

WHAT MATTERS MOST

Philippians 1

What matters most to you? It may be your family. It may be your job. It may be your leisure activities. It may be your health. It may be money. Whatever you think matters most to you, you may not be right. Other people will know better than you because what matters most will be obvious from the things you say. For example, you may *think* that your family matters most to you when all the facts point in another direction. I'm always struck by those fathers who divorce their wives and say to their children, 'I'll always be there for you,' when the plain unavoidable fact is that they won't be. They can't be. What matters most?

When we look at this letter from Paul to the church at Philippi we can't miss the subject that matters most to him. He mentions it no less than 19 times in this first chapter. Poor chap, he was in prison, but that wasn't it. He was really missing his friends. He says so, but that wasn't it. The church had helped him financially, but that wasn't it. He had his enemies, but that wasn't it. He was under the threat of a death sentence, but that wasn't it. What mattered most to him was not actually some *thing* but some *one*. Jesus. No less than 19 times he talks about Christ, Christ Jesus, Jesus Christ, the Lord Jesus Christ, or simply, the Lord.

Later on in this letter he says, 'I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' (3:8).

In spite of his terrible circumstances the thing that comes over loud and clear in this letter is the tremendous peace which Paul had, his overflowing joy. If you want a bit of that you can have it, but first you must get hold of what matters most, and that's Jesus. Paul talks first of all about being

1. A servant of Christ Jesus

In the first century letters began with the name of the writer or writers and the name of the recipient or recipients. That's how this letter begins, but notice it doesn't just say, 'Paul and Timothy to all our friends at Philippi'. Those relationships were defined by the fact that they belonged to Christ Jesus. 'Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi'.

Philippi was a colony of the Roman Empire. It had a special status and its citizens were very proud of that status and the privileges it brought them. Pride was potentially one of the downfalls of the church. Paul has a lot to say in this letter about humility, and he starts as he means to go on. Quite often Paul's letters begin with a reminder of his authority, 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus' – his authorised envoy, his representative. But this letter is different: 'Paul and Timothy' (timid Timothy) 'servants of Christ Jesus' (literally, slaves). Paul doesn't get his confidence from an over-inflated sense of his own importance. He gets his security from belonging to Christ and serving him. To serve Christ does, of course, represent an enormous privilege but it's not one that should make us arrogant. Rather it should reinforce our sense of unworthiness and our commitment to serve him.

2. Saints in Christ Jesus

Paul goes on to describe his Christian friends as 'all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi'. When the Bible talks about saints it has nothing to do with stained glass windows or special ceremonies performed by the pope. Special people – yes, but people who are special because they are 'in Christ Jesus'. They've confessed their sins and trusted in Christ. Once they were outside of Christ but now they are 'in' Christ. They belong to him and he belongs to them.

Note that Paul addresses 'all' the saints, not just some, not just those who liked him, not just the people he liked best, but *all* the saints, all who belonged to Jesus. That's

what matters most in the church. Everyone *he* has welcomed we must welcome.

They were saints in Philippi. Paul reminds them of a double identity: in Christ in Philippi. Philippi was not a safe place to be for a Christian. It was a very hostile place. Paul himself had been beaten up and thrown into prison there. There was real opposition and hatred. But Paul says, 'You're not just in Philippi; you're in Christ in Philippi. You're saints – set apart – in Christ in Philippi.'

Have you ever been on a train with a corridor and thought how strange it is to be walking to the back of the train on the corridor when the train is hurtling forwards at more than 100 miles an hour? You're in two environments. It can be lashing with rain outside and you can be sitting with no coat on perfectly dry and warm. You're still in the outside environment but you're protected by the inside environment. In Christ in Philippi. In Christ in Coventry. In Christ in the class room. In Christ in the staff room. In Christ in the office. In Christ on the factory floor. In Christ in the canteen. In Christ in the neighbourhood.

Look at verse 14. 'Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.' The brothers in the Lord. Jesus brings us into a new family, God's family, where God is our Father and we are his children, brothers and sisters. In verses 15–18 Paul talks about his brothers. He talks about love and sincerity. He also talks about envy, rivalry, selfish ambitions and false motives.

That's 'some' of the brothers. Not all, or even most, but only some. He keeps things in perspective. Still it must have hurt. But notice, they're still brothers. Just like our natural families we don't always get on. We don't always agree. Actually, we don't always like each other. But there's a bond that binds us together, brothers in – *the Lord*. Not 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' but 'the Lord'.

Those of you who have kids, do they ever squabble? Brothers – do they ever fight? What happens? You need to come in with authority and sort them out. Christian brothers and sisters will disagree and fall out and we need to come under the authority of the lordship of Christ. We belong to Jesus – as servants, as saints, as brothers and sisters.

3. Jesus is good news.

In verse 27 Paul says, 'Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.' That word 'gospel' means good news. When Jesus came into Paul's life it was good news. When he came into the life of the believers at Philippi it was good news. The gospel is another of Paul's magnificent obsessions. It gets six mentions in just this first chapter.

Jesus brings grace and peace into our lives. Verse 2. 'Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' Grace washes away our sins and peace wipes away our guilt. That's good news. Only God can do that for us and he does it through his Son Jesus Christ. Paul underlines that here by giving him his full title of deity, 'the Lord Jesus Christ'. Is this just a benefit for the privileged few? No. In verse 7 Paul says, 'All of you share in God's grace with me'.

And there's more good news. We have the Spirit of Jesus. In verse 19 Paul talks about 'the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ'. That word 'help' is literally support, the kind of support you get from ligaments. Ligament is fibrous tissue that holds organs of the body in place and fastens bones together. Ligaments are grouped together in cords, bands, or sheets. They are as strong as rope. It's something organic – not a walking stick, ligaments.

Verse 11 talks about 'the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ'. Verse 26 talks about 'your joy in Christ Jesus,' joy that overflows.

Grace, peace, righteousness, joy. No wonder Paul was fanatical about preaching the gospel. Not everyone who was preaching the gospel in Paul's day was doing it from the right motives, but Paul says, 'What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice' (verse 18).

4. Suffering for Jesus.

Here's a paradox. For Paul serving Christ meant suffering and imprisonment. In verse 13 he says, 'I am in chains for Christ'. The NIV has smoothed over the translation a bit here. Literally, Paul talks about 'my chains in Christ'. It's that double environment again: in chains, but also in Christ.

Because Jesus is so great it is actually a privilege to suffer for him. Verse 29. 'For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.' 'It has been granted to you' means it has been given as a further evidence of God's grace. Suffering will be rewarded with glory.

In chapter 3 Paul says, 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death' (verse 10). It is a privilege to suffer for Christ.

5. The day of Christ

Verses 4–6. 'In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.'

Jesus deals with the past, forgiving our sins. He helps us in the present, with the organic support of the Spirit within us. And he secures the future. 'The day of Christ' is equivalent to the Old Testament 'day of the LORD'. Things will not always be as they are now. A better day is coming for those who belong to Jesus. We can be confident that he will complete what he has begun.

This certainty about the future gave Paul reason for thanksgiving and it was also the inspiration for his prayers. Verses 9–11. 'And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.'

More love, more knowledge, more insight, more discernment, more purity, more blamelessness, more fruitfulness, more righteousness, and then the day of Christ.

6. For me to live is Christ

If we were to ask Paul to sum it all up he would say (verse 21), 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.' That's a great philosophy. In any circumstance of life there are two possibilities. I live or I die. If I live: Christ. If I die: gain. And that's what matters most.

Take that philosophy with you into the week ahead. Take it into the rest of your life. Whatever happens, there are two possibilities. I live or I die. Can you say with Paul, 'If I live: Christ; if I die, gain'? What matters most in your life?