

How to Study the Bible (2) (28.8.1984)

by Nigel Lee

Nigel Lee's sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding scripture, the value of knowing Christ, and the challenges of servanthood in the Christian life.

Duration: 1:16:44

Topics: "Bible Study"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the mind of the Christian worker and how they should cope with the challenges of serving and following Christ. The speaker suggests that the whole chapter 4 of the Bible is about different ways of thinking. They also mention that the last chapters of Paul's epistles can sometimes be puzzling and don't seem to fit into a specific theory. The speaker concludes by encouraging the audience to read and study the Bible for themselves and to pray for guidance and understanding.

Transcript

I would say that there are hunks of Matthew where the word disciple, disciple, disciple comes in great clusters. It's fun working with a concordant sometimes on this because you can see that a particular key word gets mentioned again and again and again and again within the bounds of a few chapters and then not at all. And you may think that perhaps that's for a reason, that the writer was focusing on that term at that time for good purpose.

The way you think as a Christian is obviously part of this isn't it and you've got certain examples. Let me move you on a bit, we haven't completed the exercise, I've just shown you some of the way in which batting ideas around is good. What do you think about chapter 3? What on earth is all that about? And how is it different from chapter 2? What is chapter 3 about? Show me from the text.

Does it divide up and if so how? What will you entitle it? The value of knowing Christ. Yes. Now why should he suddenly start to talk about the value of knowing Christ at this point? Why doesn't he talk about the second coming? Do you think that following the example of Christ in the early verses of chapter 2 is likely to cause you any problems? You can't live up to it, so one problem may be frustration.

This is another very interesting thing. You get Paul answering in the successive verses the kind of questions that what he's just said will produce. Now do you think chapter 3 does answer the frustration of... That's in chapter 1 I think is it? Or am I mistaking? Verse 17.

Watch out for the dogs and watch out for the concision and so on. We are the true circumcision. We'll come to that in a minute.

The business about, well I'm just happy that people are proclaiming the gospel even if some of them are doing it for wrong reasons. That comes before in the gospel work chapter. So he's talked about gospel work and the hurly-burly of it.

Then he's gone on to talk about the mind of the worker, humbling himself, serving others, abasing himself. Are there any frustrations that that might cause apart from feeling you're not up to it? What is one of the worst things that you have to bear with when you do what Christ did between verses 5 and 8? Who's there? Failure? Yes, to a degree you feel you don't keep up to the example. But I'm thinking of something else.

What is the greatest difficulty about being a servant? Nobody appreciates you. You've got to, I mean you decide to humble yourself but then you have to live with it. Anybody can humble himself if he gets praised the next day for having been so wonderfully humble.

If the exaltation would come a little quicker, we'd prefer it. If God would only exalt me today because I humbled myself yesterday, well I could live with days like that. That sort of feeling.

Is this chapter psychologically going to help me with that problem? So let's give an example, or maybe you want to give an example. You commit yourself to an extra bout of toilet cleaning, or washing up, or endlessly on your team there are certain little jobs that nobody ever seems to notice, but you always do, so you do them, but nobody appreciates you for doing them. What's the difficulty about that? Just going on doing it without appreciating it at a deeply logical level, is that in fact the whole basis of your life has changed.

It's not for outward public acclamation, what a great person you are. You are from now on to learn tough lessons, but to learn to be motivated by another goal altogether. It is the secret of the servant of God.

What is the goal? Yes, now preach that to me a little bit, sure. How is that to come about? How does, well preach Paul's sermon for him. How does Paul, having laid aside the goal of public righteousness and being thought socially, spiritually so superior, what are you going to satisfy yourself with? Will you read for us from verse 7 to verse 10 in a good strong voice? Now he's talking about two different things isn't he? Putting aside the righteousness of the Lord, this is a matter of his legal salvation if you like, or my being a Benjaminite and being a Pharisee and learning the law and etc etc, doesn't save me.

I have a righteousness that comes by faith, it's given to me. But, I also want to go on, not just to be declared righteous, but to go on to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering. This is a tough thing for a servant, that he suffers, and often lonely, often nobody notices, misunderstood, just gets on with it.

You must have found this in your months on the ship. Sometimes you have to do jobs and you just get presumed on and nobody cares. Eh? Just do it.

How are you going to survive such a thing? How are any of us going to survive in a way, when there's jobs to be done and precious little glory being offered? Isn't that like the Olympics, when they're going to put up national flags and you can mount the podium and you came, you know, third in the humility stakes and get a bronze medal and and uh-uh. It's simply a question of knowing Christ, in his death. So we're back to the

idea of chapter two.

This is how he died. He made a decision, he followed through with it, he humbled himself. Now I want to know Christ in his death.

I want the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed unto his death. I want the cross, in experience, as the means whereby I get to know him better. Now is there anything else in the chapter, that chapter three, that will indicate to me that my thinking is on the right lines? I'm beginning to see how in chapter three, Paul is dealing with the psychological problems aroused by his teaching in chapter two.

What about the last paragraph? Can anybody explain why he puts verses 17 to 21 in at the end of chapter three and not in the middle of chapter two, for instance? The particular thing that grieves him in those verses is what some people are doing, and it isn't that they're enemies of God. They haven't become atheists. It isn't that they're enemies of the church.

They haven't become persecutors. What are they enemies of? Verse 18, enemies of the cross. What they do not like is God's way of spiritual progress.

It is the cross that they object. They do not want to know Christ in the fellowship of his sufferings. They don't want the road that he took.

God wants to reveal himself to you. God wants you to know him. But that road involves crucifixion.

Paul says, I've put away external glory as a thing I'm going to really go for. Instead I want to know Christ. That he is a Christ who humbled himself.

A Christ who kept silent like a lamb before its shearers is done. And I want to know Christ the road of the cross. And I tell you brethren, he says, I tell you of many who, and I've got tears in my eyes while I tell you, they have become enemies of the cross.

Perhaps they started out well as Christians. Brethren, be ye imitators together of me, and mark those which so walk, even as you have us for an example. For many walk, of whom I told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ.

Perhaps they seemed to set out as believers. But they were enemies of the cross. Their heart never really changed.

Their end is perdition. Their God is at the belly. They glory in shame.

They mind earthly things. Our citizenship is that of Mrs Revolutionism. This kind of stuff will get a servant to keep serving.

Because, let's be frank, it's not always easy to serve people. To serve the Lord, and to know the Lord in that service, will psychologically strengthen you to serve people who don't appreciate you always, who take you for granted, who despise you as a servant, who treat you like a servant. Sometimes we will, you know, we try to serve, but we don't want to be treated like a servant.

But to know God in that, the one who became a servant, who took upon himself the form of a servant, and went as far as death. Do you see how the ideas of chapter 3 are built up on what he's been saying in chapter 2? Are you with me? So, the idea crucial to Bible study, which I try to get across to you, is that you

should, in your approach to these books, expect the thing to be packed together in a sensible order. It doesn't just sit and think, you know, what shall I write them a chapter on next? Click through his notes.

Oh, here's a good one. I wrote something like this to the Ephesians last week. Let me preach that to them for a bit.

You look very, very puzzled. Please do. I'm a great believer in the value of heresy.

You're one of those products of a Christian upbringing, Andrew, that is frustrating when you see the odd human being getting up near there as well. Now, do you find anything here, I'll be very honest with this, about a psychological problem that you have? And I think actually one or two people have the same, you know, they immediately, don't worry, Taps, I'm not. I keep bashing on.

Every day I try again. This is why messages sometimes, as I've heard in conferences after you've had perhaps almost more challenge than you can take. Messages on what a wretched failure I am, 23 reasons why I'm... So I hope what we've done thus far, in just looking at the broad... Now, you may be able to help me here.

Don't be too discouraged. I find problems with the last chapters of Paul, because they always seem to be a sort of, they don't seem to fit into my theory. They're much more like a bunch of scattered thoughts.

But can you pick out from chapter four things that do follow on from what we've been seeing so far? He's talking about the mind of the Christian worker. God's work in your heart at the same time as you're outward. How you cope with the problems of being a servant.

What happens to you if you don't? Now what? What's all chapter four about? Yes? We may find that the whole chapter is about different... What were you going to say? So you see it as sort of like a musical epilogue. Yes, just picking up some of the themes that have been running and just playing the tune together for the last time. Okay? Well, that's the sort of way I tend to approach last chapters.

Puzzle me. He doesn't seem... He seems to sort of throw up a number of things, often very personal. Yes.

Let's go back to the beginning then. This is now about the third time we've gone back to the beginning. You've got some idea of the difference between this epistle and, say, Colossians.

You've seen how it breaks down into certain sections that seem to hang together. You've seen a little bit of the way the thought flow runs through it. What we do is we work from the large to the small.

We now want to see if some more of the details fit our overall sense of pattern. Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, or bond servants, or doulois, douloxes. Anything strange about that? Do you ever have the experience of losing your front door key? And you search high in the door lock the next time you go out for the key.

The key to someone's... He sticks right in at the beginning. You don't see it there until you've read the thing through a few times. But he very often starts his epistles by calling just a few.

He doesn't. He calls himself a bond servant, a doulox. I mean, that is a pretty... A doulox was the absolute possession of another person.

You see, if I was Mike's servant, Mike was the lord of the manor here, and I came into the office in the morning for instructions, and he said, oh, I'm going down to the market today. Buy me a new pair of sandals, a couple of bullocks, a toga, and three servants. Three douloxes.

They were the sort of things that were on sale in the market. As you went up and down Sainsbury's, you'd come to the doulox section, and you'd bought your cheeses, and you bought your bread, and you could buy a couple of servants if you wanted. And they have no more worth and value than anything else that you could buy in the market.

You'd buy bullocks and servants for the same money in the same way. A doulox has no rights over his future. He has no choices that can be made.

He's simply at the possession of the boss. And Paul is starting this one, calling himself a doulox. It is remarkable, writing to Greeks with their centuries-old traditions of valuing freedom, dignity, and he says, here I have doulox, buy me a servant, to Jesus Christ.

And then he writes to the bishops and deacons. Why? Maybe he doesn't very often address the bishops and deacons directly by mentioning them at the start of an epistle. Here he's picked them out.

Maybe because this lack of service thing was coming from them, a little bit. They are to be reminded that the role of leadership in the Christian church is to serve, isn't it? Do you remember Acts chapter 6? The apostles loaded with practical problems, and so they were to elect deacons who would serve tables, while we, they said in verse 4, serve literally. The word of God.

Both elders and deacons, bishops and deacons are to serve. Some serve tables, others serve the scriptures. He picks that out at the beginning, and then starts his prayer.

I just want to say one other thing before we break for a quick drink, and then we'll start looking at some more of these things in detail. I picked this out of William Barclay. Now there's a heretical commentator for you.

I'm going to make a confession, please forgive me. He's one of my favourites. His doctrine is on occasions of the war, but for his knowledge of the Greek world and for his insights into what particular phrases in the New Testament may mean in context, tremendous.

I remember noticing that he picked out nine occasions in which Paul speaks of joy in this epistle. Nine-fold joy. Chapter 1 verse 4 he talks about his joy in prayer.

He enjoys praying for the Philippians. Verse 18, his joy in evangelism. Verse 25, the sheer joy in believing.

Do you get that ever? Please reassure me that you do, now and again, feel rather glad that you're a believer. In chapter 2 verse 2, he refers to the joy of watching other believers grow. That's great.

To see someone converted, beginning to grow, come on home, go out, work somewhere, join one of the ships or something, that is a thrill. And Paul knew that joy too. He speaks in chapter 2 verse 17 of the joy that comes from suffering for others.

Chapter 2 verse 17, Yea, if I am offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy and rejoice with you all. That's getting a bit beyond me. That's not so easy, is it? To rejoice being crucified for the sake of other people.

Chapter 2 verse 28, joy in returning workers, coming back from the mission field. Or from being out on time service. Joy.

It's great frustration to me, when folks come back from the summer campaign, and maybe I recruited a bunch of them, and talked to them a little bit, seen them go out, and when they come back, you know, you've only got an hour or two before they have to return home to England. But to hear some of the stories, it is a thrill to see folks coming back from the field, to hear God's provision. It's great.

He talks in verse 29 of chapter 2 of joy in hospitality. In chapter 4 verse 1, joy over our spiritual children. In chapter 4 between verses 10 and 19, joy in receiving a gift.

Again, a lot of happiness in the epistle. But we can spell out different things that he's particularly pleased about. Now let's break.

A few more than we had? Awesome. Good. And if some have to go to do duties, I don't mind, I understand you have to do duties.

So I just tipped her out, and I, as one brother has said to me, I won't assume that it's because I've said something heretical. Any questions or problems so far? Anything that you want to throw back at me? You're all happy. Anna had her hand up first, yes? The question is, was there any Jewish influence on the Philippians? Often you do find this cropping up in different churches.

It's obviously clearest in the Galatian epistle. Was there any Jewish influence on the Philippians? You've pointed to chapter 3. The difficulty with Jewish influence is that in some ways it is exactly like any other human religious system. The way the Jews were living, it had become that way.

And so there are common features between all the world religions in that they tend to concentrate on externals, on righteousness measured by human standards. And Paul is revealing the radically revolutionary way of Christ and knowing Christ and the value of that. Now there is likely to be less strong Jewish influence in this particular Roman colony.

I've no doubt that there were Jews around, I mean they were all over the Middle East. But he's not, it doesn't seem to me, to be addressing that primarily. But in the circumcision, the dogs, right.

Yes. But that's about all that we get in it, isn't it? Let me come back to you with a question. What is circumcision all about? The sign of a covenant that they have with God is one suggested answer.

Are you happy with that? A people marked, yes I think those two answers have a good deal in common. It is indelible. You can't do away with circumcision once it has taken place.

And it would be a constant reminder, particularly among uncircumcised people, that you were different. You were different because God had made a covenant with you. That's obviously part of it.

Yes, Kathy? They're setting apart of the circumcised nation. Yes, Paddy? And God made the covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Yes.

Let us just remind ourselves historically of the origins of circumcision. We'll run through the life of Abraham very, very quickly. God, you remember, one day in chapter 12 of Genesis proposed marriage to Abraham.

Marvellous day. He says, Abraham? I don't know, I mean, how did you propose marriage, Mike? Really? Where was she at the time? This was in India, was it? In the officer's mess on the Lobos. In the officer's mess on the Lobos, you suggested that the pair of you go away to Canada and live together.

So you offered her a new place to live, the only condition being that she would have to allow you to marry her. And this young lady, she agreed to this deal. New country, new name, new family.

That is actually what God does in chapter 12. He says, Abraham, I will change your name. I will make you great.

I will protect you. You will have children. Do you want us to read it? Genesis chapter 12.

Listen to God proposing. The Lord said unto Abraham, now I want you to leave your country and come away with me. And I want you to leave your family too.

Join my family. Come out from your father's house to the land that I will show thee. Canada in this case.

And I will make of thee a great nation and I will bless thee and make thy name different. Great. You'll take my name.

I will even make you a blessing to other people. And I will protect you. Oh boy, I'll bless the one that blesses you and the one that curses you better watch out.

And in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed. The beginnings of the bride of Christ, there's God proposing marriage, you see. Change your name, change your place, change your family, change everything, look after you, protect you, love you, care for you and so on.

Now the story of Abraham's life divides into three, each section beginning with problems that Abraham had with his wife. You get problems in chapter 12, you get them again in chapter 16, you get them again in chapter 20. I mean, I haven't got time to even get you halfway excited about this.

But what God is doing is giving Abraham a vision of marriage at one level and then asking him to work out the implications of that spiritual vision at the level of his own marriage. Now actually he tells lies about Sarah on occasions. He allows her to be taken off into Pharaoh's palace.

He puts her aside and takes another girl instead. And he tells another bunch of lies about her. And sometimes it's a impetuosity of his own flesh, sometimes he just wants to get a bit wealthy.

Frankly, in chapter 12 he prostitutes his own wife. Now each time that you get a crisis in Abraham's marriage at this earthly level, it reveals a problem. Because Abraham isn't just on a physical journey around the Middle East, he's also on that spiritual journey that Christ describes in the Gospels.

Now circumcision comes from the middle of the central section. Abraham, looking at his wife over the cornflakes in the morning, becomes very aware that the dear old girl, I mean, she's well into her nineties, still no baby, been waiting long time. God gave all kinds of promises, but I mean, well, ninety.

And so he takes Hagar. In the flesh, he does it. Actually, Sarah cooperates.

And they produce Ishmael. Now the Bible doesn't say an awful lot about Ishmael, but it describes him in Genesis chapter 16 as a wild ass of a young man. We have a few Ishmaels in this movement.

He was, I mean, he used to let down the tents at night. He used to put sand in the sleeping bags. He put cactuses under the saddles of the camels.

He chased the goats off in the desert. And there's no record of God speaking to Abraham for 13 years. No record.

Can you imagine poor old Abraham with the results of the flesh growing up in his own family? This twit, this bonehead. Oh, how many times he wished he'd never done it. Nothing but trouble, this Ishmael.

Oh, why did I do it? And then God speaks to him in chapter 17. Genesis chapter 17. Abraham was now 99.

I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be perfect. I will make a covenant with you.

What's this covenant all about? Well, I will make kings out of you. I will establish my covenant with you. You will have children.

Your children will enjoy the land of Canaan and so on and so on. And the sign of the covenant is that you are to be circumcised. Abraham, are you willing to judge the flesh? To agree with me in my judgments of the flesh? The flesh in the long run produces only irritation, disaster, annoyance, frustration, endless trouble in the future.

Are you willing to be circumcised as a sign that you put no trust in the flesh anymore, Abraham, to accomplish my purposes? Abraham then says very significantly in verse 18, oh God, that Ishmael might live before you. Live meaning inherit the blessing. May Ishmael be the one.

No, says God, under no circumstances. Sarah shall have the child. And then he agreed to be circumcised.

He was finally willing to agree with God's evaluation of what his flesh had produced. And say in circumcision, my flesh, what I achieve, going my way, it's nothing. It produces only rubbish in the long run.

Circumcision was a mark to every successive generation of Jew that their flesh could not save them. That going their own way produced only frustration. What the Jews did over the following centuries was to make circumcision perhaps the greatest mark of pride in the flesh that the race possessed.

They turned the whole thing on its head you see. Instead of circumcision being a mark of not trusting the flesh, as it was for Abraham, that God was going to have to give a child by promise, God was going to save his people only by what he had said and by doing a miracle. Instead they turned circumcision into something that they were proud of.

And they would speak disparagingly of the uncircumcised Philistines. Do you see how they reversed the thing? Now says Paul here in Philippians chapter 3, we believers, we are the true circumcision. Let me turn back to the page.

We are the circumcision who do three things. We worship by the spirit of God. God has put his spirit in us as believers.

We glory in Christ Jesus, this one who was executed, crucified, spat at by the Romans, despised by our own Sanhedrin. We glory in him. This must have been a living crucifixion for a man like Paul to go around preaching a crucified Jew as the saviour of the world.

And we have no confidence in the flesh. We are the true circumcision. Believers here, I don't care whether you are circumcised or not physically, it doesn't matter.

But we are circumcised in heart when we have said to God, I need your total rescue because I cannot save myself. That by the way, if I can just bring out another general principle, shows you how increasingly as you go on in bible study, certain bits of scripture, you feel you've got somewhere, you've understood what's going on. And they will then illuminate other bits.

The bible is like a rabbit warren. You may jump in through Philippians, but once you get inside the warren, you find that you're led off into 1 Kings 3 Samuel 8, 8 Hezekiah, Exodus, bits and pieces all over here and there. Well don't be afraid to follow the leads.

If it says a little bit about circumcision and you're not quite sure what circumcision is all about, trace it back to the beginning. See what he's talking about. The New Testament, particularly Paul's letters, will lead you again and again and again into certain passages of the Old Testament.

Actually there's a bit of Judges at the end of chapter 3 brings to mind. Do you remember that character Eglon, the materialistically best of bits, and the people of Israel were oppressed by the Moabites, and there was that unusual character, he was a Benjaminite. Interestingly enough, Paul has just described himself as a Benjaminite.

What was his name? Ehud. He was a left-handed character, and most of the Benjaminites seem to have been left-handed. Can you think of any more Benjaminites in scripture? David? No, no.

Ah, well done. Saul was a Benjaminite. And this particular Benjaminite came to visit Eglon, and he had conducted a sort of diplomatic encounter with him, and then as he was going away he said, no I've just got one final message I want to give.

A message, and I must give it privately. So he sent all the servants out, shut the door, and he stuck a sword right through the belly of Eglon. I have a message for you, the sword.

And then he locked the doors behind him and tiptoed off out. The servants presumed that Eglon was busy, and didn't disturb him for a while. Eventually discovered that this Benjaminite had stuck the sword right through the belly of their king.

You can ponder that little passage when we read about those whose God is the belly, who mind earthly things, who reject the cross, and contrast it with us. Our citizenship is something that God has in hand, is in heaven. Anyway, don't worry about that.

Let's go back to the beginning. I get sidetracked, I'm sorry. We're starting with Paul's prayer.

I want to try and proceed through now as much of chapter one as we can in the next half an hour or so, in some detail. You've looked at Paul and Timothy, the servants of Christ Jesus. He mentions particularly the bishops and deacons.

They are to be the servants in the church. Grace to you and peace from God our Father. Then Paul's prayer from verses three down to eleven.

He starts off by being thankful for the past. I thank my God upon all my remembrance of you, always in every supplication of mine, on behalf of you all, making my supplication with joy for your fellowship in

furtherance of the gospel from the first day right up until now. That real unity born out of working together that we were thinking of earlier.

He speaks in verse four of his joy in the present, and in verse six he speaks of his confidence in the future. I look back with thanks, I enjoy praying for you, I'm confident as I look ahead. My confidence as I look ahead is not anything to do with your work in the past.

My confidence in the future depends entirely on God's work in you. Verse six, that he which started the whole thing will perfect it right up through until the day of Jesus Christ. See God started the work there didn't he? He gave Paul the vision.

He took him over to Philippi. God it was who allowed him to be imprisoned. God it was who then controlled the events, the earthquake that smashed the prison that then caused the Philippian jailer to cry out in need.

Whose work will be examined on the day of Jesus Christ? The day when Christ returns. I agree with both of those. What does it mean for us? The day of Christ.

What are we going to face then? Anything? Judgment? Oh dear you make me frightened. What do you mean by judgment? I thought there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus. Examination of what? Our faith, our works.

I mean we might fail. The past mark. Tell me the past mark.

Supposing I haven't. I mean all this talk about judgment and examination. Tell me quickly am I to look forward to this or be terrified of it? Look forward to it? I never look forward to an exam in my life.

Reward? And now you're on to a very interesting idea. You say you don't know but you nearly say one of the most important things today. His glory as what? As our Redeemer.

What will he have done by then? According to this verse. We'll need rain. Colin do you think there'll be a lot still to be done? Like that.

So we can sort of potter along for a bit and then perfect. Now theology at this point is very interesting isn't it? And there's a lot of I suppose or maybes or perhapses coming in here. Yes.

He's talking about a wedding day. He's talking about examination day. And you're talking about what? He has indeed.

But how can we begin to get something encouraging out of all these different ideas? Here am I. I'm a Christian. I've been redeemed. Not by my works but by the blood of the Lamb.

I'm doing my best to do a bit of service for the Lord. I've become a servant. Bad but anyway appointed.

As a servant is my work ever going to be evaluated? Well sure. Sure it must be. I will be judged one day as a servant.

I was judged as a sinner already at Calvary. I will be judged as a servant at the judgment seat of Christ. But in addition to the judgment of me is there going to be any evaluation of what Christ has done? And is that going to be evaluated? Christ's work will be evaluated? So although I look forward to the judgment

day not as something to be terrified of.

It will be a sober occasion but it will be an opportunity for there to be a public evaluation of God's work in me and the degree to which I have cooperated with that. Are you happy with that? At all? You look very unhappy. Well I think I can honestly say that it doesn't cause me any fear.

Not in that sense of fear. There are various passages that speak clearly about the evaluation of the service of the believer. And yet we're reminded even here in Philippians that although we are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling it is God who works in you.

Don't imagine that you're sort of left to run on your own. God is working in you. Christ has started a good work in you and will bring it through to perfection.

So there is one sense in which Christ's own work in the believers is going to be evaluated and be shown to be perfect. How can he do less than that which is perfect? But I am also going to be evaluated as a servant of God. 1 Corinthians chapter 3. From verse 10 onwards Paul is speaking there of building on the foundation which is laid.

Your work in a church. Paul says I laid the foundation there in Corinth. No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid which is Christ Jesus.

But if you come along into the church well you're going to build on the foundation I laid. Some of you may build gold, silver, precious stones. Others of you may build wood, hay, stubble.

The whole lot will be put into God's incinerator and some of it will disappear. It will prove to have been not eternal. It will prove to have been worthless.

The man himself will be saved, verse 15, but as through fire. It isn't that you're going to lose your salvation. This is not what that passage is talking about.

But it is talking about the evaluation of your work as a Christian. And 2 Corinthians 5 talks about the same thing. Romans 14 talks about the same thing.

So it's a time for, let me put it this way, for there to be an opportunity for the approval of what the Holy Spirit, what Christ has done in us and through us. How do you think Paul lived with the knowledge that he had presided over the first Christian martyrdom? He had led a Jewish death squad the length and breadth of those provinces trying to separate Christian families from each other. It's pre-conversion.

Yes, but do you think that Christ only died for your sins up to the point of conversion and from then on you're left to do the best you can on your own? Or do you think that Christ died for your sins after conversion as well? How are you getting on with living with that problem now? Because, you see, since you became a Christian, you've realised a few things about yourself. But you did after you were a Christian. Now, are you learning to forgive yourself? Are you learning from your mistakes and just praising God for his grace that through your mistakes you have been able to learn? Is this what circumcision of the heart has to do with it? Did Abraham learn from the mistake of Ishmael? And did, in fact, his own mistakes cause him to know God better, to know the power of his resurrection better, to want to press on towards the prize of the high calling, forgetting those things that are behind him? Yeah, you're great.

Are you encouraged by that? Tell me, Anna, that I'm going to ask a very personal question. I'm not supposed to. Husband is saying no.

My question is, did you ever... Oh, it's a terrible question. A wicked personal question. Did you ever have any boyfriends before you met Sean? You said yes.

Do you spend a lot of time these days thinking about them? There is obviously something very important in what she says, isn't there? That the presence of Christ and the revelation of actually how merciful he has been all the way through, it overwhelms you and it takes away the sense of the things that you did wrong. You also see that even though you did do some things wrong, he has been merciful, he has been patient. You have been brought to learn through your mistakes and that glorifies him too.

It will all act together to give you an overwhelming sense of the wonderment of his glory. I don't see how you're going to live in eternity thinking about yourself all the time. I think that it's very important that our sense of the reality of the gospel, that even the good that we do, is to his glory.

It's not a matter for our pride. The great thing about God's mercy is that he forgives even when we don't know that we've done wrong. When the Jews had a great day in their calendar, it was the day of atonement.

It was a God-appointed feast when blood was to be shed and carried into the most holy place, not for sins that they knew they'd done. If they knew they'd done sin, there was appointed sin offering. This was for the sins that they did not know they'd done.

God has demonstrated that he is the one who forgives even what we don't know sometimes. Now, if I have revelation of a false motive, a failure, well I learn through it. Thank you God for showing me a few things.

Let me not get too far away from the cross. In the long run, the experience of the believer is one of Christ becoming more and more glorious as he's seen as merciful, as patient, of how far reaching the cross is in its effect. What chapter 3 is talking about.

This morning you talked about some of the frustrations of not being able to reach the standard. But Paul does say, let's press on, let's forget, let's keep going, because of who God is. I don't imagine I'm going to spend the rest of eternity in deep regret.

I failed a few O-levels. Honestly, he doesn't give me a moment. I haven't thought about my failed O-levels for some years now.

Isn't that great? I think it's important to distinguish between the guilt of sin, which when he forgives, he forgets, and the consequences of sin. A man can go get blind drunk and come home and brutally beat his children, and then get terribly convicted and repent. Cry to God and smash the bottles and swear never to touch another drop again and be forgiven.

But he has now got to live for some time with the consequences in his children's minds of what he did. And the great lesson of the life of Abraham, in some senses the life of Paul, is that God forgives at a stroke, but he teaches through the consequences. God forgave Adam, and yet Adam had to live with land that would now produce thorns as well as wheat.

And that taught him something. You can say something stupid and go to the person and ask to be forgiven, but actually you may find that you've gone backwards a little bit with them, and you've got to re-earn their trust, and there are consequences to live with, and that will teach you to guard your tongue a little bit more. Isn't that so? God is great in that he uses the results of our mistakes to teach us, while giving us the security of knowing that the actual guilt is forgiven the moment we repent and ask for that forgiveness.

And it's a very, very important thing in the psychology of being Christian, isn't it? Now, this is really interesting. The Bible, I've given up talking about Philipians. The thing seems to have bitten some of you.

Yeah. That leads, thank you, right on to the next verse or two. You see, we've talked about his attitude while we pray, while he prays.

Verses 9 and 10, this is what he prays, and it is to do with love. You've just said the one that's forgiven most, loves most. It's true in a marriage.

You can have these tense times, things are a bit cold, the other person's done something that you wish they hadn't done, and you can get a bit of, and then somebody will say sorry. How often have the barriers come down, maybe even the tears too, and you've felt drawn much closer together by the process of happens with kids. Have you ever noticed? Do you ever remember? Verses 9 and 10, this I pray that your love may abound.

I'm thankful for all the memory I've got of your gospel work, but I'm praying this, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and discernment. There's no doubt about their love. Their love for Paul, the gift they gave, the support they sent, Pappadimitriou carried it, their love for the lost around them.

But I want your love to increasingly become a thinking love, says Paul, because real love will always lead to greater understanding, won't it? If you love something, supposing you love fishing, motorbikes, French cooking, romantic poetry, whatever you like, whatever you love, you will tend to find out more about it, isn't that true? Happens between people. Fascinating finding out about someone that you are growing to love. Their family and their schooling and the time they spent in hospital when they were a kid, and what their grandfather did, and the wicked old uncle who wasted the family fortune, and it's all fascinating because you love the person.

If you love fishing, it's more than just drowning worms at the end of a... You know, we wanted a fishing rod this summer, so we went into Woolworths, and we bought him the cheapest fishing rod that we could get. I'm finding out a lot about fishing, all kinds of things, because he's growing to love it. If kids like pop music, it's amazing how much they will remember.

At the age of five, they can tell you, you know, the top ten, what fits in the doodah, you know, you can tell it's not my first love. What you're interested in, you're interested in football, you know, people could tell you immediately who won the championship in 1962, you know. They've just got it in their mind because they love the thing.

And Paul is praying that you may grow in love and abound in knowledge and discernment, understanding why people behave the way they do. Euodia has got to understand a little bit about sympathy, and vice versa. If you have a clash with someone, there are very often reasons why they do what they do, and it helps to calm you down when you understand why they've done that, or why they've said that.

And real love will make you want to know. Then you understand. And you need discernment too.

If you have a little six-month baby in your arm, and it looks up at Dad, and it goes, like that. Well, it's only six months, I mean, now he's still living. If your six-year-old looks at Dad and goes, it's a different matter, isn't it? The 16-year-old does it.

The same event, blowing a raspberry, and yet you need discernment. With a little six-month-old, it's just, you know, it's the only way it's got, is saying, Daddy, you're great. With a six-year-old, it isn't quite saying that.

And we need discernment. We need, in the church, on the team, we need to love people enough to discern why they're doing what they're doing. That helps to build unity, doesn't it, and fellowship, right? With me? Because you're great, you're working hard, you're preaching the gospel, but I'm praying for you.

I'm praying that this love in the church may grow in knowledge and discernment, because that too will draw you together. And I want you to value, approve the things that are excellent, and really aim for that. Not just get by somehow with standards that are sort of mediocre, but the best.

And so be filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Christ. I want you to be sincere and void of offence. Give no offence to anyone right through until the day of Christ.

It's rather like a teacher working towards the exams. Paul is wanting his pupils to come through to the exam time and do well. Or a teacher in a school where there's going to be a parent's day, and all the little paintings have got to be up on the wall, and everything's got to be just neat and tidy.

And Paul is watching over his folks, taking them towards that day when there's going to be an evaluation. And so he prays. But for these people, he prays particularly that their love may grow in knowledge and discernment.

Now, from verse 12 onwards, he's telling a little bit of what's been happening lately. It's his prayer letter section. And I want you to know, brethren, the things that have been happening to me.

You've probably heard that I'm back in jail. It is vital for the Philippians to think right about Paul. It's actually vital for us all to think right about Paul.

How much gospel would you have without the writings of Paul? You wouldn't find out anything about the doctrine of justification by faith if it wasn't for the writings of Paul. You wouldn't get too much of it from Peter, or John, or James. The great doctrines that set you free to love God without a troubled conscience.

We are given them actually by Paul. And Paul alone in our New Testament. The others allude to them, but Paul expounds them.

And that is part of Satan's strategy, to cause us to think ill of Paul. Undermine Paul, the attitude we have to Paul. How much time have theologians spent knocking the reputation of Paul? And it happened in the New Testament.

You find at the start of 2 Timothy, Paul saying with great sadness, you know, every person in Asia has turned against me. And he's urging Timothy to go on preaching the same gospel. Well, he's back in prison and he doesn't want the Philippians to misunderstand that.

It's not because he's done any crime. It's not because he's stolen anything or been an immoral man. It's no disaster.

Dear Philippians, I want you to understand why I am back in this prison, but from God's point of view, what is God up to? God was doing the most amazing thing, but out of mercy to various people in Rome who probably could be reached no other way. The Philippians alone of all the churches perhaps should have understood this. How else is Paul going to reach the Praetorian Guard, that crack regiment of Roman troops? They were turbulent, they were arrogant, they were the king-makers, they protected the emperor.

In fact, as Roman history developed, they began to make the emperor. If you hadn't got the confidence of the Praetorian Guard, you couldn't become emperor. How do you think the believers were ever going to reach a character like Nero? I mean, you can't go knocking on the door of the palace, excuse me, has Nero got a moment, has he finished his violin practice? I've got something I'd like to share with him.

There's no way you're going to reach anyone like Nero. God's strategy to reach Nero was to have a man stand in chains in front of him, a man who wasn't afraid of the worst that Nero could do. And I have no doubt at all that Paul explained the gospel to Nero as fully as he could.

And it all happened about six months before Nero committed suicide. Nero died in, as far as we know, the June of 68 AD. And Paul is preparing himself for his last trial in 2 Timothy, and he knows that he's about to be sentenced to death.

Very shortly. He had a chance to explain Nero's need of divine forgiveness and a new start. And God's way of reaching the Praetorian Guard, I mean, these poor Japs, these soldiers.

If you were guarded by the Praetorian Guard in the dungeons in Rome, you had a soldier chained to each wrist. And they chained the guard every four hours. There's nothing these soldiers could do about it, they got chained up to Paul for four hours.

Paul now and again wrote the odd letter or chatted with some of his friends. But I expect it was the most marvellous evangelistic opportunity they've actually chained to you. And they're getting paid for being there.

They can't escape. The door's locked. And there they sit, chained to you.

I wonder what they used to talk about in the barracks. Oh, I've got to go and be chained to that fanatic now. And this is what Paul says.

I want you to know, brethren, that the word of God is not bound. Things are happening. God's still in control.

Prisons are no bother to God. That which has happened unto me has fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel. So that my bonds, my chains became manifest in Christ throughout the whole Praetorian Guard and to all the rest.

So these soldiers have started getting converted. They've started going back to the barracks and saying, you know, I think that Paul's got something. In fact, I can't wait till next week when I'm due to be chained up to him for my first follow-up lesson.

And one after another these soldiers began to get converted. How else could God do it? It's a stroke of genius. But have the greatest evangelists of the day locked up with them hour after hour after hour.

Some of them probably got fed up. But a lot got converted. He wants them to understand that circumstances can take different turns when you're in Christian work.

God is sovereign, isn't he? God is in charge. The things that happen actually, surprisingly, amazingly, often turn out to accomplish the very thing that you may have been struggling towards but couldn't see how to get there. And the painful crisis or the suffering or the imprisonment or the bad judgment that comes in court, well, God works out his own purposes through it.

He even says, look, there's another strange thing happening here in Rome. There's people out on the streets preaching the gospel from completely false motives. How do you understand that? What is going on? Let me read to you.

Most of the brethren in the Lord, verse 14, being confident through my bonds are more abundantly bold to speak the word of God without fear. Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife, some of goodwill. One does it out of love, knowing that I am set for the defense of the gospel.

The others proclaim Christ out of faction, not sincerely. He's been talking about his goal in praying for them that they would be sincere and void of offense. Well, he says some are preaching Christ outside the jail wall, but not sincerely, thinking to raise up affliction for me in my bonds.

What does that mean? How would you do that insincerely? Is that preaching out of faction? And is it designed to raise up affliction for Paul? And would you preach the gospel with your real motive being to make a political point or to release a prisoner? But it's in that area that the answer seems to lie. Somehow, yes. Maybe that to show that they could do it better.

Poor old Paul, I mean when he preaches there's riots and he gets locked up. But we know how really to preach so that we stay free and carry on tomorrow. Possibly.

Preaching the true gospel, but actually in your heart it's a factionalist motive. Yeah, doesn't that happen between evangelists an awful lot? Head counting, cash counting, comparisons between Billy Graham, Louis Palau and all the others. And I tell you this, it comes into the hearts of the preachers too.

It may be that. Any other suggestions? Yep? I have no idea. My version doesn't say distress anyway, it just says affliction.

The motive in preaching the gospel seems to have been other than trying to glorify Christ. However we understand it. It may have been to create trouble for Paul.

So that these people came out of the woodwork, they were preaching on all the street corners, hoping that as a result even more wrath would descend on Paul. May have been that. He does say that they're preaching Christ.

I'm not sure that they're going preaching false doctrine, trying to cause distress because Paul hears rumours of false doctrine being preached outside. It may be that they were trying to cause trouble with the authorities. Or it may be that the focus is on doing it from faction.

They're trying to split the church and show how it really ought to be done and take a party line. It may be that. One or two more suggestions and then we'll come to the real lesson in this.

We've got a range of possibilities and I'm happy with all of them and they all seem that they might be there in the text. But the crucial point is that it is possible to preach the gospel from party spirit motives. Now that we learn from, don't we? That I can actually be going out in evangelism as an Oema and think that I'm doing it better than my brothers and sisters in YWAM, shall we say.

Or that I really know how to preach the gospel better than that other jerk on the team. And that's for that team leader. And all the time you're preaching what you're actually doing is trying to exalt yourself.

It's remarkably easy, isn't it, to do. It's another area where this epistle is all about motives in Christian work. Now Paul's reaction to that is interesting.

He doesn't say, I want to command the factionalists to stop and I want to sift and examine everybody's motives. He says, you know, it's great because somehow anyway Christ is getting preached. Of course he prays for these folk, he gives them an example, he gives them some appeals, but at least he's glad that Christ is getting preached.

Do you think people only get converted when Christ is preached out of the purest of motives? Obviously not so. People get converted when Christ is preached out of some fairly hairy motives sometimes. Because the work of conversion is God's work to exalt his Son.

God is quite prepared even to use preaching that's not so hot. But it's up to me to examine my heart when I preach, isn't it, to see that my motives are not out of faction. Now I see the time has come to an end.

He's going on to talk about the court case. This is actually the second court case. We've been thinking first of all of how we stand before the Lord and answer to him.

Now he's going to talk about how he's got to stand before the Emperor and his attitudes to death. It's a tremendous passage to preach honour to funeral, to live with Christ is what life is about and to die is actually gain and so on. What we need is another day or two to go any further.

But I hope, I'm going to have to stop now, and I think really that's no bad thing, I hope that we've opened a few cracks into it and stimulated you to read. Can I ask that just two or three people perhaps lead us in an audible voice in prayer and thanksgiving as we come to an end, perhaps mentioning something that the Lord has given you during our studies. Let's pray.

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