

Philippians Chapter Three

As we move from Philippians chapter two to chapter three the letter takes a rather dark turn. In chapter two we hear of Paul's repeated encouragement to celebrate life, God and one another and to find hope in the many good and faithful examples of Jesus Christ, Epaphroditus and Timothy. Very quickly Paul moves from celebration to a serious warning of danger to the Philippian church.

In some ways the whole chapter is a warning about how wrong following Jesus can go. Dependence on the flesh rather than Christ, the pursuit of personal righteousness rather than faith in Christ and rejection of the cross. Paul had witnessed these distortions and deviations from the truth of the Gospel.

Let me explain the background. In the early days of the Christian faith Jewish converts were struggling with letting go of all of their Jewish faith. They felt strongly that there must be a link between the two faiths. So, they went around the churches preaching that any non-Jewish people needed to be circumcised. Paul is very clear on this; God had given the Holy Spirit to uncircumcised gentile believers. This provided undeniable proof that they had been included among his people. He had come up against these itinerants before at other churches and I think by the time he hears that they will be targeting the church at Philippi- he's had enough.

It's not such an issue for us today but we must always be vigilant against those who teach a false Gospel? We saw in the first chapter of Philippians that Paul was not bothered by those who preached the gospel out of false motives or to look good (Philippians 1:15-18). However, when it comes to the theology of the church, Paul is very protective.

Then he rattles off ways in which he could have claimed pride in his Jewish identity. He claims right up until he met Christ there was no Jew who could claim more pride than he. He had ticked all the right boxes of righteousness. He was the envy of his peers, a hero to many. Little did he know that Christ would totally shatter his world. Paul's point is clear we are put right with God through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Anyone who attempts to add anything to what God has offered through his son Jesus Christ is a rejection of the Gospel.

Frank Thielman's comment in his commentary on Philippians issues a good warning, *"Many Christians have been deeply scarred emotionally and spiritually by people within the church who claim to be on a crusade for truth but were on a crusade for themselves and under the guise of guarding the Gospel, swayed the opinion of other people to capture positions of power and to banish all who did not agree with them".*¹

¹ Frank Thielman, The NIV Application Commentary on Philippians, page 183.

This phrase 'press on, press on' is action-based language. It is a challenge to every Christian. We are to press on with our prayer life, our Bible study, our life in the spirit. We are also called to serve whomever and whatever God lays in front of us. Paul uses another strong phrase, "enemies of the cross". Those who think they have already arrived and operate on a higher spiritual plain than others and therefore have moved on from the cross. Paul answers this well in Galatians 2:19-20: *"May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world"*.

As Gupta comments, "To claim a heavenly identity is not to live with your head in clouds. No, it's more about knowing your true identity even while you are a resident alien somewhere else".² Even though the Philippian Christians live in Roman Philippi Paul wants to remind them that their true identity is as full citizens of Christ. God has not abandoned his people. They live as aliens and strangers to some degree but they live in hope. It is longing for transformation and the restoration of all things in Jesus Christ. This is why it's so important to be able to say Jesus is Lord. We trust and follow him in this life that we are given.

An American theologian visited congregations in the Methodist church of Cuba and discovered that despite over forty years of oppression and miserable conditions the Methodists had grown from a low of 6000 to over 50,000 members. Nothing short of a spiritual revolution had taken place. Much of this spiritual and numerical growth could be attributed to people, both young and old, who had grown weary of the official atheist party line and turned to the church to find a more satisfying answer to the meaning of life.

During the previous four decades, the best efforts of Fidel Castro's reign to stamp out the church had not succeeded. Despite the personal cost of giving up a chance at a university education and long prison terms. They continued to follow Jesus and practice their faith. Christians had remained faithful and the church had grown. After Castro relented and allowed the church a measure of freedom it was in part due to the admiration the people felt for the church's consistent faith over many hard years. One long-time Cuban believer made these observations:

"The search for meaning is as just as crucial as the search for bread. While the economy is falling apart, Christians are living in a state of special grace. It is not difficult for Cubans to see the difference between the people of God and those who are desperately trying to live without faith. Ordinary Cubans are becoming aware of the church as a life-giving community of hope".

² Nijay K Gupta in his book "Reading Philipians".