

Philippians 4:1-9

Excellent Things

Philippians is filled with memorable texts that have inspired and encouraged believers through the centuries to pursue a deepening of their faith and has comforted and guided them through difficult times. We have read some recently.

To live is Christ and to die gain.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you . . . (2:12-13)

Do everything without complaining . . . (2:14)

But whatever was to my profit I consider loss for the sake of Christ . . . I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ 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 and is by faith.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain the resurrection of the dead.

But the one thing I do; forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me homeward.

Rejoice in the Lord always, again, I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to everyone, the Lord is near. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God, which surpasses understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally brothers, 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.

I have learned to be content in all circumstances . . .

I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

I have always been drawn to the message of this letter because of its emphasis on joy and peace, humility and faith. When there is a need for encouragement because of circumstances in the world or in the personal realm, or when the two team up to create insecurity, an unsettled feeling of sadness, this letter lifts us up.

Paul in Philipians

Paul was in prison as he writes, and he mentions the church's conflict with its culture when he speaks of those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ. He says their destiny is destruction, their god is their belly, and their glory is their shame. Paul also mentions dissensions within the life of the congregation, exhorting the two women, Euodia and Syntyche to find a way to get along.

Life's circumstances themselves are troubling but we are forced to recognize that the anxiety we feel at times of heightened stress is always present. The proximity of death and the ever-present struggle with sin and evil and the search for meaning are universal. They are a feature of human experience that cannot be escaped. Yet Paul resists the temptation to be discouraged and exhorts his readers also to resist.

A tool in the box for believers who suffer the sadness of both internal and external trouble, and the hardships associated with life, is to be aware of God's presence, the nearness of God, who heals, comforts,

guides, and guards our lives, keeps our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Part of this resistance involves looking for the positives, focusing on the affirmations believers can make in this life, sometimes even affirmations of the culture when something worthy of praise presents itself.

Paul speaks of the excellent things. The excellent things are God's presence:

The fall color and the beauty of nature, the kind word, the heroic actions, the sound of children laughing, friendship, the music of the high school orchestra, the giving of an offering for missions or disaster relief or to alleviate hunger; these things are not necessary, we are not owed them, they are gifts from God. They represent God's nearness. Think about such things.

Psalms 23

The reading from the psalter for today is the 23rd Psalm, a song of praise because of God's nurturing care, one in which a pastoral scene brings thoughts of anointing, of the restoration of the soul, feasting before enemies, goodness and mercy, and the promise of heaven.

We are reminded by all the psalms but especially this one that this vision of beauty and plenty and rest is always a vision in times of trouble for that is the meaning of the valley of death's shadow. The trouble

David faced when he was a shepherd, or Israel in the wilderness or when Paul was in prison have become a parable for its readers ever since, who come to it like the letter to the Philippians in troubled times, one way or another, when the earthquakes and hurricanes and wildfires shootings and individual burdens all seem to come at once. It speaks of God as a shepherd, reminding us of God's presence.

With all the other scripture we have heard, it is good for us to end with the words of this most excellent psalm. Hear it as one true and noble and right and pure and lovely gift, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.

1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

3 he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,[a]
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

6 Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

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