

SLOW PAUL: THINKING THROUGH PHILIPPIANS

Paul established the church at Philippi, the first Christian congregation in Europe, in AD/CE 51 (Acts 16), and revisited it during his third missionary journey (Acts 20:1-2). On the traditional view, he wrote this letter from his imprisonment in Rome c61-62. It is a friendly 'thankyou' letter for the Philippians' gift to him sent via Epaphroditus, but Paul also takes the opportunity to express his strong views on matters troubling this basically healthy church, including dissension amongst some of its members and unsound teaching from Judaizers.

Commentaries that may be found useful include F F Bruce (Pickering and Inglis 1984, on the GNB text), Alec Motyer (IVP *Bible Speaks Today* 2nd ed with study guide 1997), Gordon Fee (IVP Academic 1999), Tom Wright (SPCK *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* 2nd ed 2004); Moisés Silva (Baker Academic 2nd ed 2005). For information about *Slow Paul*, please see the 'Introduction to *Slow Food*' elsewhere on the website.

1 *¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

1:1-2 A couple of jailbirds

[1:1] Dear believers in Christ at Philippi,

This letter isn't a forgery and it hasn't been censored. It's from a couple of jailbirds called Paul and Timothy – remember them? We have no credentials of our own; we are simply servants of the greatest King in all the world, and his name is Jesus. We owe everything to him, and we depend on him for every breath we take. We have put our entire lives at his disposal and he has never let us down.

He has asked us to write to all of you. You are his precious and special people, his honoured sons and daughters. You are dual citizens of earth and heaven: your postal address may be a street in Philippi, Macedonia, but you are equally to be found 'at' the presence of the Lord Jesus, in direct touch with the throne of the One True God. Some of you hold responsibilities in the church leadership team as pastors, teachers and practical administrators, and we want you to know that your work is appreciated. But as far as your status in the eyes of heaven is concerned, your qualifications are the same as Christ himself.

[1:2] To each and all of you, then, we send greetings, not just from ourselves but from God our Father- Creator and from Jesus our Redeemer-Lord. You may be feeling, 'Who am I? I've made such a mess of things – I don't qualify for heavenly favour to the slightest degree.' Don't even start thinking like that! Receive his free gifts of unconditional love and unlimited power. Realise that the war is over and peace has broken out. The cross of Christ has changed everything. There's nothing to worry about any more.

³ I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ 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.

1:3-6 Good memories

[1:3] I have such good memories of you. It's several years since Timothy and I last saw you and even longer since that dramatic initial visit when you first responded to the gospel.

[1:4] But I've never stopped praying for you each by name, not as a matter of grim duty but with a great sense of happiness. [1:5] From the very start you caught my passion for telling others about the Lord Jesus, so that after we had to leave you to get on as best you could (with the Spirit's help, of course!), you didn't retreat into a defensive ghetto, but you joined with other neighbouring churches to bring the gospel to the whole province of Macedonia.

This kingdom partnership has continued to the present day, as we both work for our Master wherever he has placed us. A little token of it is this marvellous package that has arrived with Epaphroditus which I'll celebrate appropriately after I've given you some of my news. [1:6] It's also a token of something else the Lord is doing. I'll never forget arriving at Philippi for the first time and wandering out of the city along the river-bank, and accidentally on purpose bumping into some women holding a prayer meeting. The Lord began something all those years ago which is going to keep bearing fruit till the day he comes back. He never gives up, you see; whether it's an individual believer or a small, struggling church, when he plants the seed of the gospel, he aims to reap a whole harvest of goodness. What Christ has started, Christ will finish. That's what makes my prayers for you so confident.

⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. ⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

1:7-8 Sharing in the grace of God

[1:7] 'You would say this, Paul – you're just a professional soul-saver and you need to make sure we're in line with the other churches you've founded.' Please give me credit for honesty! This is how I really think. Philippi has a special place in my heart, and that includes each and every one of you even if I've never met some of your more recent members. How could I ever forget that night Silas and I spent in your town jail? (Luke and I have been going over those events – he's collecting material for a short monograph on the Holy Spirit's key part in the emerging church.) It doesn't matter whether I am locked up and unable to move hand or foot, or whether I'm free to travel round synagogues, market-places and debating halls wrestling with keen-minded opponents and demonstrating the theological soundness of the gospel – you and the other churches are standing there with me, supporting and encouraging, and all because we share in the grace of God.

[1:8] This word 'grace' says it all – that's why I'm beginning and ending my letter with it. 'Grace' is the love of God coming into a completely hopeless situation and turning it round for his glory and his alone. It happened to a murderer called Saul on the Damascus road. It

happened to a certain violent and blasphemous warder in a Philippian jail. It happened to a bunch of praying women on a river bank, desperate for a personal knowledge of God. It happens whenever Christ comes into a person's life bringing the mercy of God and the saving power of the Holy Spirit.

It's happened to all of you, each in your own way. That's why my work as an evangelist isn't just a job I happen to do, it's getting involved with people like you and finding the same shepherd love welling up in me that overflowed from Jesus to the harassed and helpless crowds. I am completely gut-wrenched that I can't see you and give you all a big hug. The Lord knows how true this is. He doesn't let my tears fall to the ground – he catches them in his bottle.

⁹ *And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,*
¹⁰ *so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,*
¹¹ *filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.*

1:9-11 Linking up with the mind of God

[1:9] The great thing about prayer is that it isn't just a psychological boost when I'm feeling depressed, it's linking up with the mind of God to get his will done in the world. So whenever I think of you (and that's quite a lot) I ask, 'What would Jesus be praying for those dear people at Philippi?' and I come up with three things: love, singlemindedness and practical goodness. This isn't, by the way, a moral beat-up disguised as a set of prayer requests – all the good things of God in our lives are the work of the Holy Spirit, and prayer is the way we relate to him and receive his gifts.

Love. I'm not praying for God the Father to love you more, because he can't! It's our love for him, and our love for each other, that I'm thinking about. When we get to know another person really well, we may not necessarily like what we discover – but as we go deeper into the knowledge of Christ, and really begin to understand what he has done for us in coming to this earth and dying for us, we find ourselves filling up on the inside with adoration and gratitude. And as we saturate ourselves in the character of the God who is love through and through, we find this naturally spilling over into the relationships we have with our fellow-believers. I know this is happening among you; so if it's there to some degree, may it steadily grow and deepen.

[1:10] *Singlemindedness.* We live in a multi-coloured world where the light comes and goes and it's often difficult to distinguish one hue from another. Falsehood and deceit coil themselves around the truth until they appear to be the same thing. But sunlight shows up the shadows for what they are, and the Spirit is our sunlight from within, as it were. If the Lord Jesus Christ is really at the centre of my heart and thinking, he gives me a kind of transparent integrity, so that my one desire is to know his will and to please him every day of my life, until that wonderful moment when he comes back again and I see him face to face. Pray this for each other, as I do for all of you.

[1:11] *Practical goodness.* Yes, we are given the Holy Spirit to make us godly through and through! This isn't just a matter of private devotion and public piety – it's meant to

outcrop into a daily life of usefulness and helpfulness to those we come across. Next time you visit the local market, take a look at the rows of stalls with all manner of fruit and vegetables, of every conceivable shape, colour and taste. Every church the Lord Jesus plants is to be like that market, with the difference that its goods are received and given free of charge. This isn't so people will say, 'How wonderful those Christians are!' but 'How wonderful the God these folk worship is!' I long and pray for this to be the buzz all over Philippi.

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

1:12-14 Unexpected bonus

[1:12] 'Yes, Paul, and we're praying for you too, because we're very concerned about the frustration you must feel at not being free to preach the gospel.' Well, it's true that I can't wander round the city all day gossiping about Jesus Christ to everyone I meet. But there's nothing to prevent people from coming to see me here, and besides, there's an unexpected bonus in my imprisonment. [1:13] All the other prisoners here are political agitators, corrupt businessmen and the like, and most people think I'm in a similar category – so when I explain, no, I'm simply here because I believe the hoped-for Jewish Messiah has come in the person of Jesus, they sit up and take notice! Hard-bitten praetorian soldiers have actually started asking questions about what this Christian Way is all about; and how it could matter so much to me that I'm prepared to stand trial for it before the highest court in the Empire.

[1:14] And there's another spin-off too. As you probably appreciate, the church folk here have been keeping their heads below the parapet because of the criticism and misunderstanding they come up against from all quarters. But now that I'm hitting the local headlines ('Jewish rabbi in imperial custody for Messianic beliefs' and so on), more and more of the disciples are throwing caution to the winds and cashing in on the discussion-point Jesus has become. It's wonderful to get news of seminars or wine-tastings being advertised as 'your chance to find out about what really makes life worth living.' One church is even holding a 'Chi-Rho' course for people who want to hear stories about Jesus. Frustrated? Not me! I'm delirious.

¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But 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.

1:15-18a Mixed motives?

[1:15] Of course, there are flies in the ointment. It is extraordinary what mixed motives some people have for doing what would seem on the face of it to be an entirely praiseworthy

thing, like standing on a soapbox for Christ. Now don't get me wrong: most of the people here who are sticking their necks out to witness to their crucified and risen Lord are doing it for the best of reasons. As I said, the fact that I'm kicking my heels in close custody when I should be evangelising Rome may seem as if God's plan has been thoroughly messed up – but it's actually the opposite, because it has generated enormous sympathy and support for me and has incentivised lots of faithful brethren to get out there and do it for me.

[1:17] At the same time, there's another bunch of self-professed gossellers who have decided to take advantage of my being on the shelf and have started their own campaigns for Christ in order to discredit me. The idea is that if they can peddle a sanitised form of the gospel, which saves you from sin yes, but which also saves you from suffering, ill-health, poverty and failure, they will win a lot more disciples than me. Tactically this is brilliant, because it suggests that my being in detention is somehow a sign that God is displeased with me and doesn't like what I preach. It is also supposed to turn the authorities against me, because I can be portrayed as a failed revolutionary whose time is up; and that could drain away any support I may be hoping for at my trial. At the same time it's meant to make me depressed because I can't do anything about it.

[1:18] Which of course I can't – but actually I couldn't care less. I used to kick up a stink whenever someone smuggled in their own version of the gospel masquerading as the true faith. But now I realise that the Holy Spirit is at work just as much as he always was. Jesus is Lord! If that message is getting out, then alleluia! You aren't saved by doctrinal orthodoxy, you're saved by Christ. Yes, I know Christ is the only way to God, but there are as many ways to Christ as there are pebbles on the beach. One day the Lord will sort out who are true believers and who aren't, and which servants were faithful and which weren't, but till then I'm content to him let operate how he will. After all, look at the bunch he collected around him in those early days....

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.²⁰ I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

1:18b-20 Only God's verdict matters

'We're so glad to hear you're looking on the positive side of things, Paul, but what about the future? Couldn't it all go horribly wrong?' No: the future's bright! [1:19-20] The only way it could turn out wrong would be if I recanted my faith in Christ (as you probably realise, there's considerable pressure on me to do this to get my sentence commuted). But as long as you keep interceding for me – yes, your prayers matter that much! – and as long as the King keeps pouring his rich resources into my heart by his wonderful ever-present Jesus-spirit, I can keep going.

I've been meditating on the story of Job, and in particular on the passage where he tells the worthless 'comforters' to get lost because he's dealing direct with God. It doesn't matter who else passes judgment on him, it's God's verdict that matters. And he says two apparently contradictory things. One is that even if God allows him to die he won't give up

hoping and trusting in his goodness. The other is that the result of his self-defence before God will be glorious salvation.

Now Scripture often presents us with paradoxes to get us thinking furiously. How could Job's death mean salvation for him? If I get condemned to death by the Emperor Nero, isn't that the end of all my hopes? Well, absolutely not. I could live, or I could die, it could go either way. The state is free to pass verdicts on its citizens, even if it gets it wrong occasionally. But the crunch is whether God Almighty declares me to be in the right. This is Job's consistent attitude. Now for Job, his 'righteousness' depended on the quality of his life record, which we are told was outstanding. Mine depends on the quality of Another whose life was not only outstanding but utterly perfect, and he gave it up so that I should live. How could I ever be ashamed of this God or (like my dear friend Peter in his moment of weakness) swear upon oath that I'm not a follower of his Son?

No. I'm totally confident, for the reasons I've already given, that I'll be able to stand up to any pressure that's put upon me to abandon my faith. In fact, I know glory is going to come to Christ as a result of all this. You know those glasses that people use to start a fire, by training the rays of the sun onto combustible material? Well, I'm praying that my body (meaning the sum total of all I am and all that happens to me) will act as a magnifying lens, to focus the brightness and warmth of God on this dry-as-tinder Roman capital and set it ablaze for Christ. Whether this happens through my execution or my acquittal, the result will be exactly the same: glory for Jesus.

²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

1:21-26 Win-win situation

[1:21] I'm in the best of all dilemmas; in fact, it's a win-win situation. Living on this earth means only one thing, and that's my Lord Jesus Christ; he's my reason for existence, the atmosphere I breathe, my single motivation and encouragement as I face each new day. But death, which is simply leaving this life behind in order to take up a far richer and fuller one, why, that's solid profit! [1:22] Let's suppose I'm granted a few more years slogging it out with all the opportunities and temptations bodily existence provides – yes, it's hard work, but it's serving in the Lord's vineyard and garnering a crop for him so that must be good. I really don't know which I'd prefer. You ask me if I've really got the power of choice in this matter, and I know it seems bizarre, but yes, God's waiting for me to decide.

[1:23] So this is the dilemma: I'd honestly be happier if I could pack it all in and go to be with Christ with nothing in-between, seeing my Redeemer face to face and finally fulfilling my heart's desire. Perfect! [1:24] Then the thought occurs, wouldn't it be rather selfish to put my own enjoyment before the needs of these young and often struggling churches? I'd be able to visit them – you lot included – and share the Spirit with them and write a few

more of these letters, and see off those wretched false teachers who seem to be everywhere....Yes, maybe I am needed down here after all, even though my flesh groans at the thought. I must be getting old.

[1:25] OK, my mind's made up. Sorry for all that dithering around. You're going to have Paul with you for a little bit longer, and he's going to come and see you, and you're going to make fresh advances in your faith, and there are going to be delighted grins all round.

[1:26] At the risk of letting my imagination run away with me, here I am getting off the boat at Neapolis and there's a huge crowd waiting on the quayside waiting to escort me in triumph into Philippi – but whose triumph is it really? Who is it that's rescued me from the jaws of death and shown his mercy again and again? Why, it's none other than the Lord Jesus, and we will all be praising his name to the skies and going over the top in adoration and celebration. I can't wait!

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

1:27-30 The same cosmic war

[1:27] Meanwhile we've all got to get on with our lives, and that means being good citizens in a double sense: playing a really constructive part as subjects of an earthly kingdom, while all the time being attractive ambassadors of our heavenly King whose reign is even better news than that of Caesar's. This is the news I want to be hearing about you, either when I eventually get to see you all personally, or when faithful friends like Epaphroditus bring messages about you. I want to be told that you're all standing shoulder to shoulder, united in the Spirit of peace and absolutely determined that together you're going win trophies for Christ as you run the gospel race trusting him.

[1:28] Please don't be cowed by the bully boys out there, who think that if they boo loudly enough they'll see you off the track. When all the smoke and din of battle has cleared, and they see you still holding the field and pressing on, they'll realise they're on the losing side and that you've been the winners all along, not because you're invincible but because you've got an invincible Saviour, the Immanuel God who is always with us. [1:29] I'm not saying it's going to be easy, believing in Christ in the face of a cynical or hostile world; what I'm saying is that it's a privilege to suffer for him and to bear his scars. [1:30] You and I are engaged in the same cosmic war; I needn't remind you of what I went through to bring you the gospel – some of you saw my lacerated back after that experience in your city jail – and I don't think you'll be under any illusions about the kind of opposition we're getting here.

2¹ Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind,

2:1-2 Antidote to disunity

[2:1] So now let me ask: are you getting on well together? When I said I didn't mind what versions of the gospel were being put about, as long as Christ was being preached as Lord, of course I didn't mean that I approve of the kind of in-fighting that can go on amongst Christians. The things we share are so much more precious than the things that divide us. To start with, the fact that we are in Christ and he is in us should give us massive encouragement. His love to each and every one of us is unconditional; his word comes to us personally, reassuring and re-energising us. Again, when we meet together or even just pass in the street, the Spirit within us touches the same Spirit in the other person and the bonds of our fellowship strengthen and deepen. This means that we feel an instinctive sympathy with our fellow-believers which overflows in compassion and a desire to put ourselves out for them. I'm sure you've experienced some of this; it's the Lord's own antidote to disunity of any kind. [2:2] I know I tend to worry needlessly, but quite honestly I'd be a lot happier if I knew for a fact that you were all thinking along the same lines, having the same passion for Christ and commitment to each other, identifying with each other's known needs and singlemindedly determined to seek the Lord's will in everything.

3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

2:3-4 Point-scoring mentality

[2:3] The sad thing is that Christians so easily lapse into a critical, point-scoring mentality which picks holes in others and rubbishes anything and everyone. It's partly from a desire to boost one's own ego or build one's own little empire, but it's rooted in a pride which is frankly devilish, because it seeks to transfer the glory which should be God's alone to ourselves. This kind of thing is completely pointless. The attitude we should all have is that but for God's grace we should all be on the tip – we know how far short even our best efforts fall, and hence we are ready to be appreciative of the qualities shown by other Christians, which we are quite prepared to admit are superior to our own virtues. [2:4] It's so sad when people are so intent on pursuing their own agendas that they are completely impervious to the needs of others or to the good of the fellowship. The antidote, as I've said, is for everyone to make a deliberate effort to put themselves out for other people and put their own interests way down the list. It may not be easy; but the alternative is that the church disintegrates into little factions, constantly squabbling and sniping at each other from behind elaborate defences.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human

*likeness. ⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!**

2:5-8 The self-abandonment of Jesus

[2:5] 'But, Paul, we're always going to be like this, because human nature is alive and well even in the closest Christian fellowship.' I want to change the way you think about this; I know it's not easy, but if you work at it, you'll find your attitude coming into line with the Lord Jesus Christ's. Get your Christology in focus, and your behaviour patterns will follow. What happens when we swing the spotlight away from ourselves and centre it upon him? [2:6] We find a man who started out as God and never stopped being God. Fix your eyes on this God-shaped person and everything else follows. It's easier to think of God being like Jesus than to try to conceive of some invisible, intangible Creator. In fact, Jesus was there co-creating with his Father. It would seem totally impossible for this person to confine himself within a single planet, let alone a single human body, but he was willing to do this for our sakes. This, of course, is in sharpest contradistinction to another being who wasn't anywhere near Godhead, glorious archangel though he was, but who aspired to Divine equality even though it meant usurping privileges to which he had no right, and violently dislocating the wise and beneficent economy of heaven.

[2:7] Never underestimate the self-abandonment of Jesus. He needn't have lifted a finger to sort out the mess the human race had got itself into, selling itself into bondage to a twisted will and passing on the rebel nature to all its descendants. Instead, he voluntarily accepted a status which was completely in line with that slave nature – except that he remained loyal through the fiercest temptation. Human nature doesn't have to be sinful, unless it chooses deliberately to be so. Divinity became human: he looked like us, he felt, thought, laughed, wept like us, he was under the same physical restraints and necessities as we are, he had to shape his daily life in accordance with trust and obedience as we have to.

[2:8] Yes, obedience. How could the Son of God ever disobey his Father? Yet time after time he was presented with this choice: you can either assert your kingly prerogative to make things easy for yourself, or you can accept humiliation and scorn, suffering and death. It is paradoxical enough for the immortal to take on mortality in the first place, but you would expect that before the moment of physical disintegration he would assert his mastery over death and be translated back to his Father. Not a bit of it! Both by his Father's will and his own will he accepted the shame and agony of crucifixion, the cruellest and most degrading form of execution devised by mankind. He reached rock bottom, rejected by God and his fellow-humans, pinned to two pieces of wood with a cynical advertisement over his head.

⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,*
¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*
¹¹ *and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

2:9-11 The top Name of all

[2:9] I could go on to explain (as I love to do) what the cross achieved in terms of human salvation, but I want to stick to the main point, which is that the Lord Jesus was prepared

to pay the utmost cost in order to follow his Father's will and purpose. And God honoured this, oh how he honoured it! Far from letting his body rot in the tomb, he brought Jesus up from the dead, then enthroned him at the highest pinnacle of power and glory. To the One who had consistently abnegated every title of honour during his human life, who had submitted to the ultimate disgrace of being executed like a common criminal, the Almighty granted the top Name of all.

[2:10] I want you to drop whatever you're doing and just think about this. There are degrees of greatness, pyramids of power. There are glorious angelic authorities whose very names would reduce you and me to quivering wrecks. There are dark forces operating in unfathomable mines of evil which we should hope never to encounter face to face. Even on earth there are rulers and leaders, human gods and goddesses, who inspire veneration or terror. But all these are going to have to drop to their knees in front of one single person: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. [2:11] Willingly or grudgingly, all will yield allegiance to their supreme Lord and Emperor, the King who became Man, who allowed himself to be stripped of all he possessed, so that he might inherit a name of undying honour. Not that he ever desired the glory for himself; the ultimate glory will go, as it has always gone, to the God who is Father of us all, the Father of Jesus.

'Paul, most of our Jewish friends find it impossible to accept that Jesus' name is equivalent to that of the One True God.' I am a Jew myself and I assure you I have wrestled long and hard with this crucial question. Come with me to one of the great monotheistic passages at the heart of the prophet Isaiah. Again and again he repeats, 'I am the Lord, and there is no other.' He reaffirms the great 'I Am' revelation to Moses. Yet what do both Moses and Isaiah insist about this unique 'I Am'?

That he is a God who comes down and rescues. That he is a God who saves. Far from contradicting God's word or robbing the Most High of his full glory, I am simply drawing back the veil that lies over the Scriptures and showing that Jesus is this Saviour God in action. That is why we can take Isaiah's language about 'every knee bending' and 'every tongue swearing allegiance', and apply it in its fullest sense to our Lord Jesus Christ, the Highest God who descended to the lowest point so that he might take us back with him to share his eternal glory.

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed — not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence — continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

2:12-13 Salvation isn't automatic

[2:12-13] Yes, my deeply beloved friends and colleagues, you and I are there in this Jesus story. It is our rescue that he achieves by his selfless obedience. His 'Yes!' to God has enabled God to say 'Yes!' to us. How could we possibly be proud and self-assertive after what he went through? We all need a good measure of the same attitude of humility, then we too shall be part of his saving mission. This is what I want to say next. But first let me emphasise this: salvation isn't automatic, nor is it achieved in a single decision to follow Christ. It is hammered out in a ceaseless daily quest to find out God's will and to do it.

Now you've always been a church whose devotion to Christ has been accompanied by practical obedience; I've seen it when I've been with you in person, and I get it from every single visitor to my cell here: 'Those Philippians are really forging ahead!' But complacency can so easily creep in, as I've seen happen in other churches. We need to be literally quaking in our shoes for fear that the world, the flesh and the devil will do their insidious work and cause us to go off course to the left or the right.

It's like a pair of people rowing a boat. If either of them rests on their oar, the boat will simply go round in circles. The process of salvation works only if both sides, the human and the divine, are operating flat out. On our side of things, we need to put in one hundred per cent effort to make sure that this sanctification business doesn't just involve attending a service once a week and thinking a few pious thoughts – it's meant to function at ground level and 24/7. But this can only happen if God is doing his stuff too, and this is where the Holy Spirit comes in. By ourselves we have neither the inclination nor the capacity for carrying out God's revealed will. It's the Spirit who has to pour his ceaseless and unseen energy into us from within, constantly showing us what pleases Christ, and helping us to put it into practice – and of course he delights to do that! You may have watched your local metal-worker producing an exquisite ornament in bronze or iron. All his skill and physical strength is needed to get the artefact to conform to the original design; yet without the red-hot fire that continually heats the metal, his efforts would be useless. The Christian life is characterised both by daily dogged discipline, and by the inspiration and strength that flows from the Spirit of grace. I hope you find this both challenging and reassuring.

¹⁴ Do everything without grumbling or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky ¹⁶ as you hold firmly to the word of life.

2:14-16a Shining for the Lord

[2:14] Now how does this apply to our witness to the world around us, and to our calling to bring the word of God to them? I've been reflecting on the numerous occasions when the children of Israel complained against Moses, and God, during their wilderness wanderings. I've not been immune to that temptation in my frequent prison experiences, I can tell you! Why is God treating me so harshly? Then I realise that I've got to trust him to know what he is doing. As a church, you simply mustn't allow grumbling or petty squabbles about inessentials to cloud your witness. [2:15] Christ hasn't saved you so that you can go about constantly blaming each other – he's committed himself to presenting you without a single spot on your record before the glorious presence of God – so how can you justify any kind of grudge or personal animosity between you? The Israelites thought of themselves as the children of God, but Moses in his last great Song gets tough with them and says, 'You're not really his children at all – you're as perverse and twisted as the nations round about you!'. Why was that? Because the whole principle of grace is that we're continually grateful for it, not that we start grumbling about this dreadful manna or these boring quails that suddenly drop from heaven. The children of Israel got spoilt, somehow; they thought God owed them a better existence than the one they had, and the

end of that road was to send the One True God packing and see what other 'deities' had to offer. Result: they lost their transparent joy, they stopped shining for the Lord, they forgot about telling the world how great he was.

[2:16] I want you to sparkle for him like the desert sky on a starlit night, with not a trace of contamination or pollution to muddy the vision. I want you to get such a firm grasp on the word of salvation, the message of the lifegiving Christ, that you can present it (and him) to anybody and everybody, just like those previously divided and squabbling disciples at Pentecost, united in the power of the Spirit and telling people in their own languages how great is our God.

And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain.¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.¹⁸ So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

2:16b-18 I want to hold my head high

'That's fine, Paul, but we're just a bit confused. One moment you're telling us we're obeying flat out and doing fine, the next you're suggesting that we're all in-fighting and backstabbing. What are you trying to say?'

Well, no church is perfect, and we have a potent enemy who loves to sow disunity among Christians. I've seen churches disintegrate from the failure of a few key individuals to get on with each other. Until Christ comes back, there is no guarantee that an apparently thriving and united fellowship won't split into little factions. I want to be able to hold my head high on that wonderful last Day and say, 'Lord, I present to you the Philippian church, for whom I have endured so much and laboured so hard. They and I have finished the relay race together and none of us has dropped the baton or pulled out exhausted.'

[2:17] Now listen. I'm under no illusions that even if I'm spared for a year or two, I could still end up on the executioner's block. The Jewish leaders here (and everywhere else) are out to get me. Religion is a good and holy thing; but as I know from my own previous history, when it gets twisted it becomes an evil and destructive force. I once thought I was doing God service if I could offer him the blood of a single heretic on his altar. Now I'm in line to be the next victim, and it's my life that's going to be the drink-offering for these pious bloodhounds. But to continue the metaphor, it's a joy to me that I can partake of this priestly ministry on behalf of your faith, even if it's me that ends up as the sacrifice.

'Paul, you are thoroughly depressed and you're beginning to depress us.' No, absolutely the opposite! Our Lord told us that when we are persecuted and falsely accused we should jump for joy, because we're in a long and honourable line, going back to the prophets and of course culminating in the suffering of our Master himself. It's a matter for congratulation and thanksgiving, if I'm called to lay my life on the altar for him. That's how the battle is going to be won. Please don't be dismayed or think God has reneged on his children. Hold a special service of celebration, and I'll be there in spirit with you, leaping and dancing for joy.

¹⁹ I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. ²⁰ I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. ²¹ For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²² But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³ I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. ²⁴ And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

2:19-24 Timothy: solid gold

[2:19] In fact I'll let you in on some plotting we've been doing here. All human plans are subject to the Lord's will, of course, but whatever happens he won't let us down. Timothy wants to pay you a visit, so I've decided to let him go, because both he and I are desperate to get your news; it will be such a relief to know everything is all right your end. [2:20] I expect you realise that Timothy is really special to me: he has an extraordinary pastoral heart and insight, and he shares my concerns for the churches like no one else I know. [2:21] In fact he is a constant challenge to me because sometimes I catch myself lapsing into the default mood of human nature, which is to fight my own corner without a moment's thought for what the Lord or anyone else really wants or needs. This spirit of selfishness infects a lot of good Christian people here in Rome, I can tell you, even those apparently campaigning hardest for the spread of Christ's kingdom. Most of them are never happier than when they can gather throngs of admiring followers and make themselves the centre of attention. There! I'm seeing things in black-and-white, as usual. But I just wonder whether I could count on their support if it came down to the wire. [2:22] Now Timothy is a shining exception to all that; you have had first-hand experience, of course, of his solid-gold worth, when he showed me the kind of loyalty you would only get from a son to his father. Time and again he has put himself completely at the service of the Lord for one thing and one thing only, and that is so that nobody within reach should be in any doubt that Jesus died for them and rose again.

[2:23] Well, I can't think of anyone who could be a better ambassador to you on my behalf. My intention is to release him as soon as I get some clarity about my future here. [2:24] Then I will settle affairs in Rome and arrive at your gates in person! I love making plans; but of course it's the Lord who must decide, because he can see the whole picture and I have absolute faith that he knows what is best.

²⁵ But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. ²⁶ For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸ Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. ²⁹ So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, ³⁰ because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

2:25-30 Epaphroditus: back on active service

[2:25] You may still be wondering why Epaphroditus, rather than Timothy, is bringing you this letter. I hope you realise that he is extremely valuable to me and valued by me, not only as a fellow-Christian with whom I can share matters of faith at the deepest level, but also as a practical support in my daily life and work, and not least as part of the team, Christ's tiny yet mighty army, which is contending for the gospel in this crucial battle arena. After all, you sent him to me expressly so that he could represent your church and its leadership here in Rome, as well as ministering to me in all kinds of ways. Why is he back so soon?

[2:26] Well, there is one key reason why it is absolutely imperative that he returns to you, and that is that he has an acute longing to see you all again! In fact he has been quite emotional about this, partly of course because he's missing your fellowship, but also because word had got back to you about his state of health. News travels fast in this Mediterranean world! [2:27] I can confirm that he was indeed very ill, and at one point the doctors were convinced he wouldn't last another day; but our merciful God and Father granted him an amazing recovery. I felt this was a sign of God's very special concern for me too, because I was going through a particularly difficult patch at the time and Epaphroditus' removal from the scene would have been the last straw. [2:28] So why couldn't he have stayed on once he had convalesced? Well, as I say, he had been very worried that you might still think he was in danger, and he couldn't wait to see the delighted grins on your faces as you exchanged hugs and kisses and realised that he was back again safe and sound. I must admit I feel happier too, because he had really been very depressed and quite honestly it had begun to affect me too.

[2:29] So you need have no reservations at all about welcoming him home; he's on active service for the Lord once more, and you can join me in feeling just so thankful that there are people like him around who are worth their weight in gold. [2:30] Please don't underestimate what he's been through for the Lord Jesus' sake: he put his life on the line to bring me your offering, simply because he knew you couldn't all be clustering round me here in person; and if he couldn't get through, your sacrificial contribution wouldn't get to me either. But he did, and it did, and here he is larger than life to prove it!

3¹ Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. 2 Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—

3:1-3 A band of marauding axemen

[3:1] Everything I've said so far can be summed up in one short strapline: find your joy in the Lord Jesus. He is the one dependable source of contentment and utter satisfaction. Just pause here and draw a long, deep breath. Nothing that can happen to you will ever remove his presence from your lives. I had thought of signing off on that note, but at the risk of being really boring (boring for you, I mean, not for me) I want to return to a theme I've often banged on about when I've been with you, and have hinted at several times in this missive. I am just so concerned that you shouldn't put your eternal destiny at risk by swallowing a version of the faith that isn't about Christ at all – it's human-centred kibosh.

[3:2] There are people telling you that in order to make quite sure you're acceptable to God, you've got to get circumcised – am I right? Yes? These people are Jews by birth, they've made a profession of faith in Christ, and they're saying one little snip and you're totally saved. Sorry, but I've got to issue a red alert. Don't even start listening to them. They're pariah dogs baying for your blood. I don't care how sincere they are or how hard they work at their full-time ministry, they are not doing the Lord's work and that means they are enemy. They're like a band of marauding axemen chopping down somebody else's vines and olives. They're slicing off any hope you have of Christ saving you. I'm not apologising for sounding the alarm loud and long about this. Wake up, everybody!

[3:3] It simply doesn't matter in God's sight whether you have a physical mark on your body or not – the question is, who is a member of God's chosen people and how did they get there? I've had to deal with this question times without number. The answer is the same every time, and I don't care how hot under the collar it causes certain people to become. Circumcision isn't physical, it's spiritual. God's people are everyone (including the present writers) who fulfil three conditions.

One, they have received God's Holy Spirit into their lives, they have become new people, their lives are ruled not by external religious precepts or rituals but by the internal longing of their hearts to please him and to put themselves at the service of his kingdom.

Two, they trust completely and utterly in Christ Jesus, the God who became man, who died for them and rose again. The cross which brought shame and humiliation to him is their proudest boast. The slavery he endured for them has set them free to leap and sing for joy.

Three, they have absolutely no confidence in who they might happen to be or what they might have achieved. Earthly distinctions and human status, whether inherited or achieved, have no significance for them. They have tried in the past to walk with the legs of the flesh and they have ended up spiritual cripples.

⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

3:4-6 I ticked every box

[3:4] I could go on to give you a sociological analysis of the church here, which is an extraordinary mix of birth qualifications, religious and racial backgrounds, age, gender, class status, whatever. But I'm going to stick to the example I know best, which is someone once called Saul of Tarsus and now called Paul the slave of Christ. Once I had plenty of human qualifications which I thought I could rely on to make me acceptable to God. In fact I would challenge anybody to produce a more impressive list. [3:5] I ticked every box in what I supposed to be the registration requirements for heaven. 'Are you a proper Jew, or only a transfer?' My parents had me circumcised a week after birth; my ancestry goes back to the founding patriarchs; I'm a fully signed-up member of the tribe which gave us our first king (and my own name); I'm one hundred per cent Hebrew, with Hebrew ancestors

on both sides. ‘Do you know the law of Moses?’ Not only was I taught the faith by loving and wise parents, but I followed them in their Pharisaic profession, which meant I had the most rigorous training in religious doctrine possible for anyone. [3:6] ‘Have you shown true commitment to God?’ Not for me a cloistered virtue or an ivory-tower piety – I got out there in the thick of the action and spearheaded the attempted genocide of the worst heretics in our midst, the Jesus-way followers (and I will carry this badge of shame to my dying day). ‘Have you actually kept the law in all its fullness?’ Well, I now know that I was falling far short, but like other young men ardent for divine approval I truly believed I had nothing on my conscience, and that God would welcome me with open arms and congratulate me on my spotless record. How could he possibly turn me down?

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

3:7-9 The signature of Christ on my life

[3:7] Yes, I really thought I had it all. There was only one fly in the ointment: the Messiah. Scripture makes it perfectly clear that opposition to God’s chosen Son, the One who comes to reign as King, is opposition to God himself. My supposedly flawless qualifications were worth nothing if I was spitting in the face of the Coming One – in fact, the sooner I got rid of them, the better. My Damascus road experience and all my subsequent reflections have led me to the unshakeable conviction that Jesus is God’s Messiah. This isn’t just a product of academic research into Scripture; I’ve met him. I know him at first hand. Jesus is Lord, and he is my Lord.

[3:8-9] His mercy and friendship is the best thing that has ever happened to me. I couldn’t care less if it means I lose everything else I have ever valued or striven for. I am perfectly happy to see it all flushed down the toilet. Sorry if this shocks the more sensitive among you, but it’s how I feel. I’ve now got God’s own Messiah sharing my life, and if I’m out there in the open, with all the searchlights of heaven trained on me, well, they’ll have to focus on him, not me. It’s not my record that’s up for examination, it’s his; not my list of credentials, not my degrees in spirituality, not my medals and scars, but the signature of Christ on my life. Not my faith, but his faithfulness. If you ask me what right I have to stand before the radiant holiness of God and claim to be a true-born child of his, I reply that of myself I have absolutely no right whatever. I have placed my trust wholly and unreservedly in the rightness of Jesus, the solid worth of the One who comes as God to find me and declare me (yes, me of all people) faultless.

¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

3:10-11 I don't want to miss out

[3:10] 'Come off it, Paul! This sounds as if you've reached a state of sinless perfection and achieved perfect knowledge of the Godhead.' Far from it. When I say I've come to know Christ, I'm talking about the initial relationship with the Lord which is granted to everyone who puts their trust in him. It's like saying 'Yes, I know so-and-so personally,' then going on to marry them and finding there's so much more to discover about them. I believe that Jesus has risen from the dead as a matter of unshakeable conviction; but I've only begun to tap into the power of the resurrected life that he imparts through his presence within me. I believe that he suffered and died for me on the cross; but it's quite another matter to enter into the fellowship of those who are suffering for his Name in this world, and to experience, day by painful day, the old proud and self-glorifying person I used to be gradually being reshaped into the likeness of the ever-living King of glory, who surrendered himself to the most ignominious death possible for any human being. [3:11] One day, I know, we will all reach the amazing moment when that transformation is complete. The day of resurrection is part and parcel of the solid hope shared by Jews and Christians alike. But don't let anyone tell you that we've already got there—the event will be completely unmistakable! I just long for that day – but I'm not taking my arrival there for granted, and I'm doing my very best to make sure I don't miss out on it.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

3:12-14 Attitude is everything

[3:12] Forgive me for labouring this point, but I want to make myself crystal clear: I haven't got there yet. Perfection is not attainable in this life, however saintly and self-abnegating a person may (by God's grace) become. I'm like a soldier pursuing a potential prisoner who is fleeing from the field of battle – if only I could just grab hold of him! Then he stops in his tracks, and embraces me, and I find I'm his willing captive after all. That's what happened when I met Christ, and in one sense it's been happening ever since, so that I don't really know whether it's me getting hold of Jesus or Jesus getting hold of me.

[3:13] Listen, every fellow-Christian who is hearing this letter read out – you've been to the athletic games, and you've watched the competitors in a long-distance race slogging it out lap by lap. The training is as much mental as it is physical. Attitude is everything. There are two mistakes you can make during a race: one is to think that you've made it to the tape when there's still some way to go; and the other is to get discouraged by mistakes you've made in the earlier laps and to think there's no chance of final victory. It's the same with the Christian race. The moment I start thinking I'm as holy as I need to be to qualify for a heavenly crown, I succumb to the deadliest sin of all, which is spiritual pride. Yet if I get into a state of excessive introspection and begin to count up all the lapses I've been guilty of, I become a prisoner of despair and lose my forward momentum.

[3:14] The remedy for both of these states of mind is God's grace in Christ, the daily wonder that despite everything, he hasn't disqualified me from participating in the race and he's personally called me to aim for glory through the strength he lends. It's not the other 'competitors' that I need to worry about, nor the cheers or jeers of the spectators; my single concern is to please the One who ultimately adjudicates, who hands out the prizes, the supreme Olympic victor himself, the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

3:15-16 Are you a finisher?

[3:15] Yes, attitude is all. Are you a finisher? I'm not asking, are you a perfectionist, because that sort of person all too easily falls into the twin traps I was just talking about, the 'holier than thou' and the 'I'll never make it' mentalities. I'm just saying that if you take your eyes off Christ and get preoccupied with your own triumphs and failures, you may drop out of the race entirely. I get a lot of different reactions when I talk in such terms. Some people think, oh, God will let everybody in, there's no point in busting your guts. Others come up with, unless you've got a particular mystical kind of knowledge of the Lord, or stick rigidly to a really tough system of personal discipline, you're going to be a reject. I often have to finish a discussion with the thought, expressed or unexpressed, 'If I can't open your eyes to God's grace, then there's only one person who can, and that's the Holy Spirit, and I pray that he will.'

[3:16] So if what I've been saying either discourages you ('I could never live up to such lofty ideals') or disgusts you ('How could you possibly trample on all the privileges God has given you as a Jew?'), let me just add this. You wouldn't be listening to this letter, or reading it, unless you had already got to a certain stage in the race. OK, there's still some way to go, but it hasn't been a waste of time. Build on the foundation you've laid. Follow the path where God's been leading. He sometimes leads by strange ways. Press on. Trust him.

¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

3:17-19 People who undermine the true gospel

[3:17] 'It's fine telling us to follow Christ, but there are so many would-be guides to Christ jostling for our adherence. How can we tell who's safe to travel with?' I'm going to stick my neck out here. I could claim apostolic authority, but instead I'm going to appeal to you as fellow-Christians – I'm just as fallible as you are! I've just been describing my attitude to human status and self-promotion, and how singlemindedly running the race means turning my eyes upon Jesus, my one hope of grace and glory. So let's run as a team; let's model this attitude among ourselves and use it as our criterion for judging who is worth listening to and following. There are people out there who are solid gold, doing Christ's work, speaking his word. Get with them, walk in their shoes. [3:18] Because I'm never

tired of saying, and you've often heard me rattling on about it, and I'm saying it again with tears running down my face: don't accept people at face value. They may talk the talk, and wear the clothes, and go on about Jesus being Lord, when all the while they're undermining the true gospel. They preach the cross while they're really woodworm in its timber.

[3:19] I know I said earlier that I didn't mind what motivated some people to talk about the things of Jesus Christ, as long as his name was being proclaimed. That was in the context of my imprisonment here in Rome, where a few people who are personally hostile to me are trying to rub salt into my wounds by suggesting that God wants me silenced. I'm talking now about a more general situation threatening the church of Christ, where a way of salvation is being peddled which is not only anti- Pauline, it's anti Christ himself. They do not see the cross as the sole and sufficient way of God and mankind being reconciled. They add to the cross, and so sideline it.

Follow these people through the doctrinal fog they have created, and you walk off the cliff edge with them. They see religion as a source of income because they can't bear the thought of going hungry for the sake of Jesus or losing their creature comforts. They bask in the admiration of their adherents while they store up humiliation in the eyes of heaven. Their attitude is earthly and devilish, because they are ambitious only for themselves and their self-proclaimed wisdom is the product of human reasoning and not from the Spirit of God.

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

3:20-21 Jesus is coming back!

[3:20] Listen. These people's allegiance is first and foremost to the world around them. But we – you, me, Timothy, all my true friends here – we have taken out membership of the kingdom of heaven. We may happen to be loyal citizens of an earthly realm, as I hope we all are, but our overriding loyalty is to a greater and more enduring empire, whose King is the Lord Jesus. We're like a city under siege here, but he's coming in force to rescue us.

[3:21] I find it hard to wrench my attention away from the squalid surroundings I'm in, and the enfeebled condition of my own bodily existence, and to concentrate on the incredible hope we have. Jesus is coming back! The great transformation is just round the corner!

'Hold on, Paul. Surely when we die, our soul leaves the body to be with Christ, and the old body which caused us such trouble will simply rot away into dust.' Well, I have a surprise for you. Nothing is going to die, because death is like a tiny minnow that is going to be swallowed up by a huge fish called Life. This is going to affect what happens even to our useless physical corpses. Yes, we sleep in the dust of the earth, but as the prophets have told us, we're going to wake to a new day dawning. The Lord himself drew the unforgettable picture of the tiny shrivelled wheat seed falling into the earth and apparently losing its life. Yet when it comes up in a different form, it can now produce seeds many times its original number. In this new scheme of things, not only is nothing wasted, but its potential for good is multiplied out of all proportion.

Don't underestimate the staggering power of the Lord Jesus. Yes, as I said earlier, our deathless Lord himself underwent the humiliating descent into humanity and disintegration for our sakes; but then the great reversal took place and he ascended to the supreme glory where he can be the God he always was. Everything is under his total control. And this is the amazing fact: just as he now has a human body, transfigured and transformed indeed, but bearing the scars of his earthly existence, so we shall find that our bodies have been reshaped to be like his. That's what's meant by heavenly citizenship: our identification papers bear the stamp of Jesus himself, because one day we are going to resemble him in all his wonderful and infinite variety. Because he is King, we too shall reign with him for ever.

4¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

4:1 Jewels in my crown

[4:1] This is why you've simply got to put your marker down and refuse to budge. Your whole future is bound up with Christ; keep it there! We are one huge family, and that's why I feel so passionate about you and would give anything just to be with you. I think about you constantly, and your memory fills me with joy and optimism. You are the jewels in my crown and I don't want a single one of you to be missing. I hope you realise how very greatly you are loved.

2 I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4:2-3 Reconciliation

[4:2] Now I need to say something to two of you who can't seem to agree about anything! Please, Euodia, and please, Syntyche, let go any bitterness there may be between you. Come together to the foot of the cross and submit to the reconciling work of the Lord who died for you both equally. [4:3] In fact, my dear trusty ploughing partner (you all know who I mean), I appeal to you to drop everything and work with these two wonderful people; they were part of the relay team with me when we passed on the light of the gospel against determined opposition, as of course were Clemens and all my other co-workers – I could list all their names but there's no need, just look them up in the library of heaven where they're inscribed indelibly in the great Book of Life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

4:4-5 Celebrate and sing!

[4:4] Keep celebrating! We've got the Lord with us, wherever we are, whatever the weather. In case you didn't hear me the first time, here it is again: celebrate and sing! [4:5] OK, don't overdo it; I realise you've got to go about your daily business, and people don't like aggressively hearty witnessing – but all the same, there's so much to be happy about, when

we've got the Lord walking with us and holding our hands, and any day now he could reappear in his full glory – what celebration there's going to be then!

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

4:6-7 Deep peace

[4:6] 'Meanwhile, Paul, we've got to live in this twilight world with all its uncertainties and worries.' I should know; I'm there too! But I'll tell you what I do, and I'm sure it will work for you: whenever I feel an anxiety coming on, I refuse to try to deal with it, and instead I turn it over to the Lord. You can do this with any situation: just go to him, tell him what you need and ask him for help; then thank him for being such a wonderful God and for offering to share our complicated lives. When we do this, we're not telling God what he doesn't know already; we're simply showing him that we trust him to know what's best and to be in control. [4:7] The result is pretty marvellous: instead of worrying about whether I've prayed hard enough or whether he's going to answer in time, I find a deep peace flooding my whole being. I can't explain it or work it out psychologically, but it's as though I was in a besieged town with the enemy hammering at the gates and lobbing missiles over the walls, and yet all the citizens are calmly going about their business and whistling while they work, because they know nothing can get past the King's watchful protection. After all, Jesus is Lord, he's in there with us, and he's laid himself on the line to ensure that not a single hair of our heads perishes.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

4:8-9 Positive thinking, practical ideals

[4:8] That about wraps it up. Just one more thing, though. I may have given the impression that the world is an irredeemably corrupt place and that our little family of Christ-bearers is the one light flickering bravely in the general darkness. I sometimes catch myself thinking depressing thoughts like that. So, sitting in my cell without all that much to do, I set myself a series of positive mental exercises. For instance, there is such a thing as truth out there, so can I think of maybe seven absolutely fundamental truths about our existence that remain unaffected by all the lies and half-truths that swirl around us? For instance, 'God is good,' 'love is better than hatred,' and so on. Then I do the same with other categories. Examples of honourable behaviour; cases of just and fair dealing; people of transparently pure and selfless character; artefacts of rare loveliness and beauty; deeds reported in the news that show the good side of human nature. Because make no mistake, evil will not have the last word. There are universal values that we can pass on to the next generation. And as I've hinted, nothing of really solid worth is destined to perish. If you find cynicism coming on, you might like to go into similar mental training. Attitude is all!

[4:9] But it's not just a question of thinking noble thoughts – make sure you translate them into practice. You've sat at the feet of fine teachers of the Scriptures; you've received traditions that are abundantly worth passing on; you've heard great stories of what the saints have been through; you may even be able to take encouragement from what you've seen the Lord doing in my life. Don't just have ideals – make them part and parcel of your daily lives and habits. What if we fail occasionally? We have the ultimate assurance that God will never leave us nor forsake us, that he's brought peace and reconciliation through the cross of Christ, that his Spirit within us will calm all our fears and help us face whatever the future brings.

¹⁰ I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

4:10-13 Thank-you note

[4:10] You must be wondering when I'm going to get round to thanking you for the gift you have sent me by the hand of Epaphroditus. I wanted to leave that to last. As you might expect, it made me ecstatic! I went straight to the Lord and thanked him over and over again. It was fresh evidence (not that any evidence was needed) that you still think of me and care about what is happening to me. Opportunities to send expensive packages all the way to Rome don't come round very often; but this one did, and you seized it with both hands. [4:11] It made me meditate about this whole business of material sufficiency. Over the course of my life I've had to train myself never to think in terms of 'what I need,' or 'what I should like to have.' The Stoics have taught me the quality of self-sufficiency, i.e. the truly strong person is one who does not have to depend on anyone or anything to meet their needs; but walking the way of Jesus has taught me so much more.

The secret of inner strength

[4:12] Stoic teaching is all about making oneself independent: whatever fate or the universe throws at you can't harm you as long as you cultivate an inner detachment of soul. Now I've had a whole range of circumstances thrown at me and I won't go through them now. I've known the depths of humiliation and deprivation, and I've also known what it is to live in comparative luxury. But we have a secret the Stoics never dreamt of, and that is knowing Christ. It's like being initiated into one of those mystery cults where people outside have absolutely no conception of the new quality of life you are experiencing. Tell me how you can regard sitting down to a multi-course banquet and existing for days on mouldy bread and a half-cup of water with equal indifference. Show me how to survive the transition from the dizzying heights of success and personal satisfaction to the lack of even the basic necessities of life. [4:13] My secret, my mystery if you like, is to know the power of Jesus living within me and enabling me to cope with any and every situation or demand. I'm not special; the rawest recruit to Christ's army can draw upon the same provisioning. Let me say this to everyone who looks to an esoteric philosophy or system of training for spiritual

power: the life of Jesus dwelling in my life is adequate to every pressure you can possibly imagine.

¹⁴ Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵ Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. ¹⁸ I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

4:14-18 Heavenly economics

[4:14] ‘Well, all we did was to have a whip round and pack it off to you. What’s the big deal?’ No, it was so much more than that. The value of your collection wasn’t in the amount raised, it was the fact of your entering sympathetically into my plight here and declaring your solidarity with me in whatever I had to go through. [4:15-16] Cast your minds back to those action-packed days when the Jesus story first came to Europe and the seeds of your Philippian church were sown, and how Silas and I had to get on the road with nothing but the clothes on our lacerated backs. We arrived in Thessalonica and soon ran out of cash. There simply wasn’t another group of believers we could turn to for regular material support; the fledgling Thessalonian church was coming under severe pressure. Then lo and behold, a mule-load of goodies arrives from you with our names on it! And the same thing happens a couple of weeks later just before we have to slip off to Berea.

[4:17] Don’t get me wrong – I don’t measure a church by the amount it gives, and I certainly don’t expect weekly payments into my account. Rather, I look at it like this: God is no one’s debtor, and our Lord taught us that the tiny acts of generosity we do in his name are rewarded many times over. So while my bank balance goes up by a certain amount thanks to you, your heavenly treasure increases by leaps and bounds. I love this kind of economics!

[4:18] In strictly financial terms, your gifts mean that I’m more than adequately supplied for months to come, and I’m hugely grateful to you and the faithful Epaphroditus for everything that went into getting them to me here. But parallel to all this there’s something very precious and tender being transacted in God’s holy treasury. Remember Noah’s sacrifice of a few birds and animals after the flood? He can ill afford to part with those life-seeds of the new creation (maybe whole species are being wiped out?), but he wants to say thank-you to his Saviour God. And God who does not need a single sacrifice from mankind, but who loves the gratitude that is expressed in giving, smells (as it were) the scent of Noah’s offering and multiplies the blessing, so that the whole earth comes under the time-long covenant – however rampant evil becomes, never again will all life be annihilated at a single stroke. You see how the God who is pleased by small things is also the God who repays out of all proportion to the original gift.

¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. ²¹ Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. ²² All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

4:19-23 A final word

[4:19] I say 'small things,' but don't get me wrong – I know what a sacrifice this gift has meant on your part. You've been through so much persecution, you have desperately slender resources, and yet you've been so incredibly generous. Let me repeat: God is no one's debtor. His storehouse of heavenly treasure is inexhaustible, and he pours it out on his people as he gives us the Lord Jesus Christ and so much else beside. He will never leave you short of what you really need, spiritual or material. [4:20] Don't misunderstand me: it's not an impersonal transaction, this business of blessing – it's all part of his Fatherhood love for us which one day we're going to experience in its full glory. Meanwhile we may have to wait in there, agonisingly sometimes – but he'll never let us down. And the song of praise we begin down here, however falteringly, will swell into a full-throated chorus that will last for eternity. Count upon it!

[4:21] A final flurry of greetings. Say hello from me to every single believer at Philippi. My faithful friends who minister to me here want to be remembered to you (ask Epaphroditus who they are). [4:22] In fact all over Rome there are little groups of Christians who know I'm writing to you and want to send a friendly wave. In particular there are some brave Christians in the palace of the Emperor Nero himself who rejoice in your fellowship.

[4:23] So I leave you with the traditional benediction which you will doubtless want to repeat to each other as you finish the reading of this letter: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (such grace!) refresh you through and through.' Depend upon it: it will!

THINKING THROUGH PHILIPPIANS: CROSS-REFERENCES

References are listed in biblical order. Direct references to the Old Testament are underlined. *Possible OT allusion. Many of the references below are to the 'Prison Letters' (Eph, Phil, Col, Philem). If, as the traditional account has it, all these letters come from the two or three years Paul spent under guard after arriving in Rome in cAD 60, it is not unreasonable to refer to similar expressions of ideas he had in his mind at this time.

1:1-2 Nothing to worry about Isa 32:17.

1:3-6 last saw you Acts 20:1, 6. Dramatic initial visit Acts 16:12-40. Province of Macedonia 1 Thess 1:7-8. Arrived with Epaphroditus Phil 2:25, 4:18. Holding a prayer meeting Acts 16:13.

1:7-8 Night in your town jail Acts 16:23-34. Beginning and ending my letter Phil 1:2, 4:23. On the Damascus road 1 Tim 1:13-14. Warder in a Philippian jail Acts 16:34. Personal knowledge of God Acts 16:13-14. Power of the Holy Spirit Eph 1:13, 2:4-5. Helpless crowds Mt 9:36. In his bottle Ps 56:8. Jesus praying Heb 7:25.

1:9-11 Will done in his world Mt 6:10. Work of the Holy Spirit Lk 11:13, Mt 7:11. Receive his gifts Rom 8:26-27. Love through and through Jude 20-21. Relationships with fellow-believers 1 Jn 4:7. Sunlight from the inside Jn 14:17, 1 Jn 2:20-21. See him face to face 1 Cor 13:12. Godly through and through 1 Th 5:23.

1:12-14 Coming to see me here Acts 28:30-31. In the person of Jesus Acts 28:20. Misunderstanding from all quarters Acts 28:22.

1:15-18a Support at my trial 2 Tim 4:16. Masquerading as the true faith Gal 1:7. Jesus is Lord 1 Cor 12:3. Christ the only way to God Jn 14:6, Acts 4:12. Who are true believers and who aren't Mt 13:30. Faithful servants Mt 24:45.

1:18b-20 The story of Job Job 13:1-19. Trusting in his goodness Job 13:15. Glorious salvation Job 13:16 LXX. Gets it wrong occasionally Rom 13:4, 1 Pet 4:15-16. Outstanding life record Job 1:8, 2:3-4. So that I should live 1 Pet 3:18a, Gal 2:20.

Peter's moment of weakness Mk 14:29-31. Swear upon oath Pliny Letters 10:97.

1:21-26 Redeemer face to face Job 19:25-27, 1 Cor 13:12. Fulfilling my heart's desire Ps 37:4. Getting off the boat at Neapolis Acts 16:11. From the jaws of death 2 Tim 4:17.

1:27-30 Spirit of peace Eph 4:3-4. Suffer for him 1 Pet 4:13-14. Bear his scars Gal 6:17. Lacerated back Acts 16:23, 33.

2:1-2 Massive encouragement 2 Th 2:16-17.

2:5-8 Never stopped being God Jn 1:1-2. God-shaped person Col 1:15. Co-creating with his Father Col 1:16, Heb 1:2, Prov 8:30, Jn 1:3. To all its descendants Rom 5:12. Fiercest temptation Heb 4:15. Chooses deliberately to be so Deut 30:11-20, Josh 24:15. Time after time Heb 5:8. Make things easy for yourself Mt 4:9. Humiliation and scorn Isa 53:3. Translated Heb 11:5. And his own will Heb 10:5-7. Shame and agony of crucifixion Heb 12:2. Rejected Isa 53:4.

2:9-11 Human salvation 1 Th 5:10. Power and glory Acts 5:31. Top Name of all Eph 1:21. Ultimate glory 1 Cor 15:28. As it has always gone Rom 11:36. Great monotheistic passages Isa 45:18-25. There is no other Isa 45:18, 21, 22, cf 5, 14. I AM revelation to Moses Exod 3:6-15. Comes down and rescues Exod 3:8. God who saves Isa 45:8, 17, 20-22, 24-25. Veil that lies over the Scriptures 2 Cor 3:12-18. Swearing allegiance Isa 45:23 LXX. Share his eternal glory Jn 17:24.

2:12-13 World, flesh, devil 2 Cor 11:3, Eph 2:2-3. To the left or the right Isa 30:21. Ground level and 24/7 1 Th 5:23. Efforts would be useless Jn 15:5, 1 Cor 15:10. Spirit of grace Rom 8:6, Jas 4:4-10.

2:14-16a Complained against Moses Exod 16:8, Deut 1:27. Glorious presence of God Col 1:22, Jude 24. Children of God Deut 14:1. Last song Deut 32. Nations round about you Deut 32:5. Sparkle for him Mt 5:14.

Life-giving Christ 1 Jn 1:1. *Disunity among Christians* Prov 6:19b, 16:28. *Split into little factions* 1 Cor 3:3-4. *I present to you* 2 Cor 11:2, Col 1:28. *My previous history* Acts 26:9-11. *Doing God service* Jn 16:2, Phil 3:6a. *Pious bloodhounds* Acts 23:12. *Our Lord told us* Mt 5:11-12, Jas 1:2. *Battle is going to be won* Rev 12:11. **2:19-24** *All human plans* Prov 16:9. *Really special to me* 1 Cor 4:17. *If it came down to the wire* 2 Tim 1:15, 4:16. *Solid-gold worth* Acts 16:3, 12. *Son to his father* 1 Tim 1:2. *Knows what is best* Ps 37:3-5.

3:1-3 *Joy in the Lord Jesus* Phil 2:1, 4:4. *One dependable source* Ps 16:2. *Several times* Phil 1:10, 17, 28, 2:21, 29. *They are enemy* Mt 12:30. *Times without number* Acts 15:1, Rom 2:25-29, 1 Cor 7:18-19, Gal 5:2-6, 6:12-13, Col 2:11, 3:11.

Received God's Holy Spirit Acts 2:38. *New people* 2 Cor 5:17, Gal 2:20. *To please him* Rom 6:13, 2 Cor 5:9, 15. *Their proudest boast* Rom 5:11. *Earthly distinctions* Gal 3:28. *Spiritual cripples* Mt 5:3, 11:28.

3:4-6 *Pharisaic profession* Acts 23:6. *Falling far short* Rom 7:7-9. *Ardent for divine approval* Mk 10:20. *Nothing on my conscience* Acts 23:1, 24:16.

3:7-9 *God's chosen Son* Ps 2:7, Isa 9:6. *Reign as King* Dan 7:14. *Opposition to God himself* Ps 2:2. *He is my Lord* Acts 9:5, 22, Rom 10:13. *Placed my trust* Ps 2:12.

3:10-11 *Unshakeable conviction* Rom 10:9, 1 Cor 15:8. *Transformation is complete* 1 Cor 15:51. *Jews and Christians alike* Acts 23:6. *Already got there* 2 Tim 2:18.

3:12-14 *To aim for glory* Gal 1:15, 1 Tim 1:14. *Strength he lends* 1 Cor 15:10. *My single concern* 2 Cor 5:9.

3:15-16 *Take your eyes off Christ* Heb 12:2. *I pray that he will* 2 Tim 2:24-26

3:17-19 *I said earlier* Phil 1:18. *Sole and sufficient way* 1 Cor 2:2. *Hungry for the sake of Jesus* 1 Cor 4:11. *Earthly and devilish* Jas 3:15. *Not from the Spirit of God* 1 Cor 1: 20-25, 2:12.

3:20-21 *Loyal citizens* Rom 13:1-3. *Huge fish called Life* Isa 25:8, 1 Cor 15:54. *Dust of the earth* Dan 12:2.

Prophets have told us Isa 26:19, Dan 12:2. *Seed falling into the earth* Jn 12:24. *In a different form* 1 Cor 15:37. *Said earlier* Phil 2:7-8. *Bearing the scars* Rev 5:6. *Reshaped to be like his* 1 Cor 15:49; 1 Jn 3:2.

Infinite variety Rom 8:29, 2 Cor 3:18. *Reign with him for ever* Dan 7:27, 2 Tim 2:12, Rev 22:5.

4:1 *Refuse to budge* 1 Cor 15:58.

4:2-3 *Drop everything* Lk 5:7. *Great Book of Life* Exod 32:32, Ps 69:28, Rev 20:12.

4:4-5 *Aggressively hearty witnessing* Prov 27:14.

4:6-7 *Turn it over to the Lord* Ps 55:22, 1 Pet 5:7. *What he doesn't know* Mt 6:8, 32. *Watchful protection* Ps 121. *Single hair of our head perishes* Lk 21:18.

4:8-9 *Given the impression* Phil 2:15. *As I've hinted* Phil 3:21. *Into practice* Jas 1:22-25. *Leave us nor forsake us* Heb 13:5-6.

Reconciliation through the cross Rom 5:1. *Calm our fears* 2 Tim 1:7.

4:10-13 *Whole range of circumstances* 2 Cor 6:4-10, 11:23-33. *My secret, my mystery* Col 1:26-27.

4:14-18 *Bruised and bleeding backs* Acts 16:40. *Under severe pressure* Acts 17:4-5. *Slip off to Berea* Acts 17:10. *Rewarded many times over* Lk 6:38, Mt 10:41-42. *Noah's sacrifice* Gen 8:21. *God does not need* Ps 50:9-15. *Gratitude expressed in giving* 2 Cor 9:7. *Out of all proportion* Heb 13:16.

4:19-23 *Incredibly generous* 2 Cor 8:1-2. *So much else beside* Rom 8:32. *Spiritual or material* 2 Cor 9:8. *Little groups of Christians* Rom 16:3-16.

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