

Hope Triumphs: Even in chains

10 undated devotions in
Philippians

for personal or small group use,
particularly for those over 60

Prepared by Rev'd Ben Boland

How to get the most from these devotions

We are all different yet the challenges we face are common to humanity. As such the following are principles designed to scaffold, not constrain, your devotions.

1. Devotions are reflective, so find a space and time that allows you to reflect. Creating such a space can be as simple as making a cuppa and sitting in a specific chair at a set time each day, finding a beautiful view or perhaps joining a loved one or group as you work through the devotions together.
2. **PRAY.** Yes, each devotion has a prayer; our Father in heaven hears all our prayers. Pray before you open the devotions, bring your struggles, confessions and joys before your Lord who loves you. Pray that you would be aware of his presence and hear his voice, not simply in the devotions but throughout your day. Pray after the devotional, not simply the prayer provided, but a rich, personal prayer which brings the realities of your life and the certainty of God's word together.
3. These devotions have the key text printed in full because arthritis, vision loss and other realities of later life mean many people can no longer access a traditional Bible. At the bottom of each devotion are extra readings. If you have challenges accessing a traditional Bible I encourage you to ask someone to read them with you, so Scripture will bless you both.

Introduction

As an aged care chaplain, I am repeatedly drawn to the book of Philippians. I have shared it with individuals, small groups and church gatherings. I keep seeing God use it to transform people who are sad, struggling and suffering.

Philippians is my go-to-book to read when I am feeling down. Indeed, it has been called the ‘Epistle of Joy’ as it has encouraged generations of Christians. Yet it was written by the Apostle Paul while he was chained in a Roman prison, living constantly under threat of death and struggling with anxiety and fear.

As such, Philippians is powerful for people who know similar troubles, like suffering, confinement, fear, anxiety, death and grief. These are realities many older people know well. Far from being depressing, Paul’s honest engagement with these challenging, hard, dark topics is positive, loving and bright.

My hope and prayer is that these devotions will help us to face the challenges of ageing and frailty, without denying the challenges or being overwhelmed by them. They point to a third way, the way of Christ crucified. In Jesus, trials can be acknowledged and overcome because God’s love and power prevail both now and evermore.

Rev. Ben Boland

Devotion 1: Philippians 1:21-25

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Hope in life and death

Paul's desire to die is unsurprising; he is imprisoned, in pain and under threat of death.

What is surprising is his hope. Paul trusts that his life will bless people (even in the midst of imprisonment, sorrow and pain he is thinking of others) and his death will bring him into eternity with Christ.

We too can fully live assisting others despite our circumstances, and die confident in Jesus's love and power. We can be confident our lives are blessing others (even when we are limited by our health) and that death will bring life's fulfilment and eternity with Jesus.

We can cry 'Oh to die, to be with Christ!' and keep labouring for Jesus till we see Him face to face.

Prayer

Jesus, your powerful, loving death gives us hope for today and eternity. As we face trials may we know and live in this reality more each day. Amen.

Extra readings: Isaiah 25:8-9; Phil 1:7-11; 2 Tim 2:8-13;
Ps 13

Devotion 2: Philippians 1:20

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

What do you fear?

Fears shape and control us. For example, fear of failure can stop people from pursuing dreams and undertaking new challenges. However, fear is not evil in itself; Jesus was afraid in Gethsemane (Lk 22:44). Wise fear produces holiness: ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ (Prov 9:10).

So, what should we fear? Imprisoned, in the shadow of death, Paul was afraid.

His primary fear was that he would not have enough courage and would shame Jesus by not proclaiming His love and showing Jesus’ grace.

Dementia, pain and loneliness are all scary. Yet our primary fear should be that we stop proclaiming Jesus. So how can we focus on Jesus when we are facing trials? Only if we, like Paul, daily pray for strength, love and grace.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we fear many things. Please relieve our anxiety. Comfort and strengthen us as we face pain and sorrow. Give us courage as we face our lives today and whatever tomorrow may bring. May we always proclaim your love in prayer, word and deed. Amen.

Extra readings: Joshua 1:9; 1 Cor 1:26-31; Ps 31

Devotion 3: Philippians 2:5-8

Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus ... he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

How should we live?

Ageing can be undignified. Incontinence, reliance on others and moving into a care home all shake our feelings of dignity. No one has the dignity of Jesus; the creator, saviour and judge of the world. Yet Jesus laid dignity aside, became human and died naked on the cross. Abandoned, mocked and crushed by God's wrath, He demonstrated loving humility.

Philippians reminds us that Jesus not only restored the relationship between humanity and God but He is also our example. As believers, we seek to be like Jesus as an expression of our position as children of God filled with gratitude and worship.

Believers have a double right to dignity; firstly, as people created in the image of God and secondly, as those saved by Jesus's blood. Yet, we are called to live with loving humility. For some of us, this will mean accepting help or moving into a care home.

Prayer

King Jesus, you knew disgrace and death without dignity. Help us whenever we feel our dignity eroded. Empower us to live a life of loving humility. Amen.

Extra readings: Isaiah 53; Eph 1:3; Ps 22

Devotion 4: Philippians 2:9-11

God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Lord of all

‘Gentle Jesus meek and mild’ neglects the facts that Jesus is Lord. He is the creator of heaven and earth and He is the King of Kings. He is not just our brother; Jesus is supreme.

If her Royal Highness, Queen Elizabeth, were to visit me, there would be lots of desperate work to get ready.

Why? Because she is the Queen! Jesus is greater than any other monarch. Yet often we treat Him, at best, like a vending machine; ‘Jesus, I want ...’

We would stress about a visit from the Queen, but often forget that Jesus knows our every moment (thought, emotion and action). Jesus blesses all who trust Him with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, so God is in us and with us always.

Prayer

Almighty, everlasting Lord, creator, sustainer and redeemer, you alone are God. As weak, broken and faulty people we come before you with no claim, no power and no right except your magnificent love manifest in Jesus’s death for us on the cross. We remember that Jesus rose from death and is seated at your right hand. Amen.

Extra readings: Isaiah 9:6; 1 Tim 6:11-16; Ps 47

Devotion 5: Philippians 2:15-17

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith.

Shining Sacrifices

These words of Paul speak to my heart. I want to shine, holding out Jesus's love with prayer, word and deed; but running and labouring are not easy! I certainly don't enjoy being poured out or suffering. When I run, labour or suffer, I often become grumbly and grouchy. To my shame, I find I can grumble and argue even when life is good!

Despite my warped nature, with my grumbling and argumentative tongue, through Jesus God has made me His. He made me blameless and pure. I am a child of God. Can I leave all the work to God? No! I must run, labour and sacrifice to shine God's glory as He shines in me.

Prayer

Glorious Jesus, we thank you that your death made us children of God. Help us when it's tough to not grumble or be discouraged. Instead, may we imitate you and shine your light in this dark world. Amen.

Extra readings: Numbers 14:26-35; Luke 23:26-38; Ps 23

Devotion 6: Philippians 2:25-28

It is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed, he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. 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.

Grief and anxiety

Grief can be particularly tough for Christians; our eternal hope can lead us to believe that sorrow should not touch us.

Yet Paul records his experience of grief and gives thanks that he is not experiencing more grief. Perhaps we see here Paul's sinful nature? No. Jesus wept at Lazarus's death, despite knowing he would raise him that day (John 11). Grief is not innately sinful.

Friends, God promises us peace, but we will only experience that fully when we are with Him. Until then we may experience both grief and anxiety. The question, is how will we respond? Will we deny our grief or will we trust and pray?

Prayer

God of peace, be with us in our sorrow. May we grieve well, neither denying the pain nor wallowing in it. Lead us as we walk through, and eventually out of, the shadow of the valley of death. Amen.

Extra readings: John 11:35; Acts 21:13; Ps 40

Devotion 7: Philippians 3:4-9

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, 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 on the basis of faith.

Confidence

Where is your confidence? What would you say if tonight God asked you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven’?

Would you answer, ‘I’m not a bad person’, ‘I’m baptised,’ ‘I go to church’, ‘I am ordained’? Such answers are hollow and empty. Only Jesus’s righteousness opens heaven to us and gives us true confidence – confidence that God loves us, God died for us, and God is with us now.

Prayer

Gracious Lord, my life gives me no confidence. Even my best is not good enough. Lord give me confidence in Jesus alone. Amen.

Extra readings: Prov 14:26; Heb 10:35-36; Ps 118

Devotion 8: Philippians 3: 19-21

I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Loving tears

Friends, Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead.

When your neighbour, your friend, or your relative, kneels before the Lord Almighty, what will they plead? We know that the only path to God is trust in Jesus, but do they?

Do we love them enough to weep? Do we look for ways to love them physically, emotionally and spiritually?

Love is not having people as projects. Love is caring for every aspect of a person, because they are people, created in God's image, loved so much that God died for them.

Prayer

Lord and judge of all, too often we forget that apart from Jesus we are all destined for condemnation. Help us remember that we are destined for heaven only through Jesus's death. Fill us with love for people who do not know you. We pray that they, like us, may come into relationship with you. Amen.

Extra readings: John 17; Acts 10:42; 2 Cor 5:10; Ps 82

Devotion 9: Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Rejoice and pray

We get anxious. Problems both new and old, worry us. We can become consumed by worry.

Worry doesn't help though; in fact, it's unhealthy. Repeating 'do not worry' or singing 'pack up your troubles in your old kit bag' doesn't work. Instead, we grow weary and worry about how much we're worrying!

By contrast, Paul challenges us to rejoice in the midst of fear! He rejoiced while in chains. Rejoicing in the midst of fear is not easy; it is only possible through prayer and trust.

Prayer and trust do not always give instant and eternal peace! This side of heaven we will face worry and anxiety again and again, just as we sin again and again. However, every time we face worry and anxiety, we can choose to trust, pray and worship God.

Prayer

Loving Father we worry, we are anxious and we are afraid. Lord, transform us so we can trust you. In the midst of fear may we have overwhelming peace. Amen.

Extra readings: Prov 29:25; Rom 8: 38-39; Ps 34

Devotion10: Philippians 4:12-13

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. I can do all this through him.

Contentment

Age brings experience: The idols of youth and middle age (power, riches and beauty) have proved themselves hollow, both philosophically and experientially. Powerful people fear losing out to the next challenger. The rich worry about theft. Beauty is both illusive and subjective (not to mention expensive and fleeting).

Yet knowing what does not work is not enough, particularly as ageing brings new challenges. These challenges are not modern; Ecclesiastes 12 records the challenges of later life. The challenges of ageing are ancient and profound and consequently, many older people become depressed.

So how can we find contentment? Paul's answer is Jesus. Before we dismiss this as trite we need to remember that these words are written from prison by a man who knew incredible suffering (2 Cor 11: 11). Our only hope for contentment is found by trusting Jesus.

Prayer

Father contentment is elusive when life is easy, not to mention when we are facing trials. Please transform us so that we may know Jesus and find contentment in Him. Amen.

Extra readings: Prov 14:30; Rev 22:16-17; Ps 34

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