



## Christian Origins #68 - Philippians

by Ronald L. Dart

I have given this a lot of thought, and I have finally figured out what's wrong with Christianity: It's people. There's not a thing wrong with the Christian faith. After all, what could be better than a religion brought in person by the very Son of God? And think of all the *wonderful* teachings of Jesus—of love for God and love for neighbor and gentleness and kindness and goodness and the way we treat one another. It's all good stuff. The problem with it is that Jesus left this marvelous religion in the hands of *people*, and that's where things tend to go wrong.

Now, the reason I say this is because nothing much has changed in this regard in two thousand years. People are the problem today, and people were the problem then. You have to understand that what Christianity is all about is *doing* something about the way people are, and you have to start with people the way they are. So if you're going to change people, you start with them where they are and you try to make them better.

Now, in this series of programs on *Christian Origins*, we've been reading other people's mail to try to understand what was going on back then. How did all this get started? How did the Christian faith get rolling? All of what we call the Epistles of Paul are just letters from a remarkable man to a set of 1<sup>st</sup>-century churches. Take for example this little personal note from Philippians, chapter two, verse 19.

### Philippians 2

AKJV

<sup>19</sup> But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timotheus shortly to you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your state.

<sup>20</sup> For I have no man like minded, who will naturally care for your state.

<sup>21</sup> For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's.

Now, do you see what I mean? Among *all* of his associates (and Paul had a lot of associates) he was reduced to the point to where, when he wanted to send *one guy*—whenever he wanted to send somebody to a church to take care of them, to really be with them, to naturally care for their estates—he had *one guy* he could send, *one person* who was purely unselfish in his ministry. Now visualize the rest of them: religious workers whose first consideration is themselves. And only *then* do they take care of the people of God. See what I mean about nothing much changing in two thousand years? Because I dare say that you know people who are religious workers—who are unselfish, caring, and kind. And you know people who are religious workers who—*after* they get through taking care of themselves—are caring, and kind, and considerate.

Paul isn't excessively discouraged by all this because I don't think he expects much of people. But this is connected to something he said earlier in the same letter. If you heard the last program, you'll remember it. It's in the first chapter of Philippians, verse 15. Paul says (and this is the New International Version):

## Philippians 1

NIV '84

- 15 It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.
- 16 The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense 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.
- 19 Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

“I’m happy, and I’m going to continue being happy about this.” Well, think about what he said: “selfish ambition”. Do you mean to say, Paul, that people would actually preach the *truth of God* (we’re not talking about false doctrine here) that people would actually preach the truth of God out of *selfish ambition*. Yes, that is exactly what Paul means to say. Mind you, the problem here is not doctrine. There are other places in Paul’s epistles where he talks about people who are preaching false doctrines. That’s not the point here. The point here is about people who teach true and faithful, sound doctrine and their motives are *wrong*. Timothy? Timothy was not like that. Paul said:

## Philippians 2

AKJV

- 19 But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timotheus shortly to you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your state.
- 20 For I have no man like minded [*nobody else*], who will naturally care for your state.
- 21 For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s.
- 22 But you know the proof of him, that, as a son with the father, he has served with me in the gospel.

Now follow the little personal items in this letter. When you’re reading somebody else’s mail, you get it all. You again little insights. It’s sort of like two-thousand-year-old gossip. So Paul wrote:

## Philippians 2

AKJV

- 23 [Timothy] therefore I hope to send presently, so soon as I shall see how it will go with me.
- 24 But I trust in the Lord that I also myself shall come shortly.
- 25 Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labor, and fellow soldier, but your messenger, and he that ministered to my wants.

Now, what apparently has happened here is that this letter that we are reading here—this particular piece of mail to the Philippians—was carried back to them by a man Epaphroditus: the man who had been sent by them to check up on Paul—to take some stuff to him and to minister to his needs. He says:

## Philippians 2

AKJV

- 26 For he longed after you all, and was full of heaviness, because that you had heard that he had been sick.
- 27 For indeed he was sick near to death: but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow on sorrow.

“I can’t tell you what it would have done to me if he had died.” The impression I get in reading through here is that people were worried about the fact that they had sent Epaphroditus down there and he hadn’t come back. And he may have even been getting a little criticism from some places on this. Anyway, Paul says:

### Philippians 2

AKJV

<sup>28</sup> I sent him therefore the more carefully, that, when you see him again, you may rejoice, and that I may be the less sorrowful.

<sup>29</sup> Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness; and hold such in reputation:

Which suggests that, *maybe*, some people had been critical of the poor guy.

### Philippians 2

AKJV

<sup>30</sup> Because for the work of Christ he was near to death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me [*your inability to otherwise help me*].

### Philippians 3

AKJV

<sup>1</sup> Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.

It’s almost like saying, “Come on, brethren, be happy! I know I’ve said this to you before, but I need to remind you again about this.” There’s one little insight here: Paul starts off this little section by saying, “Finally”. Now, the problem with that is that he’s got 40% of the letter left. I mean it’s midway or just a little past midway in the letter and he says, “Well, finally”. At least one scholar looked at that and said, “Well, what I take from that is this must be a combination of two previous letters.” Well, obviously this fellow wasn’t a preacher. I don’t take it that way at all. I take it as an off-the-cuff, handwritten (or perhaps dictated) letter. Paul got to this place and he said, “Well, finally”, and he starts off. And then he begins to realize, as he continues, that...well, it wasn’t quite as final as he thought. He had *more* things to say.

Now, you have to realize that these guys didn’t write with word processors. They didn’t have computers. They didn’t have WordStar, WordPerfect, or Microsoft Word. They couldn’t go back and just delete the word, “Finally”. When they had written this stuff...I mean, it’s a *big job* to sit down and write out a letter by hand in the way in which it was done in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. So he says, “Finally”, when he is writing, but changes his mind. That’s not hard. In fact, I’ve known preachers to say, “Finally”, when they weren’t *nearly* through. I think it’s cheating a little bit, frankly, for a preacher to give us hope like—to say, “Finally”, and they think he’s going to be through, and then drone on for 15 more minutes or so. Then Paul goes on to say:

### Philippians 3

AKJV

<sup>2</sup> Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision.

<sup>3</sup> For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.

Now, many people, I think, think that circumcision of the heart—that is, the true circumcision of God—is a New Testament idea. But, in fact, there are four or five places in the Old Testament, I think, where it speaks of becoming circumcised in heart—that the flesh is one thing; but what is really needed is a change

in the attitude—a trimming away, as it were, of the *attitude* that we have toward God. Now, this seems to have been the major doctrinal problem that Paul faced in his ministry.

These were not, by the way, merely Jews that we're concerned with. The church by this time was already separate from the synagogue, and most Jews were content to have it so. The Jews met over there; we meet over here; we hardly ever see each other. The Jews—the practicing, ongoing Jews—were not the problem here. The problem was with Christians—disciples of Jesus—who held a legalistic doctrine that required circumcision of Gentiles in order for the Gentiles to be saved. And that wasn't all. They held not merely to the written law of the Old Testament, but the Oral Law—the traditions of the fathers—as well; something the apostles said was in no way binding upon the Gentiles who worship God.

Now, they thought they had this problem solved, but anyone who thinks he has a theological or doctrinal problem solved among a group of Christians is dreaming. Because it is in the nature of the things, it's in the nature of man—not God, but in the nature of man—to divide. And there is no more fertile field for divisions, schisms, splits, and what have you than doctrines, as we construct them and try to teach them out of the Bible. And so just because they arrived at certain decisions at the Jerusalem conference in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, did not necessarily mean that every Christian, anywhere, at any time, *bought* all those decisions that they handed down.

And so, Paul was continually dealing with Christians who were legalists and who kept trying to pull people *back*—not merely into the religion of the Old Testament. Because the difference between the Christian faith and the faith of Moses or Abraham was not that big a deal. The problem was not there; the problem was with this kind of legalistic Judaism. Not Judaism *solely*, because Judaism is not of necessity legalistic. There are many people who are Jews who *are* legalistic in their approach to the Old Testament, to their own Torah, to their own teachings in the Talmud. There are other Jews who are not. There are Jews who look at the Talmud as a guide to life, as information, as a discussion of the Law. And they go to it looking for deeper understanding, not for rulings on how to live their life. But then there are those who look at these things as *rules*. And this is where the problem began to come in: of Christians who were looking to the Talmud (which didn't exist yet, but to the Oral Law) as rules by which they would live their lives.

Well, Paul uses the pejorative term “mutilation”, which seems odd, really, relative to circumcision, since that was given by God to Abraham. But the Law of Moses required circumcision on the eighth day. In other words, it was circumcision of infants. What seems to have been at issue in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was not whether Jewish Christians would circumcise infant children, but whether adult male Gentiles had to be circumcised. That was another question entirely—and a very *painful* question, I might add. Continuing in chapter three, verse four:

### Philippians 3

AKJV

<sup>4</sup> Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinks that he has whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more:

<sup>5</sup> Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee;

<sup>6</sup> Concerning zeal, persecuting the church [*Don't talk to me about being zealous.*]; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup> But what things were gain to me [*all the things I just mentioned*] those I counted loss for Christ.

<sup>8</sup> Yes doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ,

I don't know how Paul could have been any stronger in what he says. He looks back to his past life; he said, “I've lost it all. I've lost everything I had, lost my reputation among the Jews, I lost *all of that*. But as

far as I'm concerned, it's like a pile of fertilizer. It's worthless.”

### Philippians 3

AKJV

<sup>8</sup> [...] that I may win Christ,

<sup>9</sup> And be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:

<sup>10</sup> That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable to his death;

<sup>11</sup> If by any means I might attain to the resurrection of the dead.

Boy, Paul is strong. He's not talking about merely living a life. He's not talking about going to church on Sunday or Sabbath or some other day. He's not talking about any of those things. What Paul is talking about is the giving up of one's self, the loss of everything, counting everything in your past to be but a pile of dung. Why? “Because I want to attain the resurrection of the dead. I want to live forever, that's why.” Paul says, “I don't have it made.”

### Philippians 3

AKJV

<sup>12</sup> Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.

<sup>13</sup> Brothers, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth to those things which are before,

<sup>14</sup> I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

You know, if there's one thing that is clear beyond dispute, it is that there is nothing we can do to change the past. I don't care what it is you did. I don't care what it is that was done to you. I don't care about your accomplishments. I don't care about your lack thereof. The fact is that, today, there is nothing you can do to change your past. And it's odd, in a way though, how *hard* it is to forget the past. It's odd how hard it is to make a clear distinction between what is *behind us* and what is *ahead of us*—to make a clear distinction about those things that we cannot do anything about and those things that we can change, those things we can accomplish, those things that we can do. Paul was determined. He said: “I *forget* those things which are behind me. I reach forward to those things that are before me. I eagerly embrace the future. And I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

What's that? It's the resurrection of the dead—being changed from physical into spirit; becoming like God; being in the image, in the very substance of God; and living *forever*. I don't want to die. The fact is that dying, though, is a part of this life. It is *not* a part of the life that Paul was reaching out for.

Paul's point is that no one was ever going to be a better Jew than he had been, but none of that mattered. It was all done. And he's not talking about the Ten Commandments; he's talking about the human religion and the culture that grew up around the Law of Moses. That human culture and religion Paul placed firmly in his past; and he turned his eyes toward the future, the prize, the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

### Philippians 3

AKJV

<sup>15</sup> Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing you be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this to you.

<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.

<sup>17</sup> Brothers, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as you have us for an ensample. [*They give you the same kind of example.*]

<sup>18</sup> (For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ:

<sup>19</sup> Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.)

And you know something it's almost certain that Paul is talking about nominal Christians: People who had corrupted the gospel. People who, even though they name the name of Jesus, even though they pretended to be Christian, were still people whose God was their belly, and who gloried in their shame, and whose *primary* concern was the things of this life and this earth. Paul says:

### Philippians 3

AKJV

<sup>20</sup> For our conversation [*our citizenship*] is in heaven; from where also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ:

<sup>21</sup> Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like to his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things to himself.

Wait a minute. Do you mean that he is going to change our human bodies into something that's *like his body*, which is able to subdue all things? Yes, that's precisely what he's saying.

Now, we're ready for a little more gossip in chapter four, verse one.

### Philippians 4

AKJV

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, my brothers dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved.

<sup>2</sup> I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord.

Now, when I read this, I think to myself, "You know, you really need to be careful about where you pick your fights and your spat." Here is, apparently, a couple of folks in Philippi whose little spat (and news of their spat or their problem or their fight) had made it all the way down to where Paul was in Rome. Paul writes this letter—just a letter back to the Philippian church. (It's not our mail. It's somebody else's mail that we're reading) And here we are *two thousand years later* reading this out of the Bible...you might read Philippians in your home and go, "Oh, look-ee there. Those two people were not getting along." But here I am on the radio, broadcasting their names out for the whole world to hear, "Euodias and Syntyche had a fight two thousand years ago." And it's still a subject of interest to scholars, who spent time looking into these things in seminaries and wherever, studying what was going on in the 1<sup>st</sup>-century church. So be careful what you put in writing; those names could be being read out loud some long time into the future.

### Philippians 4

AKJV

<sup>3</sup> And I entreat you also, true yoke fellow, help those women which labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellow laborers, whose names are in the book of life.

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.

"Be happy in God. Stay happy." Always easier said than done, but Paul's point in saying, "Rejoice, rejoice!", is: "Look on the bright side of the things that you're dealing with here, and what God has given us is marvelous. Be happy in it."

**Philippians 4**

AKJV

<sup>5</sup> Let your moderation be known to all men. The Lord is at hand.

<sup>6</sup> Be careful for nothing [*Don't be anxious for anything.*]; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

<sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

It passes understanding. You know, there's just no way of quite grasping it.

**Philippians 4**

KJ2000

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brethren, [...]

Here we are back to “finally” again. I think this time Paul really means it; he's about to wind it up. But what he's about to say is of a piece with what comes before where he says, “Don't be anxious about things.” Now, if you're a human being you've probably had times when you've been a lying awake at night, and couldn't sleep, and you were worried about stuff, and you have anxiety attacks from time to time, and things get on you. He said, “When you've got this kind of thing going on, by prayer and supplication make your requests known to God. Leave it there and the peace of God will keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. And, by the way, this peace passes understanding. Don't try to figure it out.” And then he says:

**Philippians 4**

KJ2000

<sup>8</sup> [...] whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

This is your advice for when you're lying in bed at night, and things haven't been going well, and you're anxious. Pray about it; make it known to God; and then turn your heart, your thoughts, your mind to something good. You know, it's just absolutely pointless to tell somebody, “Don't think about” something. You say, “Well, I'm worried about this.” “Well, stop worrying about it. Stop thinking about it.” What are you going to do—just blank your mind and not think about anything? *You can't do that.* The mind is going to roll. What *he* says is: “Have you not anything lovely to think about? There's no good report? There's not some praise somewhere? There's not some virtue that you can give your attention? Maybe you ought to go and sit under a tree for a while, and look up into the branches and at the leaves and contemplate the goodness and the graciousness of God.” He says in verse nine:

**Philippians 4**

AKJV

<sup>9</sup> Those things, which you have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.

<sup>10</sup> But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me has flourished again; [...]

“There was a long time I didn't hear from you, but I know that you're with me. I know you're helping me.”

**Philippians 4**

AKJV

<sup>10</sup> [...] wherein you were also careful, but you lacked opportunity.

<sup>11</sup> Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatever state I am, therewith to be content.

*Oh*, that I could only learn that lesson.

#### **Philippians 4**

AKJV

<sup>12</sup> I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry [*Both of them are a part of life.*], both to abound and to suffer need.

<sup>13</sup> I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.

“There’s just nothing that’s going to come my way that I can’t handle.”

#### **Philippians 4**

AKJV

<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding you have well done, that you did communicate with my affliction.

<sup>15</sup> Now you Philippians know also, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church communicated with me as concerning giving and receiving, but you only.

<sup>16</sup> For even in Thessalonica you sent once and again to my necessity.

<sup>17</sup> Not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account.

What he’s telling these people is: “I could have made it without you, I suppose, but the fact that you have come through and helped me the way you have has *really* added up big in your account in God’s eyes.”

#### **Philippians 4**

AKJV

<sup>18</sup> But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God.

<sup>19</sup> But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

<sup>20</sup> Now to God and our Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

<sup>21</sup> Salute every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers which are with me greet you.

<sup>22</sup> All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar’s household.

<sup>23</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

It has been nearly two thousand years since Paul wrote those words; but it’s strange, isn’t it, how they resonate down through the generations, and how they touch the lives of modern man.

Until next time, I’m Ronald Dart, reminding you: You were *born to win*.

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*Christian Educational Ministries*

P.O. Box 560 ❖ Whitehouse, Texas 75791

Phone: 1-888-BIBLE-44 ❖ Fax: (903) 839-9311

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