

# Christian Experience

Hamilton Smith.

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The Epistle to the Philippians is the Epistle of Christian experience, for therein is presented in a very touching way the experience of a believer that lives the Christian life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Though written by the Apostle Paul, he does not speak of his apostleship, nor does he address the Philippian Assembly as an Apostle, but as a servant of Jesus Christ. Nor does he speak of gifts and powers that alone belong to an Apostle, but rather of experiences that are possible for every Christian. Thus, as we read the Epistle, each one can say, "This is the experience that is possible for me to enjoy if I live the Christian life in the power of the Holy Spirit."

Moreover, the blessed experiences brought before us, are entirely independent of circumstances, be they bright or sad. When the Apostle wrote the Epistle his circumstances were sorrowful and heart breaking. He, himself, had been a prisoner four years. He knew that within the Christian circle there were some who were taking up the service of the Lord, and preaching Christ, even of envy and strife, supposing to add to his afflictions (Phil. 1: 15, 16); outside the Christian circle there were adversaries plotting for his life (Phil. 1: 28). Such was the state of the Christian profession, that he has to say, "All seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's" (Phil. 2: 21); and the walk of many was so low that, instead of being witnesses to Christ and His work, they had become "enemies of the cross of Christ."

Such were the circumstances: Paul a prisoner; inside the Christian circle envy, strife, and contention; all seeking their own, and many walking as enemies of the cross: outside the Christian circle, adversaries, dogs, and evil workers.

Nevertheless, in the midst of these distressing circumstances the Apostle enjoys the most blessed Christian experience.

He has deep and continual joy in the Lord, and in everything that is of the Lord in the saints (Phil. 3: 1, 3; Phil. 4: 4, 10).

His confidence is unshaken in the Lord. He boasts in Christ Jesus and has no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 1: 6; Phil. 3: 3; Phil. 4: 13).

He is kept in a peace that passeth all understanding (Phil. 4: 7).

His love flows out of the saints and appreciates their love to him (Phil. 1: 8; Phil. 4: 1; Phil. 1:17).

His hope is undimmed as he looks for the Lord Jesus to come from heaven (Phil. 3: 20).

His faith trusts the Lord in whatsoever state he may be found (Phil. 4: 12, 13).

What then is the secret of such blessed experiences in the midst of such distressing circumstances? In one word it is CHRIST. All the experiences that pass before us in the Epistle are the result of a believer having Christ before the soul.

The Apostle sees clearly that Christ is in the presence of God to represent believers; and that believers are left here, for a time, to represent Christ. He sees that Christ is our righteousness before God and the prize at the end of the journey, and he has only Christ before him every step of the way. For him it was Christ, "whether it be by life or death." Having Christ before him he enjoyed all the blessed experiences of which he speaks in the Epistle, and in order that we may enjoy these experiences he sets Christ before us.

Firstly, CHRIST our life (Phil. 1: 20, 21).

Secondly, CHRIST our Pattern (Phil. 2: 5).

Thirdly, CHRIST in glory our Object (Phil. 3: 13, 14).

Fourthly, CHRIST our Hope (Phil. 3: 20, 21).

Fifthly, CHRIST our strength (Phil. 4: 13).

## **1. CHRIST OUR LIFE (Phil. 1: 20, 21).**

In all truth Paul could say, "For me to live is Christ." Christ was all in his life. If he lived it was by Christ and for Christ. If death was his portion, he would die for Christ. Over such a Christian adversaries had no power, Satan no point of attack, and death no terror. The malice of envious brethren could not move him, and the low walk of those who were minding earthly things only drew forth his tears. Self being gone as a motive, insults and desertions called forth no bitterness and rancour; circumstances, however trying, drew forth no complaint. His one object was not to defend or exalt himself, or to decry and belittle others, but, in all circumstances, whether in life or death, to magnify Christ.

## **2. CHRIST OUR PATTERN (Phil. 2: 3-5).**

In the second chapter of the Epistle, Christ is looked at, not as going up to glory, but, as coming down to the cross; and we see the lowly mind that marked Him in every step that led to the cross. Thus Christ, in all the lowly grace of His path from the glory to the cross, is presented as our perfect pattern to produce in us a life of lowly grace.

The flesh in us is vain-glorious; and the effort to exalt self often leads to the belittling of others. This vanity ever leads to strife. So we read of the disciples, "there was a strife among them," because they each wanted to be accounted the greatest (Luke 22: 24). And how often, since that day, the root of strife amongst the people of God has been that someone wanted to be great. But, says the Apostle, "Let nothing be done through strife and vain glory: but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves." We may think this difficult at times, for as one has said, "We may see great vanity or pride in another, and one may be going on really better than this or that person;" but if close to Christ, however comparatively well we may be walking, we shall feel in His presence our own nothingness, and see our brother in Christ, and all that is of Christ in him, rather than his faults. Then it will not be difficult for each to esteem other better than themselves.

The Apostle, then, would have us to be of one mind (v. 2); the one mind that he desires us to have is the lowly mind (v. 3); and the lowly mind has been perfectly set forth in Christ (v. 5). The mind of Christ would deliver us from all the self-importance of the flesh, and lead each to esteem himself the least of all.

We need the mind of Christ if we are to exhibit the lowly grace of Christ. It is possible to affect a lowly manner, and use humble words before men; but, if the grace of Christ is to be seen in us we shall need the lowly mind that was in Christ. Thus the Apostle turns our eyes upon Christ. Devoted saints may help us by their lives, their ministry, and their means, but only Christ can be the perfect pattern for the Christian's walk.

In all His perfect path He was the exact contrast to all that the flesh is. He made Himself of no reputation; the flesh in us would seek to make a reputation for itself, if not in the world, in the religious circle. He took upon Him the form of a servant; but the flesh in us likes to be served. He humbled Himself; the flesh in us likes to exalt itself. He was obedient to the will of another; we like to do our own wills.

In Christ we see the perfect love that made itself nothing in order to serve others. Love delights to serve; self likes to be served, and thinks itself exalted when others are waiting upon it. Walking in the spirit of Christ, vain glory would be gone, and the lowly grace of Christ would be expressed.

Win lowliness of heart, and having won beware;  
And that thou grow not proud of lowliness have care.

### **3. CHRIST OUR OBJECT (Phil. 3: 13, 14).**

If the second chapter has brought Christ before us in His lowly path, as the pattern for our walk, the third chapter presents Christ in glory as the One to whom we are pressing on. God sets before us Christ in glory as the perfect Object of our souls, and tells us that we are called on high to be with Him and like Him. With this bright prospect before us, we can forget the things that are behind, rise above the sorrows of the present, and reach forth to those things that are before.

In the light of the eternal glory that lies before us, present things lose their value, and the sorrows by the way are seen to be but for a moment. Compared with the coming glory the things which are gain in the flesh are counted by the Apostle not only as valueless, but as dung. Having seen their worthlessness, he not only leaves them behind, but, he forgets them. He says, as it were, "They are not worth talking about, even to condemn: I forget them." (v. 13).

Christ had laid hold of Paul for the express purpose of having the Apostle like Him and with Him in the glory, and Paul says, "The one thing I desire is to lay hold of Christ in glory — the prize that awaits me at the end of the journey."

Blessed for all believers to know, young and old, that if we have not yet laid hold of Christ in the glory, Christ has laid hold of us, and He which hath begun a good work will perform it unto the end. No matter how rough the road, how many the trials, how deep the sorrows, how powerful the enemy, Christ will not let us go. He is "able even to subdue all things unto Himself," so will at last have us like Him and with Him in the glory.

And is it so! we shall be like Thy Son,  
Is this the grace which He for us has won?

Father of glory, thought beyond all thought,  
In glory, to His own blest likeness brought.

#### **4. CHRIST OUR HOPE (Phil. 3: 20, 21).**

The Apostle looks up to heaven and sees Christ in the glory, and realises that believers are going to be conformed to the image of His Son in glory. It is possible to walk as He walked and, in this sense to be morally like Christ even now, but, to be conformed to His image we must wait for the coming glory. We are still in these bodies of humiliation, subject to sickness, and want, and exposed to dangers, and death.

How then are we to be delivered from these bodies of humiliation? We look at Christ in heaven and we see we are going to be like Him: our conversation — the home of our affections — is in heaven, and to heaven we look for the change of these bodies. "From whence also," writes the Apostle, "we look for the Lord Jesus Christ, as Saviour who shall transform our body of humiliation into conformity to His body of glory."

Once, He came as Saviour to deliver us from our sins, and judgment, by His death on the cross. A second time He is coming as Saviour to deliver us from these bodies of humiliation.

One thing remains to effect this great change — the coming of Christ. Christ is our hope, and at His coming what we have looked forward to in hope will be accomplished in glory. In the twinkling of an eye we shall be like Christ and with Christ.

One moment here, the next with Thee in bliss,  
Oh, what a glorious prospect, Lord is this!  
Changed in a moment, from the flesh set free,  
Caught up together with Thyself to be.

#### **5. CHRIST OUR STRENGTH (Phil. 4: 12, 13).**

It is blessed to look back and see the grace of Christ in His lowly life. It is blessed to look up, and see Christ in the glory, as the one glorious Object before our souls. It is blessed to look on, and see that Christ is coming to conform us to His image. Nevertheless, as we look around we are faced with the circumstances by the way — prosperous circumstances that may make us careless and self-satisfied, or trying circumstances by which we may be cast down and dissatisfied. How then can we be lifted above our circumstances, be they bright or sad?

To answer this question, the Apostle gives us his own experience. He had known what it was to be in want as well as in prosperity: he had been full, and he had hungered; he had enjoyed plenty and he had suffered need. But in all circumstances he had found his support in Christ. So he could write, "I have strength for all things in Him that giveth me power."

In circumstances of weakness the Lord had said to him, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12: 9). Therefore Paul had learned, in whatsoever state he was, to be content.

That Christ was his strength, was not merely an absolute truth to which he assented, but a truth that he had learned by experience. Through the strength of Christ he was made superior to all

circumstances, be they bright or sad.

We may say Christ can do this for all saints, and it is true. But Paul says, as it were, "He has done it for me, for I have learnt by experience that I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me."

Thus, with Christ before his soul as his life, his Pattern, his Object, his hope, and his strength, the Apostle entered into all the blessed experiences that are proper to a Christian in the power of the Holy Spirit, and this in spite of so much in his circumstances that was sorrowful and heart breaking.

Seeing that Christ remains, and that Christ is the Same (Heb. 1: 11, 12), it is still possible, amidst the gathering gloom of these closing days, for the simplest believer to enjoy this same true Christian experience — this joy in the Lord, confidence in the Lord, peace in the midst of trials, love that flows out to the saints, hope that looks for the coming of Christ, and faith that counts upon His support to lift us above every trial by the way.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
Look full in His wonderful face:  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,  
In the light of His glory and grace.