

PHILIPPIANS

A Lockdown letter of Joy & Jesus.

**Nine Daily Readings With
Devotional Comments.
Two Blogs 'Going Deeper.'**

W e l c o m e

In this time of physical distancing and lockdown, we wanted to encourage FEBC supporters to find fresh inspiration in the Word of God. The book of Philippians is wonderfully appropriate for a season of isolation, so we invite you to read through it with us.

In this devotional e-booklet are nine daily readings and reflections from FEBC New Zealand Director, Matt Perry. There are also two 'Going Deeper' blogs delving into some of the main issues in this remarkable 'prison epistle.'

For 75 years the Far East Broadcasting Company has been announcing hope and joy in Jesus Christ to isolated, persecuted, and distant peoples. While the contexts have changed over the decades, the needs remain the same: people everywhere need faith, hope and love. Radio and digital media are powerful mechanisms to deliver the life-saving message of the gospel. Thanks to the generous and visionary support of people like you, FEBC is reaching untold millions today, from Africa to Asia.

We hope you enjoy these readings and are encouraged in your situation, whatever this year has brought your way.

Enjoy, from the team at FEBC New Zealand
Matt Perry, Executive Director.

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Daily Reading:
Philippians 1:1-11

Welcome to the most positive and personal letter in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul is writing from his own lockdown! He's under house arrest in Rome and facing death or release (Acts 28). This letter is written after nearly two years. Paul's bubble includes Timothy and Epaphroditus, and he's writing back to Epaphroditus' church, in Philippi, to thank them for their gift, and to encourage them to live joyful Christ-centred lives together.

It's rather nice that there are no major problems in the church, just a few disagreements, so Paul focuses on unity. But in doing this he gives us some of the most profound Christian truths. Over the next while we'll explore some of these in this series.

In this opening reading, notice how Paul opens with gratitude, a profession of joy, his affection for his friends, and a beautiful fixation with Jesus (5 mentions in 11 verses!).

How could these topics inspire and shape us in our own lockdown? Keep reading.

Personal thoughts & reflections

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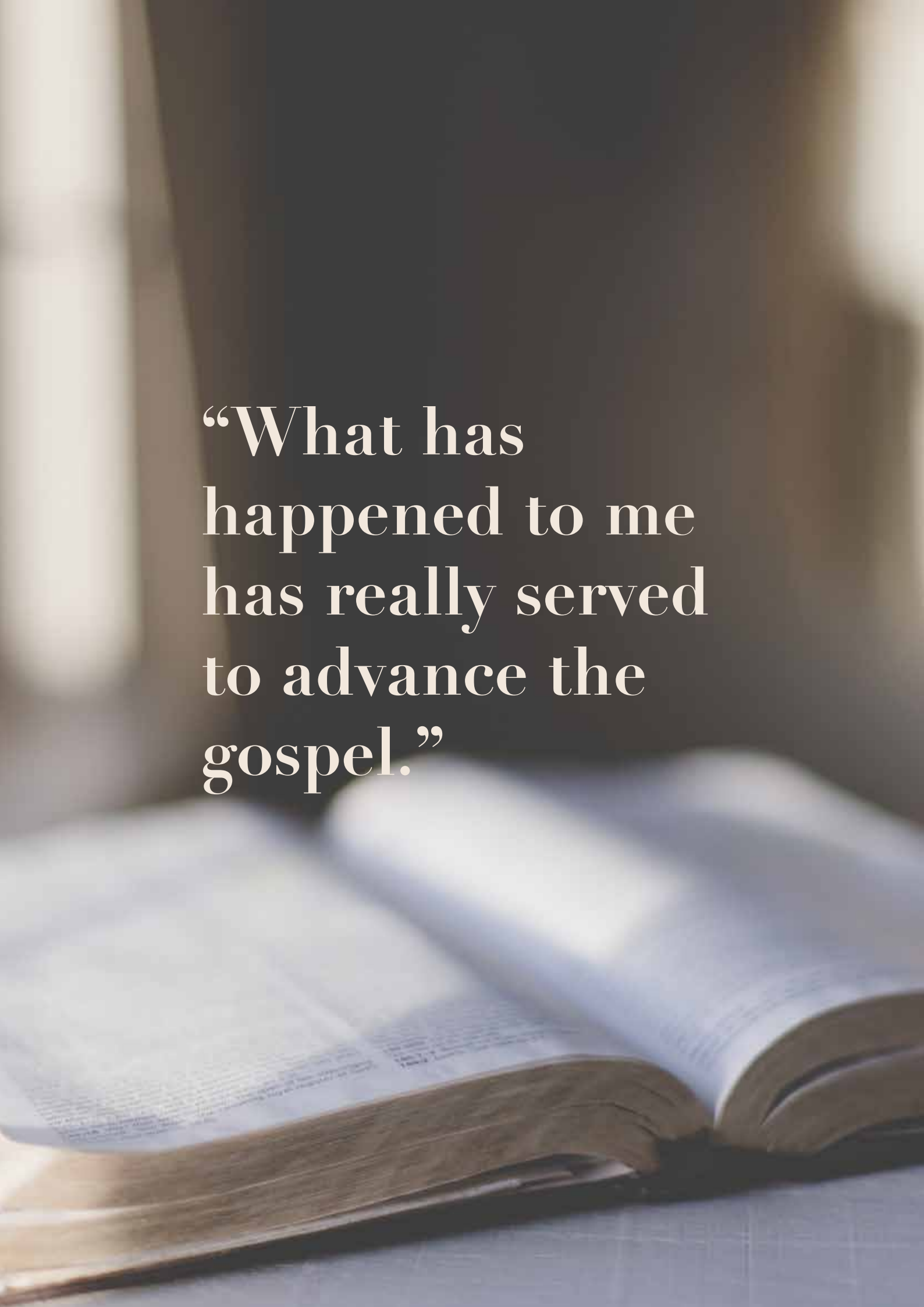
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“I thank my God every time I remember you.”

An open book with text overlaid. The book is open, showing two pages of text. The text is in a white, serif font, centered on the page. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light, suggesting a window or a bright light source. The book is resting on a light-colored surface.

**“What has
happened to me
has really served
to advance the
gospel.”**

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Daily Reading:
Philippians 1: 12-18

We didn't see this Covid19 crisis coming, and it has changed our lives dramatically. The Apostle Paul expected to be travelling the world spreading the new Christian faith. But he's locked down, under Roman guard.

So how does he make sense of this situation? He trusts that God is sovereign (having supreme power & authority) and that "for those who love God all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28). With this attitude he can actually say that his lockdown has served to advance the gospel. That is, for Paul, the church, and the Name of Jesus, they are making headway in the face of huge difficulties. How can this be? Verses 13-18 – the situation has meant the good news about Jesus has spread even further, and His followers are feeling emboldened to speak up about Christ.

How has our lockdown meant that the good news of Jesus is made known? Have you experienced new confidence? or fear because of your situation? Share this with someone you trust.

Personal thoughts & reflections

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“what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”

three

Daily Reading:
Philippians 1:19-26

Verse 21 is possibly one of the New Testament's greatest statements! A confession full of ultimate purpose and hope. From here onwards I encourage you to read with the question in mind - "How are we told to live?"

Paul determines to be happy because of Jesus in his life, and because of Christian partnership. He is deeply convinced that life in this dangerous unpredictable world is all about following Jesus' way. To honour Jesus is to magnify Him, to 'make a big deal' of Him in the way we live. And, when it comes time to die, we gain more of Jesus in undisputed eternity! Win Win! So go hard and go early, as they say.

So, to this point, Paul is grateful, happy, determined to make the most of the situation, grateful that he has Christian friends, and expectant that Jesus is in his life, and worth dying for. Which of these are you feeling, and which could you ask God for today?

Personal thoughts & reflections

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*“For to me, to live is
Christ and to die
is gain.”*

A person is sitting on a wooden dock, looking out over a calm lake. The lake reflects the surrounding mountains and trees. The sky is clear and blue. The person is seen from behind, sitting on the end of the dock. The mountains are rugged and rocky, with some greenery at the base. The water is still, creating a clear reflection of the landscape.

“For to me, to live is
Christ and to die
is gain.”

four

Daily Reading:
Philippians 2:4

Writing from his house arrest lockdown and facing possible execution, the Apostle Paul now turns us towards the lifestyle and examples to follow, to live the most joyful Christ-magnifying lives we can. This is what 'citizenship' for Christians is like.

We are urged to stand strong together as a community and face the inevitable opposition our Christianity provokes. Verse 29 states that not only is faith a gift from God, but so is suffering for Christ! This is hard to read, but the word is "graced." When you consider opposition you face because you're a follower of Christ, can you see how God is gracing you?

Then comes God's super-promise to life: Have this mind! (verse 5). Spoken to you-plural, this is a communal instruction for the church: Pursue Jesus' attitude of looking to the interests of others, not grasping after your rights, but humbling yourself and serving others. This is following Jesus, this is the way to joy, this is living.

Personal thoughts & reflections

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*"look not only to
your own interests,
but also to the
interests of others."*



**“look not only
to your own
interests,
but also to the
interests
of others.”**

Going deeper with Matt #1

The Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Philippi is one of the most positive and personal letters in the New Testament. Did you know that Paul is writing from his very own lockdown! He's under house arrest in Rome and facing death or release, depending on a trial he has very little input to (Acts 28). This letter, the Book of Philippians, is written after nearly two years of Paul's 'imprisonment,' so imagine the frustration, fatigue, anxiety he could have felt knowing that any day he could be summonsed and executed!

But this is no anxious appeal letter. From the very first verses we are treated to a thankful, joyful faithful appeal, not for help or sympathy, but to rejoice in Jesus! How does he genuinely turn his predicament from fear and worry to joy and hope?

There are several good reasons for Paul's godly optimism, and today I will focus on just four points early on in the letter.

Our struggles can be a gift.

Paul reminds the Philippians that they are both engaged in a similar conflict (1:30), and in 2020 we are wise to remember the same truths – the world is a mixture of good and evil; bad things happen to good people; and Christians will regularly experience opposition for their views. It is healthy to acknowledge life's struggles, and being Christian is no exemption from them. In fact, verse 29 says that both faith in Christ AND suffering for Christ, are gifts!

Somehow, in God's mysterious way, struggle with opposition can actually be something that grows us and grows the Kingdom of God on earth. A key to this growth is the unity of the body of Christ. The word used for struggle (1:30) meant a place of athletic contest where people gathered to contend for something. It later became a metaphor for any kind of conflict. Paul's intention is surely that we struggle 'together' against all sorts of opponents (1:28). This is a gift: to confront life's challenges, united, side by side with other Christians, in a manner that is Christ magnifying.

Determine to trust God's long-term work.

I love the way Paul says, "I am sure of this..." (1:6). This expression doesn't mean he feels confident 100% of the time. But his determination to trust God is in his heart and therefore on his lips.

"...that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

From this place of resolve Paul can go on to say that what has happened to him (imprisoned and facing death) "has really served to advance the gospel" (1:12).

Whether we are unjustly treated, persecuted for our faith, or struggling with the common evils of life, God's word invites us to trust this incredible promise, that "for those who love God all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28). Not only is the world at work on us, but "it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (2:13).

Though it is very hard to see this in the midst of tough times, let's stand on our convictions and say with Paul "I am sure of this..." God is bringing to completion the good things he began in us.

Follow the example of Jesus' attitude.

Quite possibly one of the greatest instructions in the New Testament is here in 2:5. Various translations put it differently:

- Have the same mindset as Jesus Christ:" (NIV)
- "Think of yourselves the way Jesus thought of himself." (The Message)
- My favourite is the ESV – "Have this mind among yourselves, ..."

Notice how it is 'ourselves' plural who are to have a mind (singular). One of the key secrets to living a joyful, faithful, Christian life in the midst of struggle in the first and the 21st centuries is for a whole community of believers to think like Jesus: take a down-to-earth view of ourselves, and a high view of other people; look after ourselves AND other people; be humble, serve others, and obey God. (2:4-11)

Determine to enjoy Jesus.

When life is hard and the headwinds of opposition are pushing against us, it's understandable that people seek comfort in things. God has given us great pleasures in each other, food, nature, there are all sorts of things in this life to enjoy. But God's promise is that above and beyond all earthly pleasures is the immeasurable joy of belonging to Christ and being saved. As Paul puts it in this letter - life is about enjoying and announcing Jesus, and death is about being with Jesus (1:21). This kind of faith is a win win scenario.

With this conviction he states emphatically "I will rejoice" (1:18, 2:17), and commands us to do the same (2:18; 3:1; 4:4). Following Jesus is worth it! Being with Jesus for eternity is worth all and any discomfort in this life. Can we grasp the wonder of his sacrifice for us? God made himself nothing and took on human form in order to live among us, suffer for us, and pay the price of our sin to secure our eternal wellbeing and pleasure!

For these reasons and a few others, Paul is able to endure a long lockdown, and reach out to those around him with genuine affection and lasting joy.

Take courage.

Matt

five

Daily Reading:
Philippians 2:12-30

Following on from the model of Jesus, the Apostle Paul is now giving us three more people who are examples of faithful, obedient and courageous living. Did you pick them up? Paul's willing sacrificial service for the Philippians (v17), Timothy's service of Paul in need (v20,22), and Epaphroditus who had delivered the original donation to Paul, laboured alongside him, and faced the dangers with Paul of standing firm for Christ in a hostile situation (v25,30).

All of these people were separated from their families and friends and were making do with letters to communicate. Notice the language used to describe what it will be like when these three get face to face again with their loved ones – to be 'cheered' (v19), fulfil a 'longing' (v26), rejoice together (v28). Lockdown and separation confirm that we were made to be together. Take a minute to consider who you long for and who might need cheering up once we get out of lockdown.

Personal thoughts & reflections

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*“for he has been longing
for you all”*

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Daily Reading:
Philippians 3:1-11

Once again, we are told to enjoy belonging to Jesus. Why? because of what follows as Paul’s own testimony. Lockdown can be a time to consider our priorities, and Paul certainly had time during his many months to reflect on his own achievements and consider their value. His conclusion? – no achievements, no physical features, no religious status, no other earthly thing can compare with the confidence and beauty and pleasure of being right with God! Knowing and enjoying the fact that we have a righteousness that Jesus earned and granted to us, is out-of-this-world awesome! So put your faith in Jesus. Enjoy it. Rejoice!

What’s more, knowing Jesus is not a one-off event, or simply a decision. It is a lifelong journey of increasing friendship and closeness. Knowing and getting to know, every day. One on one, and among friends. To live is Christ (1:21), that is to say, real living is getting to know Jesus more and more, following him more and more. Enjoying him more and more. Reflecting his image increasingly...

Personal thoughts & reflections

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“that I may know him.”

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Daily Reading:
Philippians 3:12-21

Paul's lockdown thinking time has confirmed deeply in him that knowing Jesus Christ personally is all that really matters. Knowing, obeying, and enjoying Jesus is what living is all about. So, we are told twice in this reading that Paul's mission is to 'pursue' Jesus (3:12,14). We say to 'go hard' after something is to want it and work hard for it. That is very much how Paul is speaking here – Go hard in a life of closeness with Jesus, toward a goal of eternity with Jesus.

And we are not to do this in our own strength. In one of Paul's other lockdown letters, to the Ephesian church he said this: "And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge... Ephesians 3:17-19

Determination and vision to know Jesus and be with him for ever, these qualities helped Paul through his isolation.

Personal thoughts & reflections

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*"I press on toward
the goal"*

**“I press on
toward
the goal.”**



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Daily Reading:
Philippians 4:1-7

In his closing paragraphs, Paul gives us a model of attitude and practice to pursue the Peace of God in all circumstances. Who wouldn't want to know this? In the face of persecution, isolation, common opposition, and even some internal church disagreements (4:2-3), the wisdom is this (4:4-7): Enjoy Jesus; Be reasonable and patient with everyone; Remember Jesus' return is not far off (in the grand scheme of things); Don't let your concern tip over into pain and anguish; but, worship God in prayer, and ask God for your needs; give thanks for the good you have.

Follow this attitude and lifestyle, and trust God to guard you with an inner peace that is hard to explain. The 'guard' of God's peace could well be a reference back to the ancient Aaronic blessing of Number 6:24-26, where the LORD gave Moses the words of the blessing - "the LORD bless you and keep you." That word 'keep' signifies a powerful sentry (like Paul's Roman guard at the front door!) keeping watch, ensuring there is no unauthorised entry or exit.

Whatever happens in the world as we progress from crisis to post-crisis living, 'May the LORD bless you and keep you.'

Personal thoughts & reflections

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“the peace of God... will guard your hearts and your minds.”

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Daily Reading:
Philippians 4:8-23

Paul finishes off this remarkable letter with a final appeal for readers to adopt and maintain the healthiest Christian thought-life ever. Verse 8 is a banquet of sound thinking. As we saw back on Day 4 from chapter 2:5, it is having this mind (of Christ) that truly glorifies God as we resolve and determine to follow Christ. Following the humility of Jesus, and even the example of the Apostle Paul and others, is the way to experience the God of peace (v.9).

Paul is grateful for the revival of concern for him from the Philippians. What are you grateful for though our lockdown? Family, friends, provision? Have any areas of interest been revived for you as you look out on a hurting and needy world?

May God supply every need of yours, captivate your thinking, and fill you with indescribable peace in this season, and hope for the seasons to come.

Personal thoughts & reflections

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“And the God of peace will be with you.”

Going deeper with Matt #2

Prayer & Peace

The Apostle Paul has endured a long lockdown (approaching two years). He has written several life changing letters to churches including Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and one to Philemon. For obvious reasons, these are called the 'prison epistles,' but it is most likely that Paul is secured in a rented house in Rome (Acts 28:16, 20, 23), guarded by Roman soldiers.

In the first part of the letter Paul gives us his mindset for joy and hope. As we saw in Blog #1, he had every reason to be extremely anxious for his life, but because of his faith and thinking, he was able to turn his fear and worry to joy and hope. The letter to the Philippians is a remarkable call to live a determined and contented life with Christ, even in a dangerous lockdown. Even when facing death.

In the last paragraphs he offers us a prayer discipline for experiencing the peace of God, that can be followed and enjoyed today, in lockdown and always.

In chapter 4:4-7 we are commanded to enjoy the Lord. A strange but wonderful charge. But this is not a "Do it because I said so" command. It is given with a plan, and repeated ("I will say it again: rejoice!" v.4) because happiness is such an important human pursuit, and God is the ultimate and righteous giver of all things good.

"Let your gentleness be evident to all" (V.5) – God's presence empowers us with a reasonableness and self-control that is disarming and gentle. Not that Christians should sacrifice the truth just to be at peace with others, but in our courageous faith we are called to copy a humility that is seen in Jesus unlike any other religious leader ever known.

We are reminded that "The Lord is near," which is clearly a strong motivation for the Apostle Paul as he has previously expressed "we eagerly await a Saviour from heaven" (3:20). This strongly suggests to me that our encouragement is to keep our perspective on eternity, and the relatively short time we are struggling in this life, compared to our eternal life to come. Not to ignore our struggles today, but to keep our eyes on the prize.

Prison, lockdown, illness and isolation all have the potential to raise our anxiety levels significantly. Paul is not banning anxiety or simply telling us to get over it. Concern is a normal human emotion. But this word 'anxiety' refers to the kind of fret and anguish that paralyses a person to inaction. There is no need to be in such a position when you know Christ. The answer? "but in everything, by prayer –" (v.6). This prayer is firstly worship-prayer, combined with genuine expressions of need (petitions). When we combine this kind of praying with thanksgiving for God's provision and promises, we are in the best space to present our requests to God.

The result? A stunning promise from God that when we pivot from anxiety to prayers of worship, petition and thanksgiving, the God of peace (v.9) will give us his peace (v.7). A peace that is hard to imagine and explain, but present none the less, thanks to

"him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us," (Ephesians 3:20)

Even more so than the powerful Roman soldiers at Paul's front door, the peace of God will "guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." I trust the God of peace will keep watch over you this season and always.

Enjoy,
Matt

For more devotional encouragement please visit mattsmissionblog.com also available via febc.nz

