

## STUDY NOTES

### Lesson 10: The Epistle to the Philippians

*“And the peace of God, which passeth  
all understanding,  
shall keep your hearts and minds  
through Christ Jesus.”  
Philippians 4:7*

#### **I THANK MY GOD UPON EVERY REMEMBRANCE OF YOU**

Paul’s letter to the Philippians was a personal letter, not intended for all the churches. The relationship he had with these saints was special to him. Remember that God had changed Paul’s missionary plans through a dream of a Macedonian man pleading with Paul to “come help us.” (Acts 16:9) So he had headed into northern Greece, then called Macedonia. The first stop he made was in Philippi. There was no synagogue. The few Jews there were meeting by the riverside. Here Paul taught and baptized Lydia, remembered as the first “European” convert to Christianity. He and Timothy taught and established a branch there, in spite of opposition, public beating and a jail stay.

Paul’s letter is written from house arrest in Rome approximately 10 years after his original missionary visit. It is a love letter, expressing how much these converts and their continuing support have meant to him. He also gives advice to strengthen them against the opposition ahead, for Paul never says that a testimony of Christ is a ticket to a life of ease. Nevertheless, Paul’s great love for his Savior and for his friends in the gospel shines through any hardship he must endure and brings him great joy. The words “joy” and “rejoice” are used more than 10 times in this short letter!

**THE THEMES OF PHILIPPIANS** Besides the theme of joy, there are two other overarching themes in this letter. One is unity among the Saints based upon humility and selflessness. The other we might call Positive Christian Living, or faith-filled living that sees beyond changing circumstances. Just as Paul recommends certain virtues, he also warns against their mirror-image vices: pride and complaining. Included in this letter are six verses (Philippians 2:6-11) that some believe were taken from a hymn in use by the early Christians and which form a “Christology” or a doctrinal declaration of truth about Christ. Woven through all the letter is the seasoned perspective of one who has seen all that the world has to offer and has rejected it—“count[ing] all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.” (Phil3:8)

**PAUL’S POSITIVE ATTITUDE** Paul’s opening words are encouraging ones. He is confident that God “which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” Sometimes we get discouraged because we feel we are not living up to our promise. All of us are subject to this heavy heartedness from time to time because we have a very high bar set before us--“the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph 4:13) We are inclined to feel how far we fall short. But Paul builds up the saints, telling them not to worry or give up hope because the work of God is going forward in them and what God has begun he will finish. This is a great promise. Remember the little sign: “Be patient—God isn’t through with me yet!” Instead of getting discouraged, we should rejoice in the process. We can take comfort in the fact that we matter so much to God that He personally supervises our growth and development toward perfection in the Christian life.

Paul’s prayer for the Philippians is that they be filled “with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.” (1:11) He doesn’t pray that they become rich or famous or that their children get into good

colleges! He gets right down to The Important Things. For a person who is filled by the Holy Ghost with the “fruits of righteousness,” it doesn’t matter if outward circumstances are negative. It doesn’t even matter to Paul that he is in prison. He has confidence in God that good can come out of anything.

It is one thing to recommend a positive attitude from a position of comfort and respected leadership. It is quite another to preach this message from prison, which is what Paul is doing. We see in chapter one that not only was Paul in prison, but that some in the church were taking advantage of his imprisonment to make a name for themselves and seek personal advantage. Paul is remarkably selfless in his response, saying that his only concern is that that missionary work will go on successfully.

In fact, Paul has become so detached from worldly things that he cheerfully admits that dying sounds good to him because it means he gets to be with Christ. “Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you,” he seems to say with a sigh. He admits that he is looking forward to his final rest but he wants to do all he can for the saints that he loves. In chapter two he tells them he wants them to be “likeminded,” and unified in seeking the things of the spirit and unified in love for one another. This will result in them being of “one accord, of one mind.” (2:2)

How will they arrive at this unity? He tells them in Philipians 2:3-4. These remarkable verses give the formula for a unified church. It is that no one would be seeking their own honor or credit, but that every person would be seeking the betterment of his brothers and sisters. As Paul puts it, each would “esteem [the] other better than themselves.”(2:3) This way of living is the way of conscious humility, mindfully choosing the servant’s path rather than choosing a way which would exalt oneself.

### **LET THIS SAME MIND BE IN YOU**

It is at this point that Paul inserts six verses that are like a hymn to the Lord Jesus Christ. He begins by saying “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.”(2:5) He then paints a word picture of the One who laid aside all the honor and dignity of his divine pre-mortal position as Jehovah and humbled himself, taking “the form of a servant, ... made in the likeness of men.” (2:7) We recall the ringing question of the Book of Mormon, “Knowest thou the condescension of God?” How can we lift ourselves up in false pride and desire for position and attention when God himself was willing to give up everything to come to earth in such a lowly fashion and then die on the cross for us? (2:8) Paul mentions Christ’s death on the cross repeatedly in his letters because it was such a degrading way to die, reserved for those that Rome wanted to humiliate, and in Jewish law, for those that were “cursed.”

Because Christ humbled himself below all things, God the Father “hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...”(2:9-10) This provides a pattern for us. “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up.” (James 4:10) Or stated another way, “For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” (Luke 14:11) This is the mirror opposite of Satan, who “said in [his] heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God.” (Isaiah 14:13) Paul inserts this theology lesson about Christ into his letter showing how to build a unified church upon a basis of meekness and “lowliness of heart.”(Moroni 8:26) This phrase is used by Mormon and echoes Paul’s “lowliness of mind.”(2:3) Mormon goes on to say that by this lowliness “the visitation of the Holy Ghost cometh.” (Moroni 8:26) When pride enters in, the Holy Spirit departs and cannot bless that life or that ward or that work with its seal of approval and blessing. Humility is the foundation of a righteous life.

**WORKING OUT OUR SALVATION** Paul says “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” As one modern paraphrase puts it, “Put into action God’s saving work in your lives.” Verse 2:12 makes clear that God is working in us, as He imparts His spirit and wisdom and strength. It is then our responsibility to “work out” what He has “worked in.” Has God given you a gift? Use it to bless others. Has God comforted you? Comfort others. Has God shown you the truth? Then show someone else the truth.

Why is this to be done in “fear and trembling?” Throughout the scriptures the “fear of the Lord” is the proper way to relate to God. Without reverence, we cannot know God or honor him. The youth of today who refer to Jesus Christ as “J-Dawg” will never know Him unless they shed that casual disrespect, humble themselves and acknowledge His almighty power. That is step one.

Paul warns against “murmurings and disputings.” Nothing can destroy the spirit in a home or a ward or a life more quickly than complaining. Without the spirit, our light will not shine to the darkened world that needs light so badly. We cannot show others what Christ is like through our own transformed lives, if we are impatient and irritable and complaining about every little thing that doesn’t suit us. There is no faith in a life of nit picking and fault finding. All of us are fallen men and women, striving to grow in grace toward the “high mark of our calling in Christ Jesus.” If we are not patient and long suffering with each other, how can we possibly go forward? If all the outside world sees is our complaining, they will not be attracted to the gospel of Jesus Christ through us.

**HAVE NO CONFIDENCE IN THE FLESH** Finally, Paul says, have no confidence in the flesh. Paul’s confidence is not in his own talents and ability, his heritage, or his religious credentials. These are the earthly things that he refers to as “his flesh,” meaning his earthly body and the natural life he lived in that body before he found Christ. He has learned to depend entirely upon Jesus Christ. Paul recounts for the Philippians what his life used to be like when he was a prominent Pharisee who persecuted the church of God. At that time he counted on his Jewish credentials and his rigorous keeping of the Mosaic Law to make him right before God. But he “lost” all that when he found Jesus Christ. Indeed, now he “count[ed] 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...” Talk about having your priorities straight! Though Paul never mentions it, perhaps one of the things that he lost was a home and family. It’s easy to see why the converts he made and his fellow workers were so dear to him.

Paul’s positive attitude shines in the verses of the last half of chapter three. We see his resolve to “press... toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” He does not waste time crying over spilled milk, saying that he moves forward “forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those thing which are before.” So should every Latter -day Saint woman resolve to let go of past failures and guilt and look forward to what God is helping her become.

### **PRESSING FORWARD AS MATURE BELIEVERS**

Paul’s use of the word “perfect” (3:12, 15) requires some explanation. When we see that word we think of something without flaw. But this was not the meaning of the word in the New Testament Greek. The word translated “perfect” in verse 12 is the Greek word “teleio-o,”<sup>1</sup> meaning “accomplished, finished.” Paul says he is *not* completed, but is still pressing forward and growing in Christ. Then why does he seem to contradict himself and say in verse 15 that he is “perfect?” or “finished?” Actually he does not use the same Greek word here. The word in verse 15 is “telios”<sup>2</sup> and means “mature”, “ripe” or “of full age.” Though from the same root, these are different words. Thus verse 15 is addressing those who are mature in the Christian life. Telios is the word used of fruit that is ripened. He is advising these seasoned Christians to use the same rule of life that he, Paul, uses—that is, to press forward steadfastly rather than assume God’s work in them is ‘finished’ or ‘complete.’\*

---

\* Telios is the Greek word translated *perfect* in Matthew 5:48: “Be ye therefore perfect (telios), even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (telios)” In other words, “be fully matured, completed in the same way that your Father in Heaven is complete.” The word “therefore” refers to the 5 preceding verses that describe the Father’s merciful love for all of His children. The meaning of this verse is not a command to be without a single flaw, but tells us to come to full maturity as Christians by having the same mercy and charity that mark our Father’s character. More LDS women should know this! (See also Luke 6:27-36, for the same teaching recorded by Luke)

### **THE CONFIDENCE OF PAUL'S FAITH**

Paul returns to his theme of confidently looking for the good in life in the fourth chapter of Philippians. Verse 6 says, "Do not worry about anything. Instead, in all things pray with thanksgiving and make your petitions known to God." (my paraphrase) What a guide to life! If we resolved not to worry our way through every day, but to begin with prayer, turning over our concerns with thanksgiving to our Father, we could get off the merry-go-round of circumstances and on the path of confident living.

It is our attitude that needs changing, not our circumstances. Paul says (v. 11) that whatever happens to him he is content, for the things that happen to him don't determine his life and his joy. If there is something God wants him to do, he "can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." (v. 13) If there is something he needs, "my God shall supply all [my] need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." (v. 19) No wonder Paul was full of joy and rejoicing in Christ. He had all he needed and more, for he knew that nothing could happen to him that God would not sustain him through. Paul truly had learned "in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." (4:11)

### **A FAREWELL TO PAUL**

As we say farewell to our study of Acts and to the apostle Paul, we see him filled with the "peace of God that passeth all understanding." (4:7) He was indeed a "perfect" Christian, one fully matured in the Christian life. A hero of the faith, Paul sets the bar very high in his courageous and single minded devotion to his Lord. Just as with others like him—Joseph in Egypt, Mormon, Moroni, Joseph Smith, Moses, Nephi—who gave their all to the cause of Christ, we can learn a great deal from studying his life and modeling our own on his example. From Paul we learn to face problems head on and go forward depending on the guidance and provision of the Lord. We learn that our obedience to God does not earn us a relationship with the Lord, for Paul had always been strictly obedient, even before he came to know the Lord. It is rather our humble acknowledgment of our own insufficiency—becoming a "beggar before God" as King Benjamin puts it—that awakens us to a knowledge of God's love through the atonement of Jesus Christ. After we have reached out and grabbed hold of the proffered atonement, we form a relationship with the Savior who saved us, wanting to serve him and obey him and always remember what he has done for us. Paul shows us the relationship between God's gifts of grace and the works that can flow from that grace like few other scriptural writers. From Paul we also see the working of God in a human life to bring about His purposes. And from his writings we have Paul's testimony that what God did through Paul on a grand scale, He can do for every Latter-day Saint woman within the outlines of her own life. Everyone can have this same assurance of a vital place in the body of Christ. There are important places for all to serve in the kingdom of God.

For most of us who did not arrive at our testimony through a dramatic encounter on the road to Damascus, we must come to a similar devotion through many small course corrections rather than one giant reversal that came like a thunderbolt. But even after Damascus Road, Paul continued to grow and develop in his Christian life. He learned to temper his quick judgment, coming in the end of his life to reconciliation with John Mark. He learned to love and care deeply for others. He learned to let go of unimportant things, not caring if his own reputation suffered while he was in prison. As we finish our reading of the letter to the Philippians, we know that Paul had about two more years of missionary service ahead of him before his death. One cannot help but admire and love him for his great heart and forgive him for any rough edges that had not quite been polished off. We feel to rejoice with him and agree that he had indeed "fought a good fight", "finished [his] course", and "kept the faith." (2nd Timothy 4:7)

---

<sup>1</sup> Strong's Concordance, # 5048; Thomas Nelson; 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Strong's Concordance, # 5046, Thomas Nelson; 1990.