



THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS – STUDY GUIDE

LESSON 8 PAUL'S LIVING FAITH AND HOPE

CHAPTER 3:12-21

Since Christ has made it possible for us to win the prize, let's press on, without wavering, to gain it. You have seen how I turned my back on the past. You must do the same, ignoring people whose aims are really selfish. We must live now like citizens of heaven. When Jesus returns to the earth, he will reward us by changing us to be like him - no more sin, no more pain or death!

12: Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Paul wants to emphasise that although he has obtained forgiveness of sins through Christ, that does not mean he now no longer sins. He must keep trying his best to be worthy of all that Christ has made possible. "He who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:22). We must be careful to distinguish between our thankfulness and joy in salvation now and our recognition that salvation is a process that is not completed until after the judgement. Christ "took hold" of Paul, he made him his own, on the road to Damascus. After a period in which Paul was fighting against the Truth and trying not to face up to its enormous implications for him, he saw that the living Lord was real. Paul now presses on to make eternal salvation his own.

13,14: Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but 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 upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Again Paul stresses that he has not yet obtained salvation in its fullness. But he is putting the past behind him and constantly "straining forward" to what lies ahead.

It is no use bemoaning the past, or dwelling on sins that have been committed. We must confess them and believe that in Christ they can be forgiven (see 1 John 1:9). Then, with eyes set on the kingdom, we must press forward doing our best. Great effort is involved. The words used are associated with athletics. The successful runner is dedicated in his training and commitment to winning the next race. So too we must "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness". Everything must come second to that aim.

The runner has his eyes set on the finishing tape. Like Christ who, "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame" (Hebrews 12:2), we too must fix our sights on Christ, knowing that the prize will be the high or upward calling of God. God will invite us to share His glorious nature; we shall be like Christ in his perfect, resurrected state (Matthew 25:23,34; 1 Corinthians 15:53-58; 1 John 3:1-3).

15: Let those of us who are mature be thus minded; and if in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also to you.

If we have a mature faith, we shall understand this need to keep on striving, to press forward, putting the past behind us. Those who don't yet understand, God will enlighten if they continue to respond to His word.

16: Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

As we make progress in our spiritual lives, let us take courage and move forward together.

17: Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us.

The Philippians have some fine examples of Christian faith in action in the apostle Paul and his companions, men like Silas, Timothy and Luke. Paul is not boasting. He is encouraging his readers. They can see he is not just a talker. He is a doer.

18,19: For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

Paul has often warned against those whose discipleship becomes a form of self-indulgence. It is with deep regret (even weeping) that he has to brand them “enemies of the cross of Christ”. The cross is about self-sacrifice. When we are baptised into Christ we identify ourselves with that sacrifice and “put on” the selfless life of Christ. If we later allow our selfish instincts (our belly) to rule our actions, we “crucify... the Son of God afresh” (Hebrews 6:6). The “works of the flesh” are listed in Galatians 5:19-21. Besides obvious sins of self-indulgence, like fornication or drunkenness, strife is listed and heresy, which means creating splinter groups by teaching different doctrines from those that are sound and well established. People who are self-indulgent in their thinking and try to inflict their views on the rest cause many problems in ecclesial life. Read Colossians 3:1-17 to see the contrast between earthly, fleshly attitudes and the true qualities of a spiritually-minded person.

20,21: But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.

“Commonwealth” means citizenship or manner of life (see 1:27). Notice how Paul emphasises the true Christian faith and hope. Now we must try to live as citizens of heaven, that is our thinking, speaking and manner of life must be directed by Christ our King. Our hope for the future is not to go to heaven, but to be rewarded when Christ returns to the earth (1 Corinthians 15:23). For then our “lowly body” - the source of fleshly, earthly thoughts and actions, will be transformed by the power of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:24-26) to be “like his glorious body”.

The Wonders of Immortality

When we read the accounts of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, we realise that there was an altogether different dimension to Christ’s spiritual body. He could still be seen, could eat, could show the marks on his hands from the crucifixion. But he could move through space and time in a way we can hardly comprehend (Luke 24:36-43). Now all pain and suffering was past. The strains of the 3½ years’ ministry which led up to his death must have made him look prematurely aged and gaunt (Isaiah 53:2,3).

But no doubt in resurrection his youth was renewed (Isaiah 40:31). In fact he was barely recognisable to those who had known him (John 20:14; Luke 24:16). Best of all, the tendency to want to satisfy the flesh, the selfish instinct inherited from his human mother, was now removed (Hebrews 2:14-18; 4:15).

The same wonderful prospect is promised to those who look for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then, our physical disabilities, the effects of age and natural decay, will no longer wear us down. Then our characters will quite readily show forth “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control”. For sin will have no place in those who will be given immortal lives. This was the prospect which fired the apostle Paul with such enthusiasm, and for which he was prepared to sacrifice everything. It should have the same effect on us!

Questions

1. How does Paul behave in his life to make sure of the Resurrection and immortal life?
2. What lesson does Paul take from the athlete?
3. What is the ‘high calling of God’?
4. Who are the enemies of the cross of Christ? What things are they doing which make them enemies?
5. What changes will take place in our bodies when we become immortal?
6. When will these changes take place?