

05. Philippians 3-4



Philippians 3:1-2

And so, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!

For their life as a community and for their mission to the world, it is critically important that the Christians in Philippi remain united and that they ‘rejoice in the Lord’. This brings Paul to stress something which he has often stressed in his visits to them (see 3:18). He judges that his insistence is important to safeguard their faith, so important that he mentions it again here. Paul’s missionary work was constantly being opposed by a group who, in Jesus’ name, kept insisting on the necessity of converts to Christianity being circumcised and faithfully observing the commands of God as revealed in the Jewish Torah.

While Paul has nothing but the highest respect for Judaism, and gratitude to God for the gift of the Law in which he himself was trained, he recognises the activity of this group of Jewish Christians as being destructive of the Christian community, for it fails to recognise the value of being a Gentile Christian, and it jeopardises the mission of the church by attempting to reduce Christianity to a Jewish sect. This is the group whom he described elsewhere as ‘false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ’ (2 Corinthians 11:13).

These rival teachers refer to Gentiles, including Gentile Christians, as 'dogs', since they fail to observe the purity laws required by God of those whom God has set aside as his chosen people. They see themselves as workers for good, and they insist on circumcision. With heavy irony, Paul uses their term of derision against them. He is not criticising Jews, and he is not criticising Jewish Christians (of whom he is one). He is criticising those who insist that to be a Christian one must submit to the Torah. It is these false missionaries and not the Gentile Christians who are 'dogs', for it is they who are doing what Gentiles are accused of doing when they are termed 'dogs': they are rejecting the covenant and the promise. They are 'evil workers', for they are contradicting the will of God as revealed in Jesus. They say that they are insisting on 'circumcision', but what they are proposing is really only a form of physical mutilation.

Philippians 3:3-4

For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in the Messiah Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh — even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

To be truly ‘**circumcised**’, that is to say, to be part of the people who enjoy communion with God, the Gentile Christian converts in Philippi do not need to become Jews and submit to the Jewish law. What they need to do is centre their lives ‘**in the Messiah Jesus**’, then they will ‘**worship in the Spirit**’ and ‘**have no confidence in the flesh**’.

Philippians 3:4-6

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Paul reminds the Philippians that he can match any qualifications these people might use to support their authority. Not only is he circumcised and a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, but he belongs to a family of strict observance. Though born in Tarsus, his family were 'Hebrews', that is to say, they kept their links with the land of Israel and with its language. Luke tells us that they had Paul educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel (see Acts 22:3; 26:4). Nor is it a matter only of what he inherited: 'I have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion and lived as a Pharisee' (Acts 26:5).

The sectarian Jewish Christians are insisting on the necessity of observing the law. Paul went further than that and in his zeal he persecuted the church (compare Galatians 1:13-14; 1Corinthians 15:9). So he knows what he is talking about when he warns the Philippians against their teaching. How many of these troublesome Jewish missionaries could claim to have lived their Jewish faith so faithfully that no one could find fault with them? We are reminded of the rich man who could say to Jesus that he had kept all the commandments since his youth. When Jesus looked at him in love and invited him to come with him, that man 'went away grieving' (Mark 10:22). Not so Paul!

Philippians 3:7-8

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of the Messiah. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing the Messiah Jesus my Lord.

All Paul wants now – and it is all he wants also for the Philippians – is to ‘**know the Messiah Jesus my Lord**’. This is the kind of knowledge that comes only through communion in love. As he said to the Corinthians: ‘I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified’ (1Corinthians 2:2). This is not something that happens once and for all. The possibilities of communion with Jesus are endless, and so Paul can write: ‘Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known’ (1Corinthians 13:12). He wants for himself and for the Philippians what he requests for all his Gentile converts: ‘to know the love of the Messiah that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God’ (Ephesians 3:19).

Philippians 3:8-II

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain the Messiah and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through the faith of the Messiah, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know the Messiah and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul once tried to secure a right relationship with God by perfect observance of the law (see 3:6). Now he knows that a right relationship with God is a relationship of communion in love. It cannot be earned. It is a gift graciously offered by God to be welcomed in faith. Jesus has this relationship, and it is Jesus who offers Paul and all who believe in him a share in this faith which opens them to share in Jesus' own love-communion with God. Paul knows this now and it is the only righteousness he wants for himself or for the Philippians.

Paul's communion with Jesus is so intimate that he wants to identify with him in whatever way God graces him to do so. He said earlier that his imprisonment is 'for the Messiah' (1:13). This is why he can rejoice in it (1:18). He wrote earlier of Jesus 'taking the form of a slave' and becoming 'obedient to the point of death – death on a cross' (2:7-8). He spoke, too, of the 'privilege of suffering for him' (1:29). Paul wants to become like Jesus (συμμορφίζω) in his death, knowing that this is part of the transformation that has as its goal a sharing of Jesus' risen life.

Philippians 3:12

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because the Messiah Jesus has made me his own.

Paul never loses sight of the fact that God is the one who initiates everything and who brings everything to its goal. Returning to the imagery of the stadium (see 1:17,30; 2:17), he sees himself as being attracted and sustained by grace as he runs his race. However, God has not yet brought him to the finishing line, and he has not yet been called to ascend the steps and receive the crown of victory. ‘Reached the goal’ translates the passive of the Greek τελεόω.

Philippians 3:13-16

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in the Messiah Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

We recall Paul's words to the presbyters of Ephesus as he says goodbye. He is planning to go to Rome and then to Spain: : 'I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace' (Acts 20:24).

Paul presses on joyfully in the confidence that ‘**the Messiah Jesus has made me his own**’. He is a prisoner ‘**for the Messiah**’ (1:13). He is also a prisoner of Jesus, having been captivated by Jesus’ love.

The Philippians have come to know Jesus, though some of them do not yet realise the depths of Jesus’ love for them or the extraordinary wonder of the goal towards which God is calling them. Paul is not worried by this, for he knows that God will continue to reveal himself and his will to them. However, they must not listen to the sectarian preachers, and they must resist any temptation to let go what they have already received through their entrance into the Christian community. ‘**Hold fast**’ (3:16) translates the Greek στοιχέω, a word drawn from the army where it means to ‘march in step’. Paul seems to be asking them not only to hold fast but to keep together. There is a special grace in their being united in the faith.

Philippians 3:17-19

Brothers and sisters, join me in imitating, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of the Messiah; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

Paul weeps over the ‘many who live as enemies of the cross of the Messiah’. He has already mentioned those in Rome who ‘proclaim the Messiah out of selfish ambition’ (1:17). There are also those in Philippi who insist on a circumcision which is merely a ‘mutilation of the flesh’ (3:2).

In his correspondence with the Corinthians Paul stresses how hard it is to see God's wisdom in the folly of the cross and in weakness accepted and lived in love. It is hard to grasp and embrace true humility, but not to do so is to run the risk of using even Christianity for one's own security or advancement. The goal of such behaviour is not salvation but **'destruction'** (see 1:28).

Paul's imagery indicates that he is still thinking especially of those who are fixated on observing Jewish food laws (their **'belly'**) and on physical circumcision (their **'shame'**). They are **'enemies of the cross of the Messiah'**, for they are seeking through observance of the law to achieve what can only come through opening our hearts to the love given us by Jesus from the cross, and allowing his Spirit to bring about in us a whole new way of living: a sharing in the communion of love which is the very being of God. It is this communion which destroys sin, not our own efforts at being perfect according to the law.

Philippians 3:20

Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus the Messiah.

The Philippians are proud citizens of a free city (see 1:27). Through their union with Jesus, they are citizens of heaven. Jesus' home is their home. They share Paul's eager longing for Jesus to come and take them to himself to share the eternal communion which we know as 'heaven'.

'Through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness' (Galatians 5:5).

'You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus the Messiah' (1 Corinthians 1:7).

'Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:23).

Jesus is our 'Saviour'. 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Romans 10:13). 'Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour' (Ephesians 5:23). It is he who has liberated us from 'a crooked and perverse generation' (2:15). He shares his life with us now and promises to continue to transform us so that we can share his glory.

Philippians 3:21

He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

There are close parallels between the language of this verse and that of Paul's 'hymn' in praise of Christ. He spoke there of Jesus being '**found in human form**' (σχῆμα, 2:7); here he speaks of our bodies being '**transformed**' (μετασχηματίζω). He spoke there of Jesus '**humbling himself**' (ταπεινός, 2:8); here he speaks of '**the body of our humiliation**' (ταπεινώσις). He spoke there of Jesus '**taking the form** (μορφή, 2:7) **of a slave**' and being exalted; he speaks here of our being '**conformed to the body of his glory**' (σύμμορφος). He said there that '**every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father**' (2:11); here he speaks of '**the body of his glory**', and of his making '**all things**' subject to himself. Paul is still spelling out what it means to '**live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ**' (1:27).

Philippians 4:1

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Paul sums up the advice he has been offering them (“**Stand firm in the Lord**”) in terms of quite special affection. He loves them. He also longs to see them and to be with them. As he wrote earlier: ‘**God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of the Messiah Jesus**’ (1:8). We have seen how ‘**joy**’ is a key theme of the letter. Now he calls the Philippians themselves his **joy**. Continuing the imagery of the stadium, he sees them also as his victory crown (στέφανος).

Philippians 4:2-3

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, loyal Syzygos, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

No community is entirely free of tensions. The fact that Paul names the two women and the fact that he asks a loyal companion, Syzygos (his name means 'one who shares a yoke') to help them mend their differences, indicates that whatever it is that has come between them is public knowledge, but also that they are already working to resolve it.

Philippians 4:2-3

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This is an example of what he urged earlier: ‘make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and of one mind’ (2:2). The ‘same mind’ which he wants for them is ‘in the Lord’. Paul remembers with affection how Euodia and Syntyche struggled beside him (συναθλέω, see 1:27). They will never be forgotten by God. We are reminded of Jesus’ words: ‘rejoice that your names are written in heaven’ (Luke 10:20).

Philippians 4:4-5

Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Once again Paul appeals to them to ‘rejoice in the Lord’. He wants them to show everyone that special ‘gentleness’ (ἐπιεικὲς) that was so characteristic of Jesus. We recall his appeal to the Corinthians by ‘the meekness and gentleness of Christ’ (2 Corinthians 10:1). For a person who exercises power, this is the magnanimity of mind and heart that ensures that judgment is truthful rather than rigid. It is well translated ‘clemency’. In everyday relations it ensures balance and equanimity. It is a most attractive virtue and Paul recognises its importance in the mission of the community to the world.

Paul reassures them that ‘**the Lord is near**’. He may still be thinking of the coming of Christ as being imminent, but even independent of such an expectation, life is short. It will not be long before they are all enjoying the fullness of communion with Jesus in the glory of the Father. In the meantime, the Lord is with them. As the Psalmist says; ‘The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth’ (Psalm 145:18).

Philippians 4:6

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Jesus told us: ‘Do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” ... your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things’ (Matthew 6:31-32). He encouraged us to pray, not to change God, but to keep our hearts fixed on God and to remain open to welcome the love that God is constantly pouring out over us. Jesus trusted that he would always receive from his Father, not necessarily what he wanted, but certainly what he needed. He believed this even when his cry of agony from the cross seemed to go unheard. Paul’s message is the same.

Paul links peace with thanksgiving also in his prayer for the Colossians: 'Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful' (Colossians 3:15). It is God's own peace, the communion in love which is the very being of God, and which the risen Lord shares with us, that will guard our hearts and our minds from worry.

Philippians 4:7-9

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in the Messiah Jesus. Finally brothers and sisters whatever is true, whatever is inspiring of reverence, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever attracts love, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, give consideration to these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul draws on the best of the moral education which the Gentile Philippians would have received through the Stoic teachers of the day, lived now by the Christians of Philippi ‘in the Messiah Jesus’.

whatever is true, whatever is inspiring of reverence, whatever is just,
whatever is pure

Paul wants them continually to ponder whatever is **true** (ἀληθῆς):
whatever is real, and not forgotten, obscured by lies and pretence.
Paul cannot speak of ‘truth’ without thinking of the real God who is
revealed in Jesus.

He wants them to keep their attention fixed on **whatever inspires a
sense of God** (σεμνός).

Something is ‘**just**’ (δίκαιος) when it is in accordance with the will of
God.

Something is ‘**pure**’ (ἁγνός) when it evokes a sense of the holy.

whatever attracts love, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, give consideration to these things.

Paul speaks of something that **brings love out** in us (προσφιλῆς).

Something is ‘**commendable**’ (εὐφημος) when it does not give offence, but rather wins people over and evokes praise.

Paul goes on to speak of the classic Greek word for virtue, namely, ‘**excellence**’ (ἀρετή), and of all that will cause people to ‘see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven’ (Matthew 5:16).

They have learned these things through their Christian instruction. They have received them from the tradition, and from their own experience they have heard and seen them being lived by Paul. If they live in this way, they will experience in their lives the presence of the ‘**God of peace**’.

Philippians 4:10

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it.

Immediately after the address Paul mentioned how much he thanks God for the ways in which the Philippians are always thinking of him (see 1:3). He has also spoken of their sending Epaphroditus to minister to his needs (2:25), who ‘risked his life to make up for those services that you could not give me’ (2:30). As he draws his letter to a close he returns to the subject of their gift and thanks them again by saying how much joy it gave him to know that they were thinking of him. His joy is ‘in the Lord’ for it is the joy of the heart of Jesus that he is experiencing. As Jesus promised: ‘I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete’ (John 15:11).

Philippians 4:11-14

Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

When Paul speaks of his ability to live a simple life, free from dependence on material possessions, he uses another technical word from the writings of the Greek moralists: the word ‘**content**’ (αὐτάρκης). As used by the Stoics and others it means being able to find one’s resources in oneself, being ‘self-sufficient’. Paul, on the contrary, is ‘content’, not because he is self-reliant, but because he has placed all his trust in God as he shares in the communion of love experienced by the risen Jesus.

In his correspondence with the Corinthians Paul had occasion to mention some of the situations in which he was brought low – a word that echoes Jesus' 'humbling' of himself when he 'became obedient to the point of death - even on a cross' (Philippians 2:8).

'To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless' (1 Corinthians 4:11).

'I was in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked' (2 Corinthians 11:27).

It is not his own strength that enables him to cope, it is the strength of the risen Christ who sustains him. This sustaining love comes to Paul (as it comes to us all) in many ways, not least through the care and concern of the Philippians, whose kindness moves Paul again to express his thanks. Their love helps him bear the distress of his present imprisonment (see 1:7).

Philippians 4:15-19

You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in the Messiah Jesus.

Paul refers to their generosity in supporting him as ‘a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God’. Earlier he spoke of ‘the sacrifice and offering of your faith’ (2:17). In this, too, they are living the life of Jesus. We recall Paul’s words in his letter to the Ephesians: ‘live in love, as the Messiah loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God’ (Ephesians 5:2).

We recall also his words to the Romans: ‘I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship ... be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect’ (Romans 12:1-2).

Nothing gives God greater pleasure than to see the love of his Son bearing fruit in the lives of his disciples.

Philippians 4:20-23

To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. Greet every saint in the Messiah Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus the Messiah be with your spirit.

Philippi is a Roman colony and the relative ease of travel between the two cities may mean that some of the slaves and others in the imperial service in Rome were known to the community in Philippi. He sends special greetings from them and concludes with a prayer that the members of the community in Philippi will experience in their spirit 'the grace of our Lord Jesus the Messiah'.