, and that mean, underhand ways have a habit of 'boomeranging' in a highly disadvantageous and embarrassing fashion upon those who stoop to use them. God sees to that, and men should be more afraid than they are to scheme and plot against His servants when they think they see an opportunity of stirring up trouble for them.

10) 1:15-18

The second point to note in this passage is this: Paul says in 18 that he rejoices in the situation. How can this be? It may be that he is so confident in the divine sovereignty that he is assured that good must come out of it, and if this be so one can only marvel at the quality of his faith. But it may simply mean that he rejoices that the gospel is being preached, even by such people and with such overtones of error. Elsewhere, it is true, and notably in Galatians, he speaks very plainly and bluntly against these Judaisers and repudiates their doctrines, but there the alternatives were the liberty of the gospel or the bondage of legalism, while here the choice is between an imperfect gospel and no gospel at all. Better to hear something: the gospel, even if it is in measure distorted and overlaid with wrong doctrine, than to remain in an unconverted state without hearing the name of Christ. This seeming paradox explains how it is possible both to thunder against error on the one hand, when the 'faith once delivered to the saints' is at stake, and to welcome and rejoice sincerely in every true conversion that takes place in and through a movement that may have much that is inadvisable and even unwise in its basis and practice. That it works in the sense that it produces genuine conversions does not necessarily authenticate all it says, any more than the possession of the 'true doctrine' entitles us to refuse to see any good in others of differing viewpoint and persuasion. A little of the spirit Paul shows here would do some narrow and bigoted sectarians a world of good.

11) 1:19-20

'This' in 19 may be taken as referring both to his imprisonment for the gospel's sake and the added trial that the attitude of his critics had proved to be for him. He means that it would be 'for the furtherance of the gospel' in his own life, if in no other way, in that it disciplined him and made him more usable in the service of Christ. Every adverse circumstance, as we have already seen in 12, is pressed into the service of Christ, and 'converted' to His glory. Yes, but 'through your prayer and the supply of the spirit of Jesus Christ'. How wonderful to think that our prayers can be linked together with the energies of the Holy Spirit in the fulfilment of God's sovereign purposes! This sublime and blessed 'partnership' is hinted at elsewhere in the New Testament, in our Lord's words in John 15:26,27, and in Acts 15:28. We do well to note that Paul qualifies the assurance he expresses in this connection and makes it dependent on prayer and the Holy Spirit. In fact, trials of this nature do not automatically further God's purposes in His children; sometimes they make them bitter, and it should burden us all the more to see to it by our prayers that they fulfil, not frustrate, the divine intention in those who suffer them. We have all known instances in which a great bitterness has taken possession of a Christian's heart following trial, clouding testimony and faith alike, and it may be a rebuke to our lack of concern in prayer for them that it should have turned out so. Do we pray for one another enough in this connection?

12) 1:19-20

Humanly speaking, at that time Paul did not know what the issue would be of his imprisonment, and he was calmly facing the possibility of martyrdom for Christ's sake. Hence his words in 20 - 'whether by life or by death'. His concern is not whether or not his life he spared, but that, either way, he might be faithful to his trust. It is as if he were saying 'Let no fear or terror or cowardice make me deny my Lord or make me silent when I should testify of Him, whether the verdict on me is life or death. Only let Christ be magnified in me, and I shall be content'. How are we to think of Christ 'being magnified' in him? To magnify is to 'make larger' or 'bring nearer', as we may realise when we think of the function of a telescope, the right use of which brings a distant object very near to the vision. It is possible so to live as Christians that our lives bring Christ nearer to men, and give them some impression of His greatness and glory as they took upon us, just as it is possible by wrong living to bring reproach upon His Name, and drive Him, so to speak, out of their vision and out of their sight. It has been said that the test of a real Christian is that by his life he makes it easier for others to believe. This was the kind of life that Paul was intent upon living.

13) 1:21

In the previous reading we spoke of 'bringing Christ nearer' by the kind of lives we live for Him, and now in this wonderful verse it is again underlined. 'To me to live is Christ'- this is surely the whole point and force of the Incarnation for us - not merely that Christ should be born into the world, but that He should be born in us - that in the mystery of God's sovereign grace He should so indwell our mortal flesh that men in our day and generation might see Him and come and worship. Rightly understood, this is all that Paul means by these words. But it is a big 'all' for it says all that is of final importance in the Christian life. It means that Christ came as God's blessed and all-sufficient Substitute for what we call life, vitiated and adulterated as it is by sin. He is to be our life, in place of the tragic self-centredness which has been all men's undoing. In the last analysis there are but two alternatives, either 'To me to live is self' or 'To me to live is Christ', and it is this choice that the message of the Incarnation thrusts before us. And he who chooses as Paul did is sure of the blessedness that he knew.

14) 1:21

We must look at this great verse once again. What Paul is saying is: 'Life for me is simply a matter of showing forth Christ, and magnifying Him. That, for me, is what life is for. This life of mine is made completely available for Him, to live in me as He pleases. I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (Gal 2:20). The whole concrete state of life for Paul was so lived in Christ that it became a simple manifestation of His presence. But now we must try to see behind the beauty and fame of Paul's words to what they imply. Not all Christians can as a matter of fact speak like this, for not all are so wholly dedicated to Christ as he was. To speak thus is the fruit of an experience of the cross in which self is utterly crucified. For it is the property of 'self', the old nature, ever to be in the forefront in all things, and to have Christ pre-eminent in our lives means that 'self' must fall into the background. As John the Baptist said 'He must increase, but I must decrease' (John 3:30). This is a costly way to live, but in no other way can Christ become our life in the sense Paul means here. In like manner 'to die is gain' cannot be true of all believers unconditionally. It is not gain, but loss (see 1 Cor 3:15) for a Christian to die in an unconsecrated state. Death simply confirms for ever what we are in terms of character. We will not grow any taller after death. Growth comes here in this life, and if we remain stunted now, then stunted we shall be. What gain is there in that? As Bonar puts it in his hymn -

'The life above, when this is past,
Is the ripe fruit of life below'.

15) 1:22-24

It is difficult to be sure of what Paul exactly means in 22. Various renderings have been suggested, but the general meaning seems to be: 'So long as physical existence gives me the opportunity of fruitful service, I hardly know what to prefer'. The word 'depart' in 23 literally means 'to break up', and the metaphor it conveys is that of striking or breaking up a camp. The idea in Paul's mind here is that of life as a wilderness journey, in which 'camp-life' is the order of the day, an appropriate symbol of the transitoriness of our sojourn on the earth in contrast to the blessedness of the 'Land of Promise' in the eternal world, with Christ. How natural for him to desire the 'far, far better' existence in heavenly glory. And yet - and this is the tremendous lesson these verses hold for us - all personal considerations and desires for Paul were laid aside in face of the needs of the Church. With Christ-like submission and compassion he reflected the Saviour's laying aside of His glory for the Church's sake. The work of the gospel needed him, and he was content to embrace poverty and tribulation a while longer in order to further that work. It was this same selfless spirit which on another occasion made him cry, 'I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh' (Rom 9:3). Is it any wonder that his life was exceeding fruitful with a love and a passion for souls like that? O to be more like him!

16) 1:25-26

An interesting by-product of this total dedication and passion for the gospel is seen here in the assurance it brought to the apostle's heart. In 20 the issue of life or death is in the balance, humanly speaking - anything might have happened, as he well knew - but here, divine sovereignty takes control, and all possible anxiety is removed by the knowledge that God has more work for him to do. What these verses teach us in effect is that a man is immortal until his work is done, and this is a perfect antidote for any fear for the future. Nor was his confidence misplaced, for he was released from this particular imprisonment, as we know, and was able to resume for a time at least his missionary activity.

This does not mean however that faith always wins deliverance. The next time he did not obtain release, but martyrdom. It was not God's will so to deliver him again. Faith does not change the divine purposes in our lives; rather, it aligns us with them. We are not to think of faith as a 'penny-in-the-slot' method of obtaining our desires from God. Faith is mystery, but not magic, and it debases the coinage of spiritual life to think of it in such an unwarranted way. Faith never stands by itself in isolation, but always in reference and in relation to the divine will, and it is through the discernment of that will, often made known to us by the secret intimations of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, that we can have confidence such as Paul certainly had on this occasion. So close was his fellowship with the Lord that it could be said of him as it was of Abraham, 'Shall I hide from Abraham, that thing which I do?' (Gen 18:17).

17) 1:27-30

'Conversation' in 27 has the older English meaning of 'manner of life' rather than 'speech'. The word refers to 'the performance of our duties as citizens', and in this connection it is an exhortation to live the life of heaven upon earth, for as Christians our citizenship is in heaven (3:20). The particular aspect of Christian behaviour that is in Paul's mind is the duty of standing fast and certainly the conscious maintenance of a pilgrim spirit always proves a lively incentive to do so (cf 1 Cor 15:58, where 'the hope of glory' is made the basis of an appeal to be 'stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding....'). The meaning of 28 has been variously construed. 'Perdition' may be referring either to the adversaries or to the Christians. If it refers to the adversaries, the meaning would be: 'The fact that you are so fearless in face of all they can do ought to convince them that the Lord Who so upholds you will also be swift to deal with them in judgment; or, the fact that He so vindicates you by bestowing a fearless spirit upon you is a sure sign that He is about to deal with them'. If it refers, however, to the Christians, the meaning would be: 'your fearlessness makes your enemies think that you are mad and berserk'. This in fact is how the heathen often did think of the demeanour of the Christians under torture. In this sense, the token would be like the pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness, interpreted differently by both sides - to the one, a cloud and darkness, to the other, a light by night.

18) 1:27-30

Matthew Henry, commenting on this passage, says that 'persecution is ever an evidence of perdition, for those who persecute Christ's Church are marked out for ruin. But being persecuted is the mark of salvation. Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you'. This association of ideas is continued by Paul in 29, where he indicates that the gift of faith is accompanied by the call to suffer for Christ. The word translated 'given' literally means 'graciously conferred' or 'granted as a privilege', and in the heart of it is the idea of grace. This has important doctrinal implications. It is grace that brings us to the place of faith in Christ, and no man can believe on Him except it be 'given him' so to believe. But 'to suffer for His sake' is also in the gift of grace. 'God has granted you', says the apostle 'the high privilege of suffering for Christ; this is the surest sign that He looks upon you with favour'. Nor can we doubt, in this connection, that the fearlessness spoken of in 28 is also bestowed by God and is no natural self-sufficiency. This ought to comfort and encourage us, for it is precisely the fear of what we may yet be called upon to suffer for the testimony of Christ that often fills our hearts with dread and misgiving lest we should be unable to bear it and fall under the pressure. These verses assure our faltering hearts that, whatever we may be called upon to face, grace will be there first, to meet us and undergird us so that we shall be enabled to stand firm and fearless in the evil day. Blessed assurance!

19) 2:1-4

This is still part of the 'conversation that becometh the gospel' (1:27). There is much here for us to learn. Paul is lying in prison, but he is so detached, as we have already seen, from his circumstances that he can speak of his joy being fulfilled (his cup of happiness being filled, as the N.E.B. puts it), not by his being released from prison, but by their living in harmony and unity and being all they ought to be. Prison, and anything else, would be bearable and indeed of little import if only they made progress in the spiritual life. Paul is the best exemplification of his own words in 4, 'Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others'. He had a heart 'at leisure from itself' and therefore had time to think of others and their needs. Self-absorption is one of the most time-consuming of all occupations! But there is something else here. J.B. Phillips translates 1 as follows: 'If your experience of Christ's encouragement and love means anything to you, if you have known something of the fellowship of the Spirit, and all that it means in kindness and deep sympathy...' This modern rendering brings out the force of what Paul is saying rather more graphically than the more archaic language of the A.V. The apostle makes their experience of Christ and of fellowship in the Spirit the ground of his exhortation to them to live in unity and in selfless consideration of one another. 'When Christian experience is real', he means to say, 'it ought in fact to have this effect upon us'. Well, has it? Has our religion delivered us from strife and vainglory? Has it made us lowly? (3) Has it delivered us from our chronic self-centredness of life? These are the real questions in spiritual life. May God give us grace to face them.

20) 2:5-11

This is one of the mightiest utterances Paul ever made. For sublimity of thought and majesty of conception there is little to equal it in the Scriptures or outside them. Our time will be well spent if in the next day or two we meditate upon these wonderful words and allow them to communicate their message to our hearts. We should notice first of all how Paul came to pen this passage. It is in effect a commentary, an exposition, of the phrase in 4, 'looking on the things of others', and reveals all that this involves, and costs, when it is taken seriously as a principle of living. The phrase 'thought it not robbery to be equal with God, has been interpreted to mean, 'He did not consider His equality with God a position to be greedily grasped at, for He emptied Himself'. This is a likely interpretation, for it refers back to the 'low mindedness' of 3. If anyone was entitled to a place of honour, Christ was. But this in fact is what he did. Therefore follow His example. This is Paul's meaning. One thinks of the incident in the gospel story when the disciples were quarrelling among themselves as to who was greatest among them. Christ's answer was to gird Himself with a towel and wash their feet. He took the lowly place. Behind that practical expression of lowliness of mind there stands the abiding eternal principle expressed in this wonderful passage. This is the explanation of all He did. He emptied Himself!

21) 2:5-11

C.S. Lewis had a notable passage in his book, 'Miracles' which forms a perfect commentary on the meaning and implications of this passage. Here it is: 'In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity....down to the very roots and sea-bed of the nature He had created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift; he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders. Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into bleak and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime, and old decay; then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks the surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both coloured now that they have come up into the light; down below, where it lay colourless in the dark, he lost his colour too'.

22) 2:5-11

Paul's language describing the downward steps of our Lord's humiliation is very moving. From glory to shame, from crown to curse, He came. Why such a descent? Because we were down there! He came to where we were, in the place of darkness and condemnation, to stand with us in our woe and lift it by His grace, by the infinite value and power of His descent and humiliation. It was because He thus came down that God raised Him - and us - to the glory of His presence. This is the point of the 'wherefore' in 9 - the humiliation was the basis of the exaltation. Someone has pointed out that the Name given to Him (9) is in fact the Name Jesus - that given by the angel at His birth. Then, however, it was given prophetically; only at His death, resurrection and ascension did it become His Name in the fullest sense, for it was His finished work on the cross that made Him a Saviour from sin. The significance of every knee bowing at that Name above every name, the Name which at the last, as someone has said shall be the joy and terror of the universe should not be missed. But this means none other than that Jesus is God, equal with God, in the form of God, God the Son. Nothing could underline more decisively than the words of 10 the absolute claim that is made for Jesus by the apostle. It is not open to us to think of Him merely as a great Teacher or religious Genius or a shining Example, nor was it ever intended that we should so think of Him, He is God, and in this great descent and ascent, this movement of eternity for our sakes, He is shown to be God.

23) 2:5-11

We offer one further comment on this passage before leaving it. In 7 we read that He 'made Himself of no reputation'. This has sometimes been translated 'He emptied Himself' and this is the force of the Greek verb which Paul used. But unfortunately a serious misunderstanding of its meaning has caused a great deal of wrong thinking with regard to the Person of Christ. It has been maintained, for example, that when He is said to have 'emptied Himself' it means that. He divested Himself of His deity, and in becoming man He voluntarily surrendered some at least of the attributes of His divine nature. It is easy to see how this might lead to dangerously erroneous thinking about Christ. It did. Men began to think of Him as merely man and, being divested of His deity, to be fallible like other men, a child of His age and therefore subject to the limitations of knowledge common to that age. But this is completely to misunderstand Paul's meaning here, and indeed the witness of the whole New Testament to Christ. The meaning of the Incarnation is not that He divested Himself of His deity, not, to use Wesley's words, that

'Mild He laid His glory by'

but that, while remaining God (how could He cease being God?) He became man, the God-man. Wesley is far truer to the biblical position in another statement he makes in the same hymn,

'Veiled in flesh the Godhead see'. That is the real point. At no time can it ever be said that He was not 'Very God' as the Creeds put it. To suggest it takes the heart out of the atonement which He wrought, for that awesome deed derives its efficacy precisely from the fact that it was a divine act. It was God that 'was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself'.

24) 2:12-13

These well-known words are open to misinterpretation. When the truth that salvation is by faith alone is stressed, this verse (12) is often quoted in opposition to it. But this is entirely to misunderstand Paul here. What he says refers not to our working for acceptance in the sight of God, but to the moral endeavour we are to show after we have been accepted freely in His sight through what Christ has done for us. We can only work out what God has worked in (13). (Significantly enough, the two words for 'work' in the original are different, the second referring to God's working being one used generally of miraculous interposition). The trouble is, many try to work out something that has never been worked into them. You cannot live the Christian life without first of all receiving it. But when God begins to work in the soul, how different everything becomes. Paul does not mean that God does part of the work and we do part. God does it all indeed, from beginning to end, for salvation is all of God, but He does it in such a way that we remain nevertheless responsible for its outworking. The decision of faith, for example, is ours - we come to Christ; and yet, we can come only because God draws us (see John 6:44). The divine sovereignty and human responsibility are mysteriously blended in a way we cannot fully understand, and cannot attempt to explain without seeming to err in the one direction or the other. This is true of the whole of Christian experience. Our salvation is complete in Christ. In Him we have been made kings and priests unto God. The work of faith is to appropriate what is ours in Him, and make good in our experience what He has made possible for us, and given us, in His finished work on the cross.

25) 2:12-13

We cannot leave these verses without a further comment on Paul's statement about God working in us 'both to will and to do of His good pleasure'. This defines the scope and extent of the 'good work' mentioned in 1:6. There is in fact a twofold miracle involved. The first is that He should bring us to the point of willing His good pleasure. How wonderful that we who are by nature so set upon our own way (Isa 53:6), so slow, even as Christians, to want His way, should be so changed by His grace that we should now be willing for His will. This is in fact the fulfilment of the primal promise made to our first parents in the Garden of Eden - the promise that God would through grace plant in our hearts an enmity against sin. But to will God's will is one thing, to perform it another. We have only to recall Paul's agonising words in Romans 7:18 - 'to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not' - to realise that this is no mere academic distinction. But in Christ and through Christ, both the will to do God's will and the power to perform it are given. This is the believer's heritage in Christ. As the hymn puts it 'Thou hast made us willing, Thou hast made us free'. It is on the ground of this double miracle that the Scriptures exhort us to 'work out' or 'take' our full salvation, and live in the full experience of God's bountiful provision for us.

26) 2:14-16

Some commentators think Paul has in mind here the murmurings of the Children of Israel during their wilderness wanderings. The word he uses for 'murmurings' is constantly employed in the Greek version of the Old Testament to describe the attitude of discontentment and stubborn unwillingness shown by the Israelites towards the Lord's will. If this be so, then this is an exhortation to be wholehearted and glad in obedience to God's will, as if it were our supreme pleasure. This also is part of God's good work in us - not merely to will and to do His will, but also to love it. Nothing is more likely to 'put off' people than the realisation that our conformity to God's will is grudging and unwilling and something we drag ourselves to do. The goal for the Christian must be the words, 'I delight to do Thy will O God'. Not otherwise can we shine (15) as lights in the world, and nothing less could rightly be called a shining testimony. Notice, however, the twofold testimony of the Christian - shining and holding forth the word of life. Grace and truth must be combined. Our testimony and our contending for the truth must be accomplished and backed up by a blameless, gracious, childlike (harmless) life. Well might a man rejoice - and he surely will rejoice in the day of Christ - if his ministry produces (16b) such fruit as this in believers' lives! The presence of sanctified and perfected saints on the Great Day who by lip and life had witnessed a good confession on earth, would constitute the final justification of all Paul's labours and travails in the gospel.

27) 2:17-24

The meaning of 17 is: 'Even if I am required to pour out my life-blood as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I rejoice in this'. Even death itself was something to be used for the furtherance of the gospel for this dauntless, Christ-centred man. This is what it meant for him to 'seek the things that are Christ's' (21). High standard indeed, but it must have gladdened his heart to know that in Timothy he had someone so likeminded that he was as a 'son with the father' in the care he had for the Philippians. With the gladness, however, must there not have been a great sadness that he had no other likeminded? The truth is, this way of living is so costly that few are prepared to rise to the total self-giving that it involves. 'All seek their own' (21) - we need not assume that this represents any particularly gross and flagrant form of selfishness, rather it speaks of the competitive claims that finally militate against unreserved devotion to Christ. It is a question of basic priorities, and there are many good, steady Christians who nevertheless 'draw the line' too soon. There are some areas of life in which they cannot bring themselves to the total surrender that leads to fruitfulness and power in service. Only hearts that have been won by the Lover of souls are prepared to give the extravagant and prodigal devotion to Christ that is necessary to produce this kind of service in the kingdom of God. Only the man who can say from his heart "To me to live is Christ" will ultimately make the grade.

28) 2:25-30

Not a great deal is recorded or known about Epaphroditus. He was of the Philippian fellowship, and had been their messenger to Paul, and the bearer of their contributions to him (see 4:18). Having come to Rome he had given himself with such dedication and wholeheartedness to the work of the gospel and in ministering to Paul (30) that his health had suffered in consequence. His convalescence seems to have been marked by homesickness for the fellowship in Philippi, and Paul in turn made him the bearer of his letter of thanks to the Philippian Church and sent him back to them. What is important for us is to see the manifest spirit of devotion which actuated him in all he did for the gospel. We have in fact three portraits in the second half of the chapter, all evidencing in the spirit of their lives the Christlike qualities mentioned or implied in the earlier part of the chapter. 'Let this mind be in you....', Paul had said in 2:5, and forthwith that 'mind' is shown at work alike in his own spirit of self-sacrifice (17), in Timothy's care for them (20) and in Epaphroditus' suffering for their sakes. The reference to Epaphroditus in particular should teach us that it is not an impossible standard that is required of us, but one that was lived out in the early Church by believers who were relatively unknown, as well as by giants like Paul.

29) 3:1

Paul's 'finally' here was probably meant to bring the epistle to a close, but almost immediately he introduced a fresh subject which occupied him for another two chapters. We should be grateful for the sudden tangents in the apostle's thought, for in this instance we have been given a passage of great beauty and power, and second to none in importance in all the epistle. His first word here, however, is 'Rejoice', and he adds 'for you it is safe'. This, may refer to the exhortation to rejoice, or to what follows. Certainly a habitual attitude of thankfulness to the Lord and rejoicing in Him is a sure safeguard against the wiles of the Devil. A spirit of discouragement is almost worse than a state of sin, and lays us wide open to enemy attack. But it is also true that what Paul writes - here, or for that matter anywhere else - will, if heeded, safeguard us in our spiritual lives, and this, by implication, is a testimony to the power of the written word in the battle against sin. We have only to recall how Jesus resisted Satan in the wilderness by the threefold 'It is written' to realise how true and how relevant this is for the spiritual life. As John puts it, 'These things write I unto you, that ye sin not' (1 John 2:1); and the Psalmist, 'Thy Words have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee' (Ps 119:11).

30) 3:2-3

Paul's warning here is against the Judaising influence that has proved so great a hindrance to his work in many places, the legalistic insistence on the observance of Jewish ordinances ('Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses ye cannot be saved' (Acts 15:1). There is a play upon the words 'concision' and 'circumcision'. The RSV translates the former as 'those who mutilate the flesh', and what Paul means is that the Judaisers' rite of circumcision was nothing more or less than a gross mutilation of the flesh, because they paid more attention to the rite than to what it was meant to signify - it was for them a rite bereft of faith, and therefore meaningless and valueless. We, says Paul, are the real circumcision, for we pay attention not to the outward symbol but to the inward reality. Rites are always liable to corruption in this way, and Paul's warning here is timely and relevant for our own day, as witness the widespread misunderstanding of infant baptism, the New Testament equivalent of circumcision. To believe, as many besides the Roman Catholics seem to do, that baptism makes us Christians, is to fall into the error which the apostle so sharply attacks here, and to place a reliance upon a rite when it should be placed in Christ alone. It is as pointless and misleading to do so as it would be to imagine that a wedding ring is the most important thing in a marriage. You do not neglect to wear it, indeed, but it merely signifies the union; it is not the union itself, nor does it affect the union. Nor is it otherwise with the soul's marriage to Christ. It is the inward reality that is all-important.

31) 3:3

This inward reality is fully expressed in Paul's words here, and we would go far before we found as good a definition of true religion. The word 'spirit' should, it seems, certainly have a capital, for it refers to the Holy Spirit. Not that this makes the other reading wrong, for it is the Holy Spirit Who makes our worship inward and of the heart. To worship by the Spirit of God is to worship in a true spirit. This worship has to do with the heart, and involves a heart-relationship not a formal ritual. This relationship is with Christ. The true worshipper rejoices in Christ Jesus, and finds his joy and life in Him (Paul elaborates this later in the chapter, 7-11). This has fundamental implications. If it is true that, as Jesus said, 'No man cometh unto the Father but by Me' (John 14:6), then no one can truly worship God apart from Christ, and no one who does not truly rejoice in Christ Jesus can truly worship. Everything in the soul's relationship to God depends on our attitude to Christ. This is underlined by what Paul says next about having 'no confidence in the flesh'. No one can worship God as of right, but only through Christ, and the confidence which men sometimes place in their religious attainments, however impressive these may be as a basis for an approach to God in worship, must always be fleshly and therefore unacceptable to Him. The point to which the true worshipper must come, and does come, is that expressed in Romans 7:18 - 'I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing'. As the well-known hymn puts it,

'I dare not trust my sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' Name.'

At this point alone is Christian worship possible.

32) 3:4-6

We may learn from these verses just how little trust can be placed in one's spiritual heritage for salvation. Not only do our background and upbringing not in themselves make us Christians, but they may actually - as was the case in Paul's own experience - prove a positive barrier to salvation, when a false trust is placed in them, instead of in Christ. We also see -and this should be a disturbing thought - that it is possible to do all the right things, and still not be right with God. The Old Testament ordinances were all meant to be spiritual helps to God's people, but through a tragic misunderstanding of their nature and function, they became hindrances, because men trusted in them instead of trusting in God. This explains the remarkable situation Paul found himself in when he could say that 'touching the righteousness which is of the law', he was blameless, and yet at the same time be the chief persecutor of the Church of Jesus Christ, Who is borne witness to both by the law and the prophets. It also explains the unaccountable - and yet from this point of view understandable - antagonism and opposition shown by many loyal kirk members towards the demand the gospel makes for conversion and rebirth, and above all to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. One would have surely thought that it would be a comparatively simple matter to transfer the loyalty of such people from kirk to Christ, but the fact that it proves one of the most difficult of all spiritual tasks is some measure of the depth of the tragic misunderstanding which in every age obscures the real message of the gospel.

33) 3:6

We pause again at this significant phrase 'concerning zeal, persecuting the Church', for it reveals a very great deal about a certain mental and spiritual attitude which can do incalculable harm both to the life of the Church and to those who adopt it. Paul's zeal, in those pre-conversion days, was purely negative; it was directed 'against' something, and was intent upon 'breaking down'. Now there is a virtue, doubtless, in breaking down things, for some things need to be broken down, for truth's sake. The Reformation was a great breaking down of error and darkness; but it was not merely a breaking down, and one cannot help feeling that when this is all that religious zeal is concerned with, it is tragically misdirected. A moment's consideration will show how different was the attitude of the Apostles in the New Testament. Not for them the hard and bitter denunciation or indiscriminate condemnation of everything around them. No, they had a positive message, and they changed the face of the ancient world by out-preaching and out-living and out-loving all the false religions around them. This should be remembered by those who conceive it to be their mission in life to go around the churches putting other people right, condemning this, that, and the other in them with tireless zeal. Common experience shows that they accomplish little for God - for the simple reason that their work is destructive and singularly unattractive withal! What we need to remember is that the best way of correcting error is not to abuse it or call it names, but to speak forth the truth in love. To give rein to abuse is the surest way of poisoning the soul with all manner of bitterness. This does not of course mean that we must never raise our voices against what is wrong and evil in the Church. That is not the point. There are times when a great deal of plain speaking is needed. But the danger is that we should fall into a purely negative attitude and allow criticism to become an end in itself. One can easily believe that it is one of Satan's subtlest wiles to beguile believers unawares into developing a critical spirit. It is so easy to criticise. Any unskilled labourer can knock down a building, with a crow-bar or battering ram; but it needs a wise master-builder to lay a foundation and erect a spiritual edifice to the glory of God. This word should make us all ask ourselves in which direction our zeal points us. 'Concerning zeal', where do we stand?

34) 3:7-9

These words, with the verses that follow, bring us to the deepest notes in all Paul's teaching, and no time, however long, spent in meditation upon them, will ever be wasted,

The things that were gain to Paul, referred to in the previous verses, were in fact his religion, his very life. By these he had hoped to 'get home to God'. But these things were loss to him in the light of eternal things, because they created a sense of self-confidence and prevented the development of a consciousness of spiritual need, which alone brings men to Christ. The 'what things' of 7 become, significantly, 'all things' in 8, and remind us that in fact anything in the world may constitute a hindrance to men in their relationship to Christ, if it assumes a competitive place in the life and does not give Him the pre-eminence. Not only must every prop go, in the sense that everything we lean on and look to for salvation must be knocked away if we are to be justified before God, but also on the deeper level, all lesser 'goods' must go, for Christ demands total commitment for sanctification. As Paul says later in the chapter 'This one thing I do'. The fact is that as Christians we can be taken up with many things good in themselves and in their proper place, and by them lose the best that God has for us in the spiritual life. That 'best' is to 'win' Christ and 'know' Him. But of this more in the following readings.

35) 3:7-9

Notice particularly the significant change of tense in the verbs Paul uses. 'I have suffered' he says in 8. This is a reality in his experience. It is no theory that Paul is expounding. It is one thing to know and accept this as a principle for living, another to put it into practice and live it out day by day. This is where the challenge of the Apostle's words comes home most acutely to our hearts. We too may know the doctrine and have grasped its importance for our Christian experience, but do we live like this? This, according to Paul, is the 'cost' of winning Christ. Some idea of what in fact this involves may be seen when we remember the different ways in which this word 'win' is used in everyday life. We speak of winning a race - and with what effort and costly discipline does the athlete gain the prize! We win a battle, and not without costly toil and arduous campaigning'. The business man wins a fortune, but what sacrifice of time and life's common pleasures and even of health itself are involved in. doing so! A man may win a bride, but not without giving himself to her in the process, and in such a way as that all lesser interests fade into the background and become insignificant for him. So, the Apostle implies may a man win Christ. But, costly as it may be, athlete, soldier, business man and lover alike reckon it is a price well worth paying for the prize that is offered!

36) 3:7-9

To be 'found in Him' speaks in the first instance of justification, but cannot of course be confined to it. Nevertheless, Paul's first thought lies here, as the context surely shows, and his reference to righteousness by faith speaks of basic acceptance with God. We may think therefore in terms of the picture given us in the Old Testament of the cities of refuge (see Numb 35:9-14). Christ is a refuge for the sinner from the 'terrors of law and of God', and he who flees to Him is hidden as it were in the cleft of the Rock, his safety deriving not from anything in himself but from Christ alone. (It is significant to note that one of the characteristic words in the Old Testament for 'trust' means 'to take refuge in'). But the phrase 'in Him' means that we cannot confine our thinking here to justification, for it refers to our new relationship with God, our position in Christ, a position in which we are placed by God once for all, and yet one which we must make our experimental possession day by day. It is here that the words 'counting all things loss' find their true significance, for it is only by so doing that we can abide in Him in any realistic sense of the word, and taste His risen power in our lives. We 'die' to live in the spiritual life, and this is true whether we are thinking in terms of justification or sanctification, and true in the same way of either. For 'to repent' - the act by which, from the human point of view, we enter the kingdom of God - is 'to die' to the old way of life, and this is simply the initiation of a new pattern of life in which we die daily to all that is not of God. This is not the only passage in his writings in which Paul links justification and sanctification together (see Gal 2:15-20) and we do well to grasp the truth that the 'death' involved is the same in each case.

37) 3:10-11

Lightfoot paraphrases 10 as follows:- "That I may know Him, And when I speak of knowing Him I mean that I feel the power of His resurrection; but to feel this it is first necessary that I should share His sufferings". There is little doubt that this is the true understanding of Paul's words here, and we would be doctrinally accurate if we translated the words, "That I may know Him in the power of His resurrection..." There is in fact no other way of knowing Him. It might be thought strange that Paul puts 'the power of His resurrection' before 'the fellowship of His sufferings', particularly since this seems to reverse his earlier order in the 'death-life' sequence in Christian experience, but there is no contradiction, for what he says here simply completes the picture. Here he deals with a prior consideration: before the 'death-life' pattern is ever possible, there must first be the gift of life, and the full order must be seen to be 'life-death-life'. To know Christ in the power of His resurrection is the beginning of Christian life. Paul's own experience shows this; the Risen Christ met him on the Damascus Road, and this was Paul's first experience of the power of His resurrection and, significantly, it was this that led him into the experience of Christ's sufferings. The words of the risen Lord to Ananias concerning him were, "I will show him how great things he must suffer for My Name's sake" (Acts 9:16). And in turn these very sufferings became the means of blessing to others, as 'death' worked in him in his travail to bring spiritual sons and daughters into glory (see Cor 4:7-12). But more of this theme in the next note.

38) 3:10-11

The 'fellowship of Christ's sufferings' has a twofold reference. It implies not only the endurance of persecution and affliction for His Name, but also the costliness of adopting Christ's attitude to sin. These two aspects are distinct, yet connected with each other, for to adopt an attitude of death to sin in the world in which we live generally leads to bearing Christ's reproach. The 'course' of this world is too decisively against Christian values for any other possibility. In this respect pressures without combine with pressures within to make suffering and affliction a constant factor in the life of the faithful disciple. But to adopt an attitude of death to sin does something else also; it identifies the disciple with the yearning of his Lord over a lost world and His travail for the souls of men. It is not without significance in this connection to note that Paul's triumphant experience of fellowship with Christ in the power of the Spirit, expressed in Romans 8, is followed in the next chapter (9:1-3) with the expression of his willingness to become accursed from Christ for his brethren's sake, the Jews. Martin Luther once wrote, "Wilt thou be joint heir with Jesus Christ? Wilt thou be like unto Him, His brother, and not suffer? Then at the last day He will certainly not know thee as brother and joint heir. Then He will ask thee 'Where is thy crown of thorns? Where is thy Cross? Where are thy nails and scourge?' And He will ask thee 'Wert thou an abomination to the whole world as I and all mine have been since the foundation of the world?' If thou have nought to say to all this, He will not count thee as His disciple".

39) 3:11

The word 'attain' has the force of 'to reach one's destination', and Paul is referring to the final goal of redemption, which is the resurrection of the body, when redeemed spirits shall be clothed with new, spiritual bodies. It almost seems as if Paul were here making final resurrection conditional upon a true sharing of Christ's sufferings, and it may be that the idea of reward as much as that of salvation is in his mind, in terms of what he says elsewhere, "If we suffer we shall also reign" (2 Tim 2:12). It is more likely however that he is in fact thinking in basic terms of salvation, for the condition suggested in his words surely extends also to knowing Christ in the power of His resurrection. The full meaning, then, is "Without a decisive encounter with the power of Christ's resurrection" - and this, as we have seen - means an encounter with the living Christ - and without being led by that experience into a continuing experience of His sufferings, no one can hope to attain to the final resurrection of blessedness. This once again links together justification and sanctification, the 'once-for all' decision of faith and the continuing attitude of identification with Him, in a way that makes it plain that there was no room in Paul's thinking for any form of godliness that denied the power thereof, or for any profession of faith that was not implemented by a faithful and costly discipleship. This, to him, was what it meant to be a Christian.

40) 3:12-13

Commentators think that Paul is concerned in these verses to combat ideas of perfectionism which may have crept into the Church at Philippi. The statements he has just made (8-11) might conceivably have been misconstrued to mean that he had 'arrived' spiritually, and it is this that he is now concerned to make clear. There is, in fact, no point of attainment in the Christian life at which it is possible for us to think that there are no further heights to reach. To think so means to have totally inadequate views of the nature and meaning of sin. Sin is not a question of moral misdeeds, it is a power under which we live. We are not sinners because we do wrong things; we do wrong things because we are sinners by nature. And this sinful nature is ever there, even when it is most mortified. The fact, however, that we can never become sinlessly perfect in this life does not make nonsense of the claim the gospel makes to bestow full salvation upon men. For 'Being a Christian' means that we are no longer 'what we once were' in the sense that the authority under which we were held has now been broken, the principle of indwelling sin has been destroyed even although the evidences of sin are still to be seen. It also means to have a different attitude to sin; prior to conversion our lives are directed towards sin, and we follow the course of this world (Eph 2:2) but now we have turned from it, and 'follow after' (the word in the Greek means 'pursue') the things of God. And that is miracle enough, in all conscience, without indulging in any fanciful claims!

41) 3:12-13

The phrase 'if that I may apprehend....' means 'grasping ever more firmly that purpose for which Christ grasped me'. What Paul has in mind is the Divine purpose of grace into which he was called on the Damascus Road. God has a purpose for every life, and it is our highest wisdom to find out what that purpose is and enter into it unreservedly and live for Him. It is in this way that we should interpret 'this one thing I do' (13). It is the total commitment of our lives to His purpose for us. This does not, as some might suppose, lead to grim narrowness and unattractive living; on the contrary, it brings a fulness and a fulfilment quite unknown in any other way of life. God sees to that - He is no man's debtor. We recall Christ's own words in this connection in Mark 10:29, 'There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters....for My sake and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time.., and in the world to come eternal life'. In relation to such dramatic and thrilling prospects it is not surprising that for Paul the 'things that are past' should recede into forgottenness. For the Christian, it is always true that 'those things which are before' are better, and that the best is yet to be.

42) 3:13-14

It is possible to take 'forgetting the things that are past' in another sense also. Not only are we to put the past with all its failures behind us, we must forget past successes and attainments also. We must never rest on what we have already accomplished in the Christian life. To rest upon past experience is to feed on stale manna. We must keep short accounts with God and keep our spiritual experience up to date. To reach forth in this spirit is to be assured of yet greater opportunities ahead, greater victories in spiritual life, greater effectiveness in Christian service and, above all, greater and deeper fellowship with Christ.

For the prize Paul speaks of here is not merely the 'Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord' - though this were bliss and blessedness beyond our power fully to comprehend in this life - but supremely to know Him even as we are known, and to see Him face to face. To a man like Paul, who could truly say 'To me to live is Christ' and to all who are like-minded. it would be supremely wonderful to have His approbation; but it is given to such not merely to have His approbation, but also to have Himself. Christ is the way and Christ the prize, nothing less. O my soul, press on, press on!

43) 3:15-16

'Perfect' in 15 means, as so often in the New Testament, not so much 'sinless' as 'mature'. What Paul means is that the mark of spiritual maturity is that we should have this attitude towards the spiritual life, always realising that there will be further spiritual heights to be attained. This is the 'rule' to which he refers in 16. The words in 15b contain a gem of spiritual truth of much wider application than its present context. Paul recognises the possibility that some of his readers might not be able for the moment to see eye to eye with him - are we not all at different stages of spiritual development? - but he maintains, in effect, that if we are honestly seeking God's will for our lives, He will bring us round to this way of thinking. God will make His own gospel commendable to us, if we really want to be wholly His! This is very wonderful, and a source of comfort and encouragement to all who are pressing on through thick and thin, fighting mighty battles in the inner man against preponderant indwelling sin and difficulties of nature and temperament. For it invites us to believe that, almost in spite of ourselves (that is the old self) God will have His way with us and in us. How very wonderful to realise that our reluctant minds and wills can be moved and changed by the gentle persuasion of the Spirit of God, and that He can bring us round to His way of thinking! O for a greater confidence in the sovereign over-ruling of God!

44) 3:17-19

We gather from these words that there were those in Philippi who were perverting the true message of grace, holding that if salvation is apart from the law (as Paul taught), there was no point in trying to fulfil it. 'Let us do evil' they said 'for grace will abound all the more', thus turning Christian freedom from the law into licence, But this is to have misunderstood all that Paul has been saying about 'knowing Christ'. For to know Him means to enter into a union with Him in His death and resurrection whereby we die to sin and receive a new nature, a new principle of life which makes it impossible for us to continue in sin. To adopt any other attitude is not only to misunderstand the gospel, however, it is to become an enemy of the Cross of Christ (18). Paul speaks with tears of those whose lives deny all that the Cross of Christ claims to do for men, and principally, here, it is its claim to slay sin in the life that he refers to. Their lives are a living lie, for sin is rampant in them. We lose little of the pungent force of Paul's words 'whose God is their belly', if we translate them 'who make a God of their appetites', for self-indulgence was their rule of life instead of self-denial and self-discipline. The end of this kind of living is ever destruction, not necessarily in the sense of eternal loss, but in the sense that the soul is progressively rendered incapable of rising to its true destiny and instead wasted and shrunk to a pitiful and permanent moral and spiritual insignificance. Ah, the life of consecration may be costly in its beginning and continuance, but a life of self-indulgence is costlier still in its final issue. This is the meaning of Paul's word here.

45) 3:20-21

The one effective alternative - and antidote - to the life of self-indulgence is now presented in these final words of the chapter. The word 'conversation' should be given its older meaning here of 'behaviour' or 'demeanour', The Greek word which it translates has the force of 'the state or country to which we as citizens belong'. Our 'citizenship' is in heaven, says Paul, and therefore our preoccupations are with the heavenly things, not earthly (19). When we 'die' to sin, to the old life, with all its ways, we 'rise' to new, heavenly life. The deepest issue, when all is said and done, is not the doing of wrong things, but the minding of earthly things instead of heavenly. It is the world a man has in view that really determines his position and status in the sight of God. No one could possibly read the New Testament with any discernment without realising that so far as the early Church was concerned, it was the world to come, not this world that occupied their thoughts and desires. They were pilgrims and strangers on the earth, desiring a heavenly country (Heb 11:16), and their entire concern was to seek those things which are above (Col 3:2). This is the complaint that the Apostle holds against these enemies of the Cross of Christ - not that they are bad, but that they are earth-bound.

46) 3:20-21

The characteristic of this heavenly life is that it has a forward look. 'He gave our souls a lively hope' says the old Scottish paraphrase, and that hope is that He will come again from heaven, as the King He is, to reign in righteousness and peace. And when He comes - and who will deny that this is one of the wonderful reasons for our eager expectation (?) - He shall change the 'body of our humiliation' (so 'vile bodies' should be rendered), and fashion it like unto the body of His glory. This is the final goal and climax of salvation. It is not that we shall become glorified spirits in heaven, although our spirits shall indeed be glorified; it is that we shall be reconstituted as men in the image of God. We shall be changed into new men, with new bodies that will be fit and worthy vehicles to express the glories of redeemed souls, bodies that will no longer know, as now they know in this life, the frailties and twists and perversities that have marked and marred our mortal existence, This is but one aspect - morally indeed the most glorious - of the subjugation of the entire created order to Himself. All creation is involved in the redemption wrought in Christ's mighty mediatorial work on the Cross. Earth, stars, sea, as well as mankind, are encompassed in His wide embrace. But nothing in all the redeemed and renewed universe will shine and sparkle with such unfading glory as those whom at the end He will present faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.

47) 4:1

It is impressive to note that almost always when the coming of Christ is spoken of it is made the basis of an appeal to holiness and steadfastness of life (cf 1 Cor 15:58; Col 3:4.5; 2 Pet 3:14; 1 John 3:3). This is entirely in line with our Lord's own emphasis, for in speaking to His disciples about last things His burden to them was 'Watch and pray', There is no doubt at all that one explanation of the vitality and wonderful dedication that marked the life of the early Church was the fact that the blessed hope of our Lord's Return was a blessed hope for them. Church history affirms to us that when that hope began to wane in the third and fourth centuries of the Christian era, the power and effectiveness of the Church began to diminish. The real tragedy of the Church today, and the explanation of its lifelessness and barrenness, is that we have so largely lost from our consciousness this dimension of eternity. We are 'this-worldly' in the sense that our main preoccupations are with the problem of relating the Christian gospel to the crying issues of this life. In our concern to teach men how to live in this world we have forgotten our urgent duty to teach them how to die and prepare them for the everlasting habitations. This reversal of the true emphases of the gospel is a process which will become increasingly subject to the law of diminishing returns. Those who neglect the eternal issues of the gospel end by not having a gospel at all to apply to the things that are temporal.

48) 4:2-3

Next follows a tender appeal to two members of the fellowship to bury their differences and become reconciled to one another in the Lord. Here is a practical test of spiritual reality. It is one thing to grasp the meaning of what Paul has been describing in chapter 3 as the heart of the message of sanctification - identification with Christ in His death and resurrection - but it is quite another to allow it to touch our lives in real earnest. As Christians we are to love one another, and live in true fellowship. But fellowship does not mean a relationship between those whose personal tastes and interests happen to coincide. Grace brings a supernatural love to our hearts which transcends natural likes and dislikes. We must 'die' to the natural dislikes and irritations that we inevitably meet in any fellowship - after all, we are saints (and very imperfect ones!) not angels - and not allow them to influence our conduct and attitude towards others. It is precisely when 'self' asserts itself that the kind of situation referred to in these verses arises, and it is not difficult to imagine a number of possible circumstances that might have brought it about. The fact is, 'self' does not need much encouragement; it will take offence where none was ever intended; it will imagine slights and impute unworthy motives until mountains are made of mole hills. It would be almost laughable if we did not know in our own experience what fearful harm this can cause in the life of a fellowship. Small wonder that Paul feels obliged to make mention of it publicly, in his letter to them!

49) 4:3

It is not certain who the 'true yoke-fellow' mentioned here can be, but commentators think it refers to Epaphroditus, the bearer of the Epistle to the Philippian Church (see 2:25), and if this be so, no one was better qualified than he to exercise a mediating and conciliating influence upon the two disaffected members of the fellowship, for like Paul he had a loving concern for their spiritual welfare. "Help them, since they laboured with me in the gospel", says the Apostle. "They are much too valuable to be rendered ineffective by this difference that has so unfortunately arisen between them". This, of course, is the real tragedy of such a situation - not merely that their own spiritual lives are hindered and marred, but that the work of the gospel which they might be doing is brought to a standstill. One would think that when people in a fellowship fall into such a regrettable impasse they would see the harm its continuance was likely to bring to the work, and make every effort to put it right, but we know only too well the stubborn and obstinate pride that rears its ugly head and prevents them taking the first humbling step that would lead to reconciliation, even when they see that by their continued impenitence they are grieving the Spirit away and causing untold harm. So great is the fire that even a little matter kindleth, and so devilish can the passions even of once-honoured servants of God become! To render 'help' in such a situation requires wisdom and patience, gentleness and firmness that only a heart utterly controlled by the Holy Spirit can hope to give.

50) 4:4-5

Some have thought that there is an association of ideas between 4 and the last words of 3, recalling our Lord's words, 'Rejoice because your names are written in heaven' (Luke 10:20), and this is certainly the ground here, and elsewhere in Paul's writings, of his Christian joy and rejoicing. It would be true to say that behind every specific cause for rejoicing, such as the countless blessings he was conscious of receiving day by day from God's bountiful hand, there stood this constant fact, greater than all else beside and even all else together, of his acceptance with God. No possible combination of circumstances could ever alter this glorious reality. As he says in Rom 8:38,39 'I am persuaded that.... nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

The word 'moderation' in 5 is variously translated in other parts of the New Testament. In 2 Cor 10:1 it is 'gentleness'; in Acts 24:4 it is 'clemency' (kindness, R.S.V.); in 1 Tim 3:3 it is 'patient', and 'gentle' in Tit 3:2, 1 Pet 2:18, James 3:17, and these different meanings illustrate the import of Paul's exhortation here. It is what we often speak of as 'grace' resting on a Christian life. Referring to men, we would use the word 'gentlemanliness' and to women the phrase 'the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit'. It is something for a Christian to be known for moderation in this sense.

51) 4:6-7

No greater words than these on the subject of prayer appear anywhere in Holy Writ. They echo our Lord's words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:25 ff), in their insistence that we take no thought for our life. This of course is no advocacy for carelessness or improvidence, but a warning against anxious thought or painful worry about the daily concerns of life. Nothing is to be allowed to disturb our hearts and our peace, and this is blessedly possible when we commit everything to God in prayer. The operative word here is 'commit'; the burden must be cast upon Him, and left with Him, and this can admit of no continuing anxiety on account of it. It is here that we so often fail in prayer. We continue to carry the anxiety in our hearts, which really means that we have not truly committed it to Him. Notice how supplication and thanksgiving go together. In prayer about our urgent concerns it should never be long before we are remembering our many mercies, and the many times God has helped us and answered our prayers in the past. This alone ought to quicken our expectation of further answers to our prayers and bring still greater confidence to our hearts. What He has done once He can do again, and this realisation should serve to still the anxiety within us which otherwise might overcome our spirits. There is nothing more calculated to reassure us than the remembrance that we have a living God Who is the Hearer of prayer!

52) 4:6-7

Perhaps the most important thing to realise in these verses is that before ever our prayers are answered, we are answered. The gift of peace is the first and greatest answer to prayer, and it comes when we have really committed everything to God and are utterly reconciled to His will as to the outcome of the situation, whether good or bad. This is the real point. We need to be realistic in the matter of prayer. Some of God's answers are 'No' rather than 'Yes', and sometimes He says 'Not yet' or 'Not in this way'. But peace is still possible because it comes through submission of the heart to the good and perfect will of God. And when it comes to the heart, it is an experience beyond anything merely natural either in quality or extent, for it 'passes all understanding'. This is something that the saints of God have experienced with amazed wonderment in times of anxiety and distress - a power beyond all their comprehension or imagining has come to take possession of their hearts and 'stand guard' over them (this is the force of the word 'keep' in 7) acting as a wall of fire round about them in the hour of their need. It is paradoxical but true that this answer of peace is more significant than the answer to prayer itself in the life of the believer, and the experience of Job in his affliction is a notable example of this. Peace came to his tortured heart not through answers given to his agonised prayers and questionings, but by God's revealing Himself to his soul. Why, of course, for He is our peace, not the answers He gives to our prayers. Have we learned this yet?

53) 4:8

The emphasis in this verse on thinking is in character with some of Paul's most significant statements about the spiritual life. So far as he is concerned, moral transformation in the believer is by means of what we think - see Rom 12:2, and in this he is in agreement with the Old Testament when it says "As a man thinketh in his heart so he is." (Prov 23:7) This in fact is the source of all true living, and it is therefore an obligation upon all of us to think more than we do, to think things through in the spiritual life. Very often, superficial experience in the things of God is due to lack of serious thinking. Remember how Paul prays that the eyes of our understanding might be enlightened (Eph 1:18). We 'feel' too much in religion, and do not 'think' enough. When our minds are possessed of such thoughts as these, our outward demeanour will inevitably be affected, for these are princely thoughts, uplifted and uplifting and they will redeem our lives from the commonplace and the unworthy. We are to practise this daily. The tense of the verb in the original indicates that we are to keep at it. Never let a day pass, says Paul, without more and more of this possessing your minds, until 'every thought is brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ' (2 Cor 10:5). Our minds are, so to speak, picture-galleries, and we have to decide what sort of pictures to hang there for our imagination to view. A mind inhabited by gracious thinking is bound to exercise a profound influence upon outward behaviour and demeanour. Think, therefore, on these things!

54) 4:9

Having stressed the importance of thinking in 8, the Apostle now indicates the proper line of action. "Those things... do". This will be the logical outcome of right thinking, and indeed is the only true evidence that our thinking is right. But now Paul's thought goes one step further; 6-9 all belong together, and the idea of the peace of God coming through prayer is paralleled by that of the God of peace coming through a whole-hearted commitment to a certain way of life. In both cases, commitment is necessary before the experience becomes a reality in the soul. Not that we can properly speak of two differing experiences - the peace of God is not a separate entity, it is the outcome of the presence of the God of Peace Himself in our hearts. But it becomes operative only when faith becomes an activity - i.e. when the doctrine is translated into practice. The peace of God and the God of peace alike are far removed from 'arm-chair Christianity' which is content with theorising about the things of God. Paradoxically, it is when we engage in the 'fight' of faith that we experience the reality of the gift and the Giver.

55) 4:10-13

The main teaching of the epistle is now over, and Paul draws to a conclusion with some final comments. The phrase 'now at the last' in 10 is interesting. Had there been delay then in the arrival of their gifts for his support and maintenance? Some think there is a slight suggestion that perhaps they had been remiss and neglectful in their duties and responsibilities towards him. If this be so, he passes over it with the utmost delicacy and puts the best construction upon the matter. Love, as Moffatt's translation of 1 Cor 13 puts it, is always eager to believe the best. We should notice here two things in particular. In the first place it seems to have been taken as a matter of course that the churches should support missionary work, and this bears witness to the thoroughness with which Paul instructed his converts about the practical expressions of their new-found faith. In the second place, Paul did not hesitate to speak to them about their support of himself in particular. He was free enough from self-consciousness and embarrassment to deal with the question dispassionately and even impersonally. His concern, as he later points out in 17, was not so much that he needed their gifts - for if these were withheld, God would supply from another source - but that their Christian lives should show forth this kind of fruit. There are in fact different kinds of fruit that should appear in this manner in the lives of Christian people, and when they do not, then it may be a duty to deal with such defaulters for their own good. The grace of thankfulness, for example, can be proved real only by being expressed, and when we fail so to express it, those to whom we owe thanks in the spiritual life may feel it incumbent upon themselves to take us to task about it, not because we have hurt them by our ingratitude - although we shall certainly have done so - but because they see that our lives are showing a disturbing, perhaps even fatal, lack. After all, Jesus said 'By their fruits shall ye know them'.

56) 4:10-13

Contentment (11) is a rare jewel, a 'far-ben' grace and we may well say that if the gospel can make a man speak as Paul speaks in these verses, it is a gospel worth examining very intently indeed. Contentment, however, is not something we fall upon by accident; it is learned only at the feet of the lowly Jesus, and experienced only when we are feeding on hidden manna that makes outward things unnecessary to our well-being and happiness. We are given in 12 some indication of what contentment is not. There is nothing stoical about it, nor is it the absence of desire, but rather desire disciplined and at rest in the enjoyment of deeper things than the world can ever give. Paul was full-blooded, as we can gather from 12, and he abounded when he was able to do so, enjoying to the full the innocent joys of life, although he would never allow himself to be brought under the power of any of them (1 Cor 6:12). We must realise that the fear of being human and natural and having feelings is no part of true Christian experience, and that to be a dedicated Christian does not imply having a timid, bloodless and lifeless attitude. We must beware of feeling guilty when we enjoy ourselves, as if God would think we were not proper Christians unless we were thoroughly miserable - and miserable-looking. Some folk of course enjoy being miserable but this is an expression of self that is not permitted to a true believer, and we must have none of it. Besides, life becomes very complicated that way, and we are called unto simplicity.

57) 4:10-13

The words 'I am instructed' in 12 is better rendered 'I have been instructed'. What Paul means is that he has learned - has been taught by Christ - the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want, without being greatly moved or disturbed, because the sources of his life did not lie in having or not having earthly things at all. 'I have all, and abound' (18), he says, because he had Christ, Who was his life and his all.

Now notice the sequence in these verses. 'I have learned', 'I know', 'I have been instructed' - and then finally, 'I can do all things through Christ (or, more accurately, in Christ) Who strengtheneth me'. Once again, as we saw earlier in the chapter (9), action is the outcome of a true grasp of the doctrine. Nothing could show more clearly than this how essential it is that instruction in the deep things of God, and reception of it, must necessarily precede any true experience of Christian fulness and victory, and that therefore exposition must come before exhortation. It is only on the ground that I have been 'instructed' that I can properly be exhorted to 'do', and that I will ever be in a position to say, "I can do all things...." When therefore there is failure in Christian living, we must patiently investigate its cause in this direction, and when we do we shall find that there is some instruction that we have not properly grasped or fully obeyed. It is as simple as that!

58) 4:14-17

The word 'communicate' in 14 has the force of 'sharing fellowship with', and Paul is commending the Philippians for 'making common cause with his affliction' by their willingness to share the cost of his labours. This they did in a twofold way, by sending financial help to him and by assuring him of their compassion and care in his affliction, and the former was surely an expression of the latter. This is what Paul means by 'fruit' in 17. True Christian grace creates a spontaneous outflow of love and compassion, and this is expressed in practical generosity. Giving is as we are frequently reminded in Scripture an index of spiritual health and vitality, and when it is poor and mean it is a sign of a low spiritual temperature. Now we should not confine this to the giving of money alone; self-giving is the scope and extent of this grace, and it is the outflow and the expenditure of self upon others that demonstrates the reality of salvation in a man's life. Paul is in fact touching upon something of the first importance here. A heart generous in self-giving is not optional for the Christian (see 1 John 3:18), and when we are embarrassed at the thought of expressing our thankfulness and appreciation to others we should recognise this for the un-Christian thing it is, and not attribute it to a sense of modesty. The fact is, to give thanks and appreciation - and there are many Christians who have not learned to say 'Thank you' graciously - is to give part of yourself away, and this is what selfishness grudges more than anything else. And it is this unwillingness to give of ourselves that causes the hardness of heart which distresses those in closest association with us. Well, are you a 'communicant' member of the fellowship in this sense?

59) 4:18-19

Such generosity, in money or kind, or in word or prayer, are a fragrance to God, and acceptable in His sight - not, need it be added, as a means of obtaining salvation, or acceptance with God, but as an evidence of salvation and its fruit. There are two thoughts here: one is that it does not matter if these acts of grace prove unpleasant to us. We must beware of doing only what we happen to like doing in Christian service. The important thing is not that we should find pleasure in it, but that God should. The other thought is in the word 'sacrifice' (18). There is the association of blood in the very meaning of the word. Our service must cost us some of our life's blood. We must put ourselves into what we do, and in giving we must be giving part of our very life. The thought in 19 is "as you have supplied my needs, so my God will supply yours. You have supplied mine out of your poverty, He will supply yours according to His riches". God is no man's debtor; He repays with compound interest. This, however, means that the words of 19 are a conditional promise, dependent upon our showing forth the fruits of grace in our lives. There is a price to pay for the experience of having all our needs met. But how disproportionate is the price to the reward! Well might Paul say (Rom 8:18): "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us".

60) 4:20-23

The epistle ends as it began, in a spirit of love, joy and peace, and it is appropriate that we should underline the words 'in Christ Jesus' in these closing verses. For it is 'life in Christ' that Paul has all along been describing and expounding, and we may sum up the main thought of the epistle by linking together some of its prominent ideas. 'To me to live is Christ' (1:21) - this is life, says Paul, the only possible life. But it involves having the 'mind of Christ' (2:5), and this ultimately leads to a participation in 'the sufferings of Christ' (3:10) being drawn to them and into them as with a Holy Magnet. But this in turn issues in the experience of 'the victory of Christ' (4:13) in love, joy and peace, contentment, power, grace, fellowship and fulness. No one reading the epistle could doubt the reality of Paul's experience of that victory. He himself is the best evidence for the truth and validity of his doctrine. In all he writes he truly magnifies the Saviour and commends Him to all who read, making it easier for them to believe in Him and know His fulness too.