

# For richer, for poorer

by Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2017 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

**Reading:           Philippians 4:10-23**

## **Introduction: A precious letter**

Last week a letter was sold in an auction for £126,000. It was a letter written by an American businessman to his mother, and he wrote it on board the Titanic on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1912, the day before the ship hit an iceberg and sank. Why would someone pay £126,000 for such a letter? Well, it's the only letter from the Titanic to have been in the Atlantic and survived. It is also interesting because the writer tells us his impressions of the Titanic and the people on it. It is a letter with historical significance.

Over the past few weeks we have been reading and thinking about another historical letter, one which has survived nearly 2000 years, the letter of St Paul to the church in Philippi in northern Greece. This letter, too, has historical significance – it gives us an insight into early church life, and, more importantly, into the personality, thinking and motivation of one of the great pioneers of the church, the apostle Paul.

But unlike the Titanic letter, Paul's letter to the Philippians has direct relevance to us. First of all, it is part of the holy Bible, and has been preserved for us down the centuries because Christians who have read it have been inspired by the same Holy Spirit who inspired Paul to write it. The teaching in this letter about God and Jesus Christ, and about how we should live as Christians, is just as relevant to us today as it was to the church in Philippi. But what inspires me most about this letter is the attitude of Paul himself. To remind you, he is in prison in Rome, expecting to learn whether he will be executed or released. He has been waiting a long time, prevented from taking part in the life of the local church or travelling on his mission. And yet in every chapter, Paul's joy is evident.

## **The secret of happiness**

Over the past few weeks we have touched on the theme of happiness – and the secret of finding it. There are many places people look to find it: money, a nice house, a good job, good looks, social status, relationships. All of these can give us temporary feelings of well-being, but none of them on their own can satisfy the deep longings of the human heart or give us the inner peace which is fundamental to lasting happiness. In chapter 3 Paul writes of how he considered all his achievements and his status as Jew and a Pharisee complete rubbish in comparison with the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour<sup>1</sup>.

In our final sermon on the letter to the Philippians I want us to look at two ways in which Paul experiences happiness in his prison cell in Rome. In chapter 4 verses 10 to 20 Paul thanks the Philippian Christians for their gift of money which he has received from Epaphroditus, a member of the church who has visited him in Rome.

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. (4:10)<sup>2</sup>

The Philippians' gift brings Paul joy. What brings him joy is not the money itself, but the fact that it expresses their concern for his well-being. It reminds Paul of the commitment they made to him many years before, when they supported him financially on his missionary travels through Greece.

---

<sup>1</sup> 3:7-8

<sup>2</sup> All Bible references are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by [Biblica, Inc.®](http://www.biblica.com) Used by permission.

This was shortly after Paul and Silas had founded the church in Philippi, and was a great expression of faith being put into practice.

<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; <sup>16</sup> for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.

Giving is a fundamental part of being a disciple of Christ. How we spend our money shows what we think is really important in life. And for the church in Philippi, giving in order to support the spread of the gospel was a natural expression of their appreciation for what God had done in their own lives. Generosity is the fruit of gratitude. (If you read verse 17 in Greek, you will see the word for fruit which has got lost in our translation.) And I'm reminded of a saying of Jesus which Paul quotes in his farewell speech to the Ephesian leaders in Acts 20:34 "It is more blessed to give than to receive".

So Paul's joy in these verses comes from seeing the Philippians expressing their relationship with him by their gift, and he rejoices to see this expression of their faith. It's like an act of worship, he says, "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (18). And he is confident that God will also meet all of their needs (19).

### **For richer, for poorer**

But what of Paul himself? I entitled today's sermon "for richer, for poorer". These words, from the marriage service, pretty much sum up Paul's experience of serving Christ, as he expresses in verse 11-13:

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. <sup>12</sup> I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. <sup>13</sup> I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Paul has certainly been through some tough times. You can read about them in the Acts of the Apostles from chapter 13 and in 2 Corinthians 12:23-29. When we go through difficulties and everything seems uncertain, having something constant and reliable in your life makes all the difference – perhaps a friend, spouse or family member who knows about your troubles and is there for you, offering a listening ear and encouragement. I'm sure if you look back you will be able to remember such experiences and the person or people who helped you through. For Paul, the support of the Philippian Christians and of his travelling companions had made a difference. And yet other churches had disappointed, and some co-workers had let him down.

For Paul, the real source of security and support had been his relationship with Jesus Christ. At his lowest moments, Paul had discovered that God's grace was sufficient for all his needs<sup>3</sup>. And so in verse 11 when he says he has learned to be *content* in all circumstances, the Greek word he uses literally means "self-sufficient" – he has learned to find within himself the resources to cope with any kind of adversity, and it is not his own resources he is speaking about but the inner strength that comes from God's Spirit dwelling within. And so he writes in verse 13 "I can do everything through him who gives me strength".

True happiness comes when we have an inner security and an inner peace that cannot be shaken by events. As Paul wrote earlier in the chapter, when we "rejoice in the Lord" and pray with thanksgiving we will know "the peace of God which transcends all understanding" (4:4-7). This is why he can sit in his prison cell facing possible death and write in chapter 1 that he really doesn't care whether he lives or dies. One way or another, Paul knows that God is going to get him out of jail, either through release or through death. So he can write "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain" (1:21).

---

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9

Is your relationship with God like this? Do you know that inner strength that comes from allowing Christ to dwell in your heart by his Spirit? When the next crisis hits your life, will you be ready, secure in the love of God? Don't wait for disaster to hit: make it your top priority to deepen your relationship with Jesus Christ now. Then not only will you know the joy and security of living each day with the Lord, but you will have something to share with others who are going through tough times. With the strength you get from God, you can be a rock to others, and share the compassion of Christ with them.

### **Signing off**

Paul's letter to the Philippians ends, like most of his letters, with the sharing of greetings. We're reminded, as he passes on greetings from Christians within the Emperor's household, of how God had worked through Paul's imprisonment to bring the gospel to the imperial palace (see 1:12-13). Once you put your life in God's hands, there is nothing that he can't do, through even the most unpromising circumstances. And so Paul ends by wishing the Philippian Christians what he knew in his own experience – the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (23). With Jesus Christ as your Saviour and friend, you can't lose, whatever life throws at you.