

STUDY NOTES 3

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

These notes are the final part in the short series which has been put together to help us all grow to become more like Jesus. They focus on themes of particular relevance to this aim, and pick up on points made in sermons. If you are able to use them in a group, with others who have used the previous notes and thought about the teaching presented in the sermons, you will find them more fruitful.

Groups will vary in the speed with which they cover the ground, but all groups will find their times together more valuable if members are able to do a little preparation beforehand. We're asking everyone to read the whole letter through before beginning the studies. This will take only a few minutes – the time it takes to drink a cup of tea and eat a biscuit! For maximum benefit, do this each week, with or without the tea and biscuit. Or at least read through the next chapter to be studied. You'll be surprised by how much more you get out of it. If you know this part of the Bible well, why not try a different version, such as THE MESSAGE, to overcome the familiarity factor?

1 PAIN AND GROWTH

Thinking back to the question '**Who or what is shaping the way I think and live?**'... has reflecting on it made you more aware of positive and negative influences? What changes have you made as a result? (*Allow plenty of time for this section.*)

Read chapter 1.

- What physical circumstances and other influences were shaping the way the Apostle Paul was thinking and living when he wrote this letter?
- Do you think his circumstances were preventing him from growing closer to Jesus and becoming more like him?
- In human terms, Paul was facing an uncertain future. But how would you describe his *mood*?
- How would you describe his *relationship* with the Christians at Philippi?
- What were his *hopes* and *expectations* – for them/himself?
- Which of these hopes or expectations do you share?

(Remember: Expect > Act > See.)

At our Parish Weekend, the speaker mentioned that many in his own church family felt they'd grown most during times of pain.

- Are you aware of having grown closer to God during times of pain and difficulty?
- What else has contributed to your growth as a follower of Jesus?
- At the moment, are you going through difficulties or other 'growth experiences' which you would like to share, so that others may pray for and support you?

PRAY The Apostle Paul didn't let his circumstances blind him to the goodness and faithfulness of God: he began this letter with thanksgiving and prayer (vs 3-11). It would be good to follow his example, thanking God for his mercy, faithfulness and anything else you'd like to mention! Turn verses 6, 9-11 and 27-28a into prayers for one another.

2 ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER

At the Parish Weekend, the speaker emphasised the value of '**GOD TALK**', by which he meant encouraging one another by sharing what God has been doing and giving him the glory. Spend some time doing just that.

Read chapter 2.

Groups which used the study 'My Hero' will have looked at verses 1-18 already.

The notes for that study said:

*Paul is pointing people towards Jesus, and his emphasis is on **character**. Make a list of Jesus' characteristics, and the attitudes listed in the passage which Paul is encouraging his readers to develop...'*

If your group missed out on this study, it would be good to do it now. Then...

'Pick out those characteristics and attitudes which you think the Lord is particularly wanting you to work on at the moment. Pray for one another in twos and threes, for the grace and perseverance we need when we're following Jesus and training to become more like him.'

If you did this before, review progress on the attitudes you've been working on – and then **pray for more!** (Expect > Act > See)

'Let your attitude to one another be governed by your being in union with the Messiah Yeshua' (v 5, Complete Jewish Bible.) Have you noticed how open Paul is in his communication with the Christians at Philippi? He seems to be assuming that they'll recognise his 'plain speaking' as for their good, because they are united with him in their aim of following Jesus and becoming more like him.

- How did your group respond to Pamela's suggestion in her sermon that groups can sometimes *discourage* members from making changes needed as part of becoming more like Jesus and following him more closely?
- More generally, how good are we as individuals / a house group / a church family at saying things which will encourage one another to grow to be more like Jesus?
- Maybe sometimes we hold back, fearing to intrude on what has traditionally been seen as a private area of life. (Is this the picture we find in the NT letters?) One person's 'helpful comment' can be another person's 'intrusion' so we must be sensitive. But if you would be willing for those in your group to speak to *you* more boldly, you could take this opportunity to let them know.

Note Paul's sadness in verse 21. The attitude he describes there is very different from the attitudes in verses 4-5 and later verses.

Whatever lies behind Paul's sadness, those who were separated geographically knew that they were united in Christ and clearly had a sense of connectedness.

- How do we as a house group / church family express our concern for those in jobs with unsocial hours, or no longer able to meet with us because of old age or serious illness; for members serving overseas?

PRAY For those you know who find it difficult to meet for fellowship, and for our missionaries. Pray for them to go on growing more like Jesus - yes, *they* need prayer for that, too! How about using verses 6, 9-11 and 27-28a of chapter 1 to pray for them, as you used them to pray for one another last week. You could add prayers for perseverance, courage and boldness in any circumstances which you know they are currently facing.

FOR NEXT TIME: Think of something that has encouraged you in your following of Jesus – a book, tape, CD, DVD, something else – and bring it with you for someone to borrow.

3 PRESSING ON

Read chapter 3.

Verses 2-3: Jews had come to look at circumcision as a passport to spiritual security. (Read Galatians 5:1-6, where Paul expands on the confusion this brought to the Early Church. Colossians 2 is also helpful.)

Verses 4-6: Paul's list would have been mighty impressive to other Jews! As a group, write an up-to-date fictional version. For example: born the eldest son of the

Archbishop of Canterbury... went to Spring Harvest / New Wine / some other Christian event every year from birth...

- Are you aware of people thinking that their baptism as a baby, and their personal achievements or kindnesses since, are their passport to heaven?
- How would you explain to them that this is not so? (John 3:1-8 could be useful.)

Verses 7-11: Since meeting Jesus and committing his life to him, Paul has come to see his pedigree and achievements for what they are. The word 'rubbish' (NIV; 'dung', KJV) is a coarse word which covers repulsive left-overs of all sorts.

- Has becoming an 'apprentice of Jesus' changed your view of what matters?

[Note on verse 11: the words translated 'somehow, to attain' do not imply a struggle with an element of uncertainty about the outcome, but rather Paul's determination to stick with Christ right to the end. It makes more sense if you read it with the verses which follow.]

Verses 12-14: Some interpret v 13b as encouragement to draw a veil over our past. But remember that Paul had *confronted* his past and received forgiveness before pressing on with Christ. If you're aware of things which need dealing with, why not speak privately to your house group leader, or other leader?

- Paul knows he hasn't 'arrived'. But he does have a strong sense of moving forward... Where do you see yourself on the line below? Where would you like to be?

drifting backwards.....standing still.....pressing on

VITAL POINT! Bible reading and studying, prayer, being part of a church, serving others and so on, can all be used by God to shape us, to move us on to maturity, and to help us become more like Jesus. But we're not meant to rely on them as our means of salvation! If we do, they'll form us into good Pharisees, not into the likeness of Christ.

In his very helpful book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), Dallas Willard lists the following:

Disciplines of Engagement:

study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, submission.

Disciplines of Abstinence:

solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice.

- Are there things the Lord is wanting you personally to do more of, as part of 'pressing on'? Are you ready to try one of the disciplines you've not tried before?
- Are there things your group might do more of, as part of encouraging one another to press on? (Make a written list of suggestions, so you can come back to it next time.)

SHOW the items group members have brought along which have encouraged them. Who would like to borrow which?

PRAY For one another in twos or threes, for stamina in pressing on; for wisdom to know which spiritual disciplines will help in the areas where the Lord is wanting you to grow at the moment (identified when studying chapter 2). Close by thanking God for his grace (2 Corinthians 12:9), and by praying 'The Grace' (2 Corinthians 13:14) together.

4 LOVE, PEACE AND CONTENTMENT

REPORTING BACK: How did you get on with trying out a new 'discipline'?

Read chapter 4.

Verses 1-3: Learning to love is challenging, but we can't avoid it if we're following Jesus! 'Go after a life of love as if your life depended on it – because it does' (1 Corinthians 14:1, THE MESSAGE). 'The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.' (1 John 4:21, THE MESSAGE. See also 4:7-20.)

- Thinking back to previous chapters, how had Paul been showing love for the Christians at Philippi?
- How do you feel about the way Paul confronted Euodia and Syntyche? Do you think he loved them less than the others?

Verses 4-9: In about 1955, psychologist Albert Ellis came to the conclusion that what we think affects how we feel, and thereby influences our behaviour. Nearly two thousand years earlier, Paul was advising the Christians at Philippi along similar lines: '...you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious – the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse' (verse 8, THE MESSAGE).

- Remembering TV programmes / films you've watched recently, and conversations you've had, which of the words from THE MESSAGE verse above would describe them?
- Thinking and living without reference to God open the way for anxiety, fear,

envy and so on to affect people deeply. The results are predictable, so why are we surprised?

In the Complete Jewish Bible, Colossians 3:15 is expressed like this: `...let the *shalom* which comes from the Messiah be your heart's decision-maker...' Elsewhere, Paul tells us that love and peace are two aspects of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

As we welcome the Holy Spirit into our inner being, he will bring love and peace ***as part of forming the character of Christ in us*** – not as selected options on a spiritual take-away menu!

- How did Paul urge the Philippians to cooperate with God in this process of transformation, so that they'd know his peace? (v 9 and surrounding verses)

Verses 10-20: Dallas Willard recommends that we say, `I'm **in training** to become more like Jesus', rather than `I'm trying...'

- Paul says (vs 11-12) that he has `learned to be content'. What training plan could you recommend to someone in training for becoming content?
- We're followers of Jesus, real people not super-heroes, so there will be things we can't do – for example, we can't fly or be in two places at once! So what do you think `I can do all things through him who gives me strength' (v 13) really means? How might it relate to the challenges we've been studying?

GROUP DECISION: Looking back to your list from Session 3, how do you plan to change the way your group functions, to make it more effective in encouraging everyone to grow to be more like Jesus and to serve him more faithfully?

PRAY For one another, for the grace needed to continue as Jesus' apprentices, following him and doing what he did in the way he did it.