

BROKEN CHAINS
The Philippians Series #9
Philippians 2:19-30

(ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY)

REAL PEOPLE WITH REAL PROBLEMS

There are times when I am giving pastoral counsel that I wonder if people are silently thinking to themselves, "That advice might sound good in theory, Pastor Jay, but you don't understand what it is like to experience what I am going through". That is a very common way of thinking, isn't it? I have no doubt that there have been times when someone was giving me sound counsel and I was slow to accept it because I didn't feel like they were in a position to know what it was like to be in my shoes. Speaking purely objectively, sound counsel should be heeded no matter who is giving it and no matter how dissimilar their life experiences are from our own. Nevertheless, human nature being what it is we often tune out sound counsel because we don't think the person giving it knows enough about us.

One of the great features about the Bible and something I find very comforting is the fact that the sins, the inconsistencies, the doubts and the struggles of its key people are written down for us. That is a great help to someone like me who struggles with sin, is often inconsistent and at times feels the weight of discouragement. Abraham, Rebekah, Moses, David, Elijah, Peter, Martha, Thomas and Paul – each of them are shown to be less than perfect. This gives the Bible an air of realism. It is not some abstract religious philosophy, it is a book written by real people, written about real people and written to real people. It was God Himself who inspired the writings, and He saw to it that the Scriptures would speak to us right where we are. When we read the Bible the way it should be read we will discover a rich common ground with its human authors and the people they wrote about.

I find this very reassuring when reading Philippians 2:19-30. There are four people(s) involved in these verses; Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus and the Philippian church. Of the four, Timothy is the least involved. Paul's reference to Timothy had to do with future plans for the church. But in the immediate setting, it was Paul, Epaphroditus and the believers in Philippi who were experiencing difficult circumstances. When you read 2:19-30 you can see how similar these Christians are to us.

Epaphroditus must have been a special person. He was a key member of the Philippian church and was dearly loved. Apparently, he was a hard working servant who constantly encouraged and helped others. He was the kind of person to whom you would entrust your life. When he was around things just seemed better. The church had sent Epaphroditus to visit Paul in Rome where Paul was imprisoned.

Epaphroditus carried with him a financial gift from the church to help Paul while he awaited his trial (4:14-18). While in Rome, Epaphroditus had rolled up his sleeves and labored diligently to help Paul and the other Christians in Rome (2:25). Every church needs an Epaphroditus, and the church in Philippi truly loved and missed him.

While Epaphroditus was in Rome he had become ill, and it got so bad that it looked as if he might die (2:26-27). Communication being what it was in those days (no texting, telephone, e-mail or fast transportation), the church had heard a report about Epaphroditus' sickness, but then they had heard nothing more. They could not even be sure if he was still alive. His brothers and sisters were worried, and Epaphroditus was distressed to know that the church was distressed. All of this put added weight on Paul's shoulders (please read Philippians 2:28). Imagine how Paul felt knowing that Epaphroditus had almost died helping him and that the church in Philippi was worried.

Paul decided to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi. Although Paul was sad to lose such a wonderful fellow worker, it would relieve him to know that Epaphroditus was reunited with the church that loved him so much. In addition, Epaphroditus would now have the task of carrying Paul's letter back to the church in Philippi. Please take careful note of Philippians 2:28.

*Therefore I am all the more eager to send him,
so that when you see him again you may be glad
and I may have less anxiety.*

It is interesting to note that Paul admitted to having anxiety. The word Paul used here is not identical with the word "anxious" which we will encounter in 4:6, but it is an intense word. It refers to a deep concern, an anxiousness to see something be resolved. What we see here is the humanness of Paul. Folks, Paul was a real person with real problems, and so was Epaphroditus and so were the people of Philippi. Don't make the mistake of treating the Bible as an abstract book about unreal people with unreal lives. God has allowed us to see that the believers we read about in the Bible struggled the same way we do, and what God did for them He can do for us.

Was Paul being a hypocrite when he wrote about joy, peace and contentment? After all, by his own admission in 2:28 he was feeling the weight of his responsibilities and the burden of his circumstances. No, Paul was far from being a hypocrite. Joy is not an emotion or feeling; it is a perspective, a way of looking at things. One can simultaneously feel the pressures of life's battles yet still have true joy. Here are eight biblical concepts that need to be part of our thinking or our perspective when we are feeling life's pressures:

1. Choose a biblical perspective. The Bible tells us that God is involved with the circumstances of our lives and that He is wise, loving, powerful and that He will work out all things for our good (Romans 8:28). This perspective can generate wonderful feelings or emotions, but joy is not itself an emotional state. Not having immediate or constant feelings of happiness does not mean that I lack joy, peace and contentment. Unless your name is Luke Skywalker, **don't** let your feelings be your guide.
2. We need the Lord. One of the lessons God constantly reinforces is that our struggles serve as a reminder that we need Him (see Philippians 4:11-13; II Corinthians 1:8-11; 12:7-10).
3. God has guaranteed the victory (Romans 8:31-39), but He has also told us there will be battles which we will have to fight (John 16:16-22, 33; I Peter 4:12-19).
4. The times of struggle are intended by God to be a time of refining in our lives. Real growth, like real joy, is not something God instantly zaps us with, it is a process. God is a full time teacher and Christians, including Paul, need to be full time students (Philippians 4:12; James 1:2-5).
5. Our struggles, and the comfort God gives in those struggles, equip us to comfort others (II Corinthians 1:3-6). God will never waste our pain. It will be used for something very good, and we can be a great blessing to someone else who is hurting.
6. We live in a fallen world where evil and sin are present and the curse is very real (Genesis 3:14-19). There is room for legitimate sorrow because of the world we live in and there are things which should grieve us (John 11:35). Remember, this world is not our home, we are aliens and strangers here (Philippians 3:20; I Peter 1:1; 2:11).
7. Paul likened the Christian life to running a race. An athlete in training accepts discomfort as a way of preparing his body to respond positively to the stress encountered in competition. Tough times are an opportunity for God to grow us (I Corinthians 9:24-27).
8. Our sinful choices or willful disobedience will rob us of joy, peace and contentment (Psalm 32:3-5). We must always be willing to do an honest personal inventory or spiritual self-examination before God (Psalm 139:23-24). Strained or broken relationships, such as the one we read about in Philippians 4:2-3, are joy killers. Paul consistently applied scriptural principles to his relationships and encouraged others to do the same (2:1-4). Remember, no one can take my joy away, but I can give it away if I harden my heart.

I hope that as you read about the struggles written in 2:19-30 that you will be encouraged to see that it is normal for Christians (even someone like Paul) to have struggles. The Bible is very realistic, and its promise of **BROKEN CHAINS** can be realized by any Christian who is willing to think and act biblically.

DIGGING DEEPER

1. The Bible allows us to see the failures of its greatest heroes. This shows us how very real the Bible is. What flaws do you see with these people (Genesis 20:1-9; II Samuel 11:1-27; I Kings 19:1-4; Mark 10:35-41; Mark 14:66-72; John 20:24-25; Acts 15:36-40)? _____

2. What lesson about trials did Paul learn in II Corinthians 12:7-10? _____

3. According to I John 3:19-20 how can our feelings and emotions mislead us about who God is?

4. According to II Corinthians 1:3-7 God will use our troubles to enable us to comfort others. Describe a time in your life when you have been able to comfort someone else because of how God comforted you during a difficult trial. _____

5. Are you experiencing joy today? If yes, to what do you attribute your joy? If no, what is the barrier and what would the Bible ask you to do? _____
