

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Philippians

Day 1 – Philippians 1:1-6 ‘On to completion’

In June 2020 one of our Sunday services told the story of Jeff Lowe. In 1974 Jeff – a musician in his mid-20s who had recently become a Christian – felt prompted by God to set all 150 Psalms in the bible to music. And so began an epic journey. Over the next 40 or more years he privately composed music and settings for each psalm, and, finally, in January 2020 – 46 years later – the first psalm (number 6) was released publicly. Over the next two years all of the completed psalms will be recorded and released as The Jeff Lowe Psalms Project.

We are all works in progress. Life is a long journey, and whilst we may not dedicate ourselves single-mindedly, as Jeff Lowe did, to one great project, we all have a similar calling: to finish well, to run the race of life as best we can.

As we begin our short series of reflections in the lovely little book of Philippians, it's striking to observe that St Paul – the author of this letter – begins with the end-point in mind. He has much to share with this young church, but where he starts is to remind them that 'God who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.' (v6)

In other words *God finishes what he starts*. Whatever the nature of our journey, whatever our ups and downs in faith, our distractions down side-alleys, our frequent stops for a rest – God will make sure we complete our journey.

This is good news! Not just because we are assured that our journey will not be in vain; but also that we have help. However 'lacking' we may feel, God will make sure that we can cross the finish line and join him in glory.

In February 2021 the nation said goodbye to Captain Tom. His was an inspirational story – and it's worth reflecting for a moment that when he turned 98 just a couple of years previously, how many people would have assumed that his journey was done. But God still had work for him to do – and what work!

We may feel in a dark alley at present, with no clear idea how long the alley is, or when it will get light again. Today, let's take heart from Captain Tom's example – and above all, let's claim this beautiful promise of Scripture: God *always* finishes what he starts. The one who began a good work in us will carry it to completion – in us, and in others. Amen.

Day 2 – Philippians 1:7-11 ‘Wise love’

What are the qualities of love? It’s a good question to ask: love is one of those words that we all think we know, but is very hard to describe. Love is something that is largely caught, not taught: it’s primarily a doing word, rather than a feeling word.

But that’s not the whole story. Love is also a *thinking* word. This is a passage about love, and it begins in much the way you’d expect. Paul tells his dear friends in Philippi – a place which was special to him as it was the first place he visited in Europe, and therefore also the first European church he’d planted – that he has them ‘in his heart’ (v7). He goes further in declaring his love, saying in v8: ‘I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.’ Paul loved the recipients of his letter – something he felt in his heart and had also showed directly to them (see the account of his time there in Acts 16:11-40, where he ran very real dangers to help them in their journey of faith.)

But when he prays for them likewise to be filled with love, he adds a third dimension. Love is not just about doing and feeling, it’s about thinking too: ‘And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.’ (v9) To know God is to love him: in other words, the more we know about God, the more we must love, since God is so beautiful, so amazing, so majestic, what other response could there be?

So knowledge matters – wisdom is precious. But it’s not just about how we relate to God – this wisdom also affects our actions. Our love must have depth of insight, ‘so that you may be able to discern what is best.’ (v10) *Love is also about wise choices.* Two courses of action may present themselves: we need wisdom to choose the most loving. A path of temptation or pressure opens up before us: we need wisdom to discern a helpful way out of it. An opportunity to show the love of Christ arises: we need wisdom to make the most of that opportunity.

Love is the basis of our lives, since God is love and the love of Christ fills us (by His Spirit). But this foundation of love needs wisdom to thrive, to grow, to be most fruitful. This will ultimately be what most produces ‘glory and praise to God’ (v11).

So why not pray Paul’s prayer for yourself and those you love today? And perhaps follow it with this famous prayer of St Richard of Chichester:

Dear Lord, of you three things I pray: to know you more clearly, to love you more dearly, and to follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Day 3 – Philippians 1:12-18 ‘The important thing is....’

We’re all experts in mixed motives. It’s part of being human. We’re a heady mixture of light and darkness, goodness and selfishness. And if we’re honest, even our good deeds usually have a bit of ‘me’ in them.

As a younger adult, I used to feel much more exercised about this than I do now. That’s not to say that I’ve gone soft on selfishness, or that I’m not still trying to purify all the corridors of my life. I still long to become like Christ, truly selfless in love. But I’ve learned to understand the reality of the human condition. To accept it pushes me towards grace, and away from the closet gospel of pride which we call ‘trying harder’. It is *Christ* who sanctifies us, slowly transforming us from the inside out. As we give ourselves to Christ, so we find that his motives and motivations tend to (super)naturally hold more sway in our lives, more powerfully than our human efforts.

Paul faced a similar dilemma in our passage. His imprisonment had left a ‘leadership gap’ which others were trying to fill – for not entirely selfless motives. Some saw it quite openly as a chance to compete with him, or even oppose him (v15,v17). And a less mature leader might have been threatened by that. But the wise old saint – Paul had been in ministry for a good 25 years by this point – kept a calm head because he knew the bigger picture. Even if peoples’ motives were decidedly mixed, Christ was still being preached. And our great God was well able to work regardless – ‘and because of this I rejoice.’

As an Anglican vicar one of the things I promise to uphold are the 39 articles – these define the nature of the Anglican faith. There’s a particularly salient one I’m going to quote in full – bear with the old language, because the point is worth it:

‘Although in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good, and sometimes the evil have chief authority in the Ministration of the Word and Sacraments, yet forasmuch as they do not the same in their own name, but in Christ’s, and do minister by his commission and authority, we may use their Ministry, both in hearing the Word of God, and in receiving of the Sacraments.

‘Neither is the effect of Christ’s ordinance taken away by their wickedness, nor the grace of God’s gifts diminished from such as by faith and rightly do receive the Sacraments ministered unto them; which be effectual, because of Christ’s institution and promise, although they be ministered by evil men.’

In other words, whatever our human limitations (even sinfulness) God can still make effective use the ministry, because *it is Christ’s, not ours*. So a useless or selfish minister can still be used by God because it’s not about them, it’s about God. It’s a direct application of this lovely little passage, and it’s a great encouragement to all of us today.

God can use us because *it’s about God, not us*. He can even use our mixed motives for his glory.

So today, if you do something kind, don’t worry that you enjoyed it, or it made you feel good. God will use it. If you did something good yesterday and then yelled at your children – God used that good thing too. And we can pray for forgiveness and healing for the rest!

The important thing is that we keep trying to do this stuff for God’s glory. Go for it!

Day 4 – Philippians 1:18-26 ‘To live is Christ’

Today’s passage is a special one – for me, at least. It was a lovely surprise to sit down and prepare today’s reflection and read again a verse which has had a huge impact on my life – like seeing an old friend, the time spent together has been nourishing and uplifting. Let me tell you the story behind it.

When I was a teenager I was mugged three times in the street: the last being when I was 17, on the day when I found out I had been offered a place at university. Whilst that piece of news I felt strongly to be God’s encouragement to me after a terrible day, the immediate effect was traumatic. I was afraid to leave the house for a year. I felt weak, vulnerable, easy prey for a society full of potentially dangerous people. Of course I still had to go to school, to the library, to the shops, but every journey was some sort of small victory over the fear and nausea within.

Then one day, 18 months later, everything changed. It was as much a surprise to me as to anyone. I was reading my bible in bed one morning – this very passage. And this verse literally leapt off the page at me: ‘For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.’ Paul was in prison at the time, his life was constantly in danger, but his perspective was so radically different to mine. ‘I’ll just go for it, he says, since even if the worst should happen and I’m killed, well that’s actually the best thing that could happen, as I’ll be with God in glory. *To live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

My attitude to life changed that day. I knew that God was calling me to let go of my fear, to trust him and to start really living again. To seize life every day, and trust God for the rest.

That day became a major turning point in my life. Not that everything was plain sailing after that, or even that I suddenly became fearless – but God had spoken directly to me through a special verse in Scripture, and set my life on a new trajectory. A year later I started doing outreach youth work with the sort of kids who had mugged me. That’s what it means for God to ‘heal the past’.

So this verse has kind of been my life motto for the last 30 years. And although it is particularly special to me, I’ve long felt that it’s a healthy approach for anyone seeking to journey with Jesus. *To live is Christ, to die is gain.*

There are two common objections I’ve encountered along the way: the first is that it encourages a kind of Christian fatalism, thinking too much about death. All I can say is that for me, the effect has been precisely the opposite. To know that my future is secure has, paradoxically, freed me to really *live*. I can seize the present better when I’m not obsessing over my future.

The second is that it sounds trite in difficult times – times like these. To which I would answer: surely we don’t need a lifeboat in calm waters, but in the storm? These verses find their true value exactly in times such as ours. It’s not a magic wand, but it is a firm rock on which to place our feet, and to live hopefully even while so much around us could point us in the opposite direction.

So, I commend it to you! And may it be a verse for your journey, as it is for mine: ‘For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.’ Amen.

Day 5 – Philippians 1:27-2:4 ‘One in spirit’

(Written during the 2021 lockdown...) ‘I’ll be with you in spirit.’ It’s a phrase we often use in conversation, but I confess it’s one I’ve usually been a bit dubious about. It can be cheapened as a sort of cop-out – the sort of thing we might say when the weather forecast’s bad (in England? surely not) and we might say to our friend: ‘I can’t join you today, but I’ll be with you in spirit.’ When what we mean is: ‘I don’t want to get wet and cold like you will be.’ You know the sort of thing I mean.

But during the pandemic, I think this sense of being with someone in spirit has undergone something of a rehabilitation. The imposed restrictions have stopped many of the physical meetings we would otherwise have enjoyed: we are forced to rely on cultivating relationships from a distance. *Never, perhaps, has it been more valuable to be with someone ‘in spirit’.* When we spend time with our family or friends on the phone or on Zoom, and long for their presence, I imagine we might use a phrase like this and really mean it, in a deep, heartfelt way.

In other words, when St. Paul uses a phrase like being ‘one in spirit’ – which he does twice in this short passage – I think we really know what this means much better than we might have done before the pandemic, because we’ve experienced what it’s like to crave community, to long for the chance to stand beside someone. ‘One in spirit’ is not just a soundbite for us anymore, it reflects a reality which we now understand. We’ve learned to form bonds remotely, bonds which are none the less real for being practised at a distance.

The immediate context for the small Christian community in Philippi who received this letter is one of persecution and opposition – this is something that dates back to when Paul was with them (you can read the story in Acts 16:16-34), and presumably the lingering suspicion that Christians were bad news had never left the city. On the surface, it’s very different to what we face in 2021 – but the underlying conditions have certain similarities: we can’t practise community as we’d like, we face an ongoing situation which is much bigger than us and which makes us feel afraid.

And into this situation Paul gives us two practical examples of what it means to be ‘one in spirit’ – first, we stand firm together (v27). We support each other, we look out for each other, we’ve got each others’ backs.

Second, we show tenderness, compassion and humility together (vv1-3). In other words, we practise the same loving lifestyle, trying to live like Jesus the best we can (more on that tomorrow).

One of the unexpected blessings of this season is that we’ve learned to value community like never before. Sometimes it’s only when something is taken away that we really appreciate it. As we look forward to pushing through this crisis and out the other side, let’s hold on to this resolve to be ‘one in spirit’ with our sisters and brothers. Take a moment today to ponder: is there someone you can bless today with a loving word or action, demonstrating our togetherness in spirit?

Day 6 – Philippians 2:5-11 ‘Therefore God exalted him’

What makes someone great? ‘Some are born great; others have greatness thrust upon them,’ so the old saying goes. To which we might also add a combination of some of the following along the path to ‘greatness’: working hard, having a great talent, pursuing ruthless ambition, or just getting lucky.

It’s quite instructive to try and discern definitions of greatness by the people our society values. For example, when children were asked 30 years ago who they most wanted to become when they were older, the top three answers were: a doctor, a teacher and a lawyer. When the same study was carried out in 2015, the answers were: a pop star, an actor, a sportsperson. In other words, we tend to define greatness nowadays by fame or celebrity, or (taking a generous view) by having an enviable talent which gets a lot of media coverage.

However, if we were to ask: ‘how does God define greatness?’ we would get a very different answer, as today’s passage makes clear. Jesus is the being most exalted in all of history: ‘to the highest place,’ as v9 says, with ‘the name that is above every name.’ No-one has been more glorified, and indeed one day, the whole of creation will bow before the Lord Jesus (vv10-11).

But what is Jesus’ qualification, his path to greatness? ‘He made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant... He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross.’ (vv7-8)

The path to greatness is through humility. In God’s economy, it has always been so. God chose Israel, ‘the least of the nations’; and Gideon, hiding in the winepress; and David, the youngest of eight brothers, because of his heart. ‘Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,’ Jesus summarised for his disciples many hundreds of years later (Mark 10:43).

God exalts the humble of heart. Which is good news for us, with our limited talents and obvious flaws. God isn’t interested in promoting those of high birth or great wealth – he simply asks us to follow Jesus as best we can, living a life of humble service, to his glory.

And God *will* glorify it – because it’s not about us, it’s about him. So take heart – in this (and every) humbling season, God can, and will, lift us up. ‘For whoever exalts themselves will be humbled, and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted.’

And may God grant us all grace, humbly and whole-heartedly, to follow our loving Saviour today.
Amen.

Day 7 – Philippians 2:12-18 ‘Continue to work out...’

In the journey of faith, how much is *our* action, and how much is *God’s*?

That’s a question that has exercised minds for as long as the church has been around. Whole schools of theological thought have been based around the answer. Some have laid the emphasis entirely on *God*, to the extent that even our very real efforts are only those that have been essentially caused by our Maker. Others have tended to emphasise the importance of *our* efforts, decrying the thought (implied by extreme versions of the first school) that we are simply stooges for divine activity.

But here in this passage, we get the biblical answer. It is *both*. God works, and we work too. There is a tension in this answer, but the bible doesn’t find it necessary or helpful to reconcile that tension: we simply hold the two together: *God works as we work*.

After the heights of yesterday’s extraordinary verses, how does St Paul encourage us to live? Therefore... ‘continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling’ (our responsibility), ‘for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his purpose’ (God’s responsibility). God works as we work.

Our lives are based on grace, and we must be careful not to make our works our badge of honour, or the means by which we earn God’s favour: but nonetheless there *is* a place for human effort – submitted to God’s will, and through which God’s loving grace and power can be made effective.

The passage continues in a similar vein: ‘do everything without complaining or arguing’ (our self-disciplined actions), so ‘then you will shine like stars’ (God’s empowering), ‘as you hold firmly’ (our action) ‘to the word of life (God’s life-giving power).

God and us – us and God. We don’t initiate the relationship: that’s always God’s loving prerogative. We can’t ‘fix’ it either – that’s God’s wonderful grace. But we can co-operate. We can work to live out our faith, trusting in God’s grace to empower it.

So today, don’t worry about how much is you and how much is God. Live as if it’s fully you. And trust and pray that the effects will be fully God.

And perhaps take a moment to look up this evening. If you’re lucky enough to see a star, give thanks that, by God’s grace, you can shine like one of those, wherever God has placed you.

Day 8 – Philippians 2:19-30 ‘God’s grace in human form’

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

These famous words of St Teresa of Avila are a good way in to our passage for today. I really like these chunks of Paul’s letters, because it reminds us that these are real letters written to real people in real places. Often we can be tempted to treat the letters today as abstract theological essays, or primarily as delivery vehicles for teaching. And there’s nothing wrong, of course, with discerning deep theology or practical teaching – that is part of their great value.

But they are also pieces of communication in time. And at this time – probably early 60s AD – Paul is under house arrest in Rome. He wants to visit his friends in Philippi, but he can’t (and indeed, from this point he never will). Likewise, the church has heard he’s effectively in prison, so they send a trusted church member to visit him. So this short passage is really all about two visits: the most recent visit of Epaphroditus from Philippi to visit Paul in Rome – a visit during which he got very ill and which almost cost him his life – and a return visit from Paul’s best friend Timothy to Philippi instead of the old apostle.

It reminds us that *God’s mercy is often mediated through us* – through real people showing God’s love in practical ways. It’s a practical outworking of what we looked at yesterday – as God works through our work, as we become Christ’s feet and hands and mouth to share God’s love.

We don’t know whether Timothy ever made it to Philippi, or indeed when (or if) Epaphroditus returned to his home church. But these lovely snapshots of community at work make these ancient churches seem very real to us. In our days of doorstep visits to housebound people, the idea of Epaphroditus effectively the doing the same over a long distance to Paul really makes a connection. Equally Paul is able to bless others from his home by communicating through letters. *It all counts.* We all get to show God’s grace in human form.

So today, take heart – whatever our circumstances at present, the same forms of blessing are at work, the same connections are being made – and God is still being glorified through it. We are still the body of Christ!

Day 9 – Philippians 3:1-11 ‘That I may gain Christ’

One of our kids’ favourite TV programmes of a few years ago was the brilliant series ‘Horrible Histories’ – indeed one year, it was the theme of choice for Amelie’s birthday party. As someone who took history as his degree subject, I loved the way it made the past accessible, without shying away from the reality of what life was like.

One of the highlights of the show were the songs: and one of our favourites related to the ‘Gorgeous Georgians’: it featured the four kings singing ‘Born to rule over you’ (Georges 4, 3, 1... and 2!).

We may chuckle – and the series was always very funny – but not that much has changed in the two hundred years since. Today 65% of our judges (10 times the national average) and almost 30% of our current MPs (4 times) had private school education – and these are figures published by gov.uk, the government’s own website. There is still a type of upbringing which open doors into adult success – a ‘ruling class’ which still forms the bulk of our authority figures today.

St Paul himself was from just such a background. He had the equivalent of a private school and Oxbridge education, culminating in an apprenticeship with Gamaliel the famous rabbi (mentioned in the bible in Acts 5:34). No doubt it was this background that partly opened the doors for him to become a leading persecutor of early Christians. In other words, he was a powerful man, tipped for greatness in his culture. Now writing Philippians as an old man, he looks back on this in vv4-6, describing all the human advantages he enjoyed in building his early religious career and reputation.

BUT... and this is one of the great ‘buts’ in the bible – BUT all that means nothing to him now: ‘whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ’ (v7)

One of the great truths of the gospel is that *we are all equal before God*. Indeed, our human advantages might in fact get in the way, cultivating a pride and self-reliance which prevents us receiving God’s grace. It certainly did for the young Paul, who saw these grace-filled believers as a great threat to the traditions he held dear, and the laws that governed his lifestyle.

By God’s grace, Paul was transformed from the inside out: he understood that it was God’s grace that saved him, not his external righteousness; and he learnt a new way to live, surrendering completely to Christ, and allowing his lifestyle to be directed by the pattern of Christ’s self-giving love. Everything else was ‘garbage’ (strong word, but it is the literal meaning in v8) compared to the ‘surpassing greatness (or worth) of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord’.

We may have had a privileged upbringing – or a very ordinary one. It doesn’t matter. *We all matter equally to God. Christ’s love is for all of us, and we all have direct access to it.* Christ’s grace is sufficient to save each of us, and his Spirit dwells in our hearts, regardless of background, age, gender, ethnicity or anything else.

What matters is Christ. And may that glorious Christ dwell by faith in each of our hearts today. Amen, thank you Lord.

Day 10 – Philippians 3:12-16 ‘I press on’

How do we deal with past mistakes and sins in our lives? We all carry things we regret: some big, some small, but all things which nag away at us. As far as possible we try to put them right: but there are things we can't change. A moment when we had the chance to help someone and we didn't; a relationship that ended badly and we no longer have any contact with the person; a harsh word we have apologised for but we can't un-say.

Paul knew what this was like, perhaps far more than we ever can. Paul's mistakes were huge: people were killed, imprisoned, terrorised. Some of what he did can never be un-done. How does he live with the knowledge that he was responsible for these things?

Interestingly, reading all of his letters, it's clear that he never totally forgets what his past was like. Even writing to his friend Timothy in a letter of a similar date to this one, he still refers to himself as 'the worst of sinners' (1 Timothy 1:15).

But what changes profoundly is that *he no longer allows his past to determine his present and future*. Through his ministry he's done all he can to 'atone' for the past, but ultimately what he does now is the only thing he can do, which is to dedicate himself fully to living flat out for Jesus in the here and now: 'I press on,' he says, 'to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.' (v12)

It's not that past doesn't matter. But it doesn't direct our present. The good news of Jesus insists that we have been forgiven, that the cross has *already* borne the punishment that our sin and selfishness deserves. If God says we are forgiven, then we are forgiven! We remain works in progress – Paul is very clear on that in verses 12 and 13 – but we press on towards the goal of our faith: to be united with Christ, and to enjoy life with him forever.

So mentally, Paul lets go of what lies behind, and strains towards what is ahead (v14), and says that this is the mature – i.e. the most productive – way to live (v15). This is how he lives with ongoing energy and purpose.

So, my friends, let's take Paul's advice. Let's press on, let's not allow the past to define our present or our future, let's believe that we are forgiven, and live as free people – freed by Christ eternally. Let's remember that this is God's calling for us, and he will complete it (1:6). If the past has been troubling you recently, turn it back to God and release it him. Claim the truths of scripture – what God thinks about you is what really matters!

And may that empower our lives to overflow with gratitude, and to radiate the love of the God who calls us heavenwards.

Day 11 – Philippians 3:17-4:3 ‘Citizens of heaven’

Citizenship has been much in the news in recent years. The debates over our relationship with Europe have thrown up deep questions about who we are, and who we belong to. As Britain left the EU, it’s noteworthy that it was felt necessary to change the colour of our passports. It’s somewhat ironic that the powers that be decided to abandon the red colour (despite it also being one of our national colours) in favour of blue and gold, the colours of the EU flag!

That makes me chuckle, but it reflects the innate, deep desire to identify as citizens of *something*. This principle matters in the spiritual life too. The consistent teaching the New Testament is that when we come to Christ, we effectively have a dual citizenship: we are no longer just citizens of this earth, *we are also citizens of the kingdom of heaven*. You might say that we have two passports, and the new one is more important, as today’s passage makes clear: when reflecting on how to live in human society, Paul reminds us that ‘our citizenship is in heaven’ (v20).

But what does that look like? Paul gives us three useful tips today. First, we need the right models. Paul draws a striking contrast between two cultures in verses 17-19: those who live to gratify their mortal desires, and those who live for Christ. It’s not that we live a disembodied life: some have wrongly taken this passage to mean that all things of this earth are bad, missing the awkward fact that we worship a Saviour who quite clearly enjoyed a party.

Rather, it’s about what we value, who we worship. ‘Their god is their stomach,’ reflects Paul about the people he is critiquing. We are to enjoy the goodness of the earth without being enslaved to it. Material pleasures are good servants but lousy masters.

Which brings us to the second tip: we need the right master – in this case: ‘the Lord Jesus Christ’ (v20) who is the one with the real power ‘to transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.’ (v21) The inner transformation we crave is only possible through the loving and life-giving power of Jesus.

Finally, we need the right mindset: Paul at the start of chapter 4 refers to an argument between two church members which was obviously causing distress to the rest of the church family. He pleads for them to be ‘of the same mind’ (v2). Whilst we will never agree with everyone about everything, we need to value unity as part of our lifestyle: what unites us is always more than what divides us.

So today, may God grant us grace to ‘stand firm’ (v1), living as citizens of heaven. Perhaps now is the time to renew a commitment to the right models; or to seek the master again for continuing transformation; or to practise unity. How will you carry your new (eternal) passport today?

Day 12 – Philippians 4:4-9 ‘In Christ’

I love a good preposition. They’re the small and apparently insignificant words that hold our language together. We may give all our attention to the Proper Nouns and high-impact verbs – but it’s the little guys that hold it all together. The words that no-one notices: with, to, of, by, and so on.

This may sound surprising, but prepositions matter in the biblical text, too. If I was to ask you *how* you relate to Jesus, what would you say? Many of us would use the word ‘to’: for example, ‘I’ve come *to* Jesus.’ Others might use the word ‘for’: such as, ‘I live my life *for* Jesus’.

Other examples which might come to mind are ‘under’ (everything under Jesus’ rule), ‘before’ (we will all come before Jesus) or even, sadly in some cases, ‘against’.

But there’s a very important little word which doesn’t get as much attention, but is perhaps more important than all of these: and that’s the word ‘in’. If we are followers of Jesus, we are *in Christ*. That is the way the New Testament talks about it. Not just that Christ is in us (although he is, by his Spirit), but that *we are in Christ*.

Once you start looking, you’ll see this small but massively significant phrase everywhere. For example, just flick through the first half of the first chapter of Ephesians and you’ll see it quietly dominates the text – in Greek it’s the word *en*, and it’s used no less than *11 times* in the first 15 verses alone: ‘faithful in Christ’ (v1), ‘every spiritual blessing in Christ’ (v3), ‘chosen in Christ’ (v4), ‘redeemed in Christ’ (v7), ‘purposed in Christ’ (v9), ‘all things in Christ’ (translated ‘under’ in modern translations, but the word is *en*) (v10), ‘chosen in Christ’ (again, v11), ‘hope in Christ’ (v12), ‘included in Christ’ (v13), ‘marked/sealed in Christ’ (v14), ‘faith in Christ’ (v15).

Interestingly, although we talk a lot about ‘faith in Jesus’, that’s only the last of these 11 mentions. *To be in Christ also brings us all these other fantastic realities*: being chosen, having hope, purpose, assurance (‘sealed’), every spiritual blessing... the list goes on. And it’s all *in Christ*.

Today’s little passage is one of many people’s favourites. And there is so much to treasure, so many famous verses to be encouraged by: ‘Rejoice...’, ‘Do not be anxious...’, ‘the peace of God that passes understanding...’, ‘Whatever is lovely or admirable...’, ‘the God of peace will be with you.’

There’s so much to feast on, and I pray that your eyes are drawn to whatever you most need to hear today. But let’s not miss this little word ‘in’. We rejoice *in* the Lord (v4). The peace of God guards our hearts and minds *in Christ* (v7).

We receive all these blessings – peace, joy, answers to prayer – *in Christ*. It is our fundamental reality as followers of Jesus. We inhabit a new and life-giving reality, that of being *in Christ*, the author of life, who imparts his life and love to us. Wow!

So don’t miss the little words in these beautiful scriptures – they might just mean the world to you. And may God, in whom we live and move and have our being, grant us more of that life and love *in Christ* today. Amen.

Day 13 – Philippians 4:10-23 ‘All this through him’

In the long winter months we need a bit of enjoyable nonsense on the telly. Hard hitting dramas are for the bright days of summer – in the winter we tend to prefer escapism. For us, one of our ‘go to’ programmes in January and February has long been ‘Death in Paradise’. And yes, the characters are paper thin, and the one-liners pretty weak, but that’s not really the point, is it? The show is really all about the location – and who doesn’t want to live in that shack on the beach? – and the Agatha Christie-style puzzle to solve, complete with convenient assembly of the main characters at the end.

The show works to a fairly consistent formula, but the grand denouement always hinges on one revelation. The lead detective has a sudden insight, and immediately everything else falls into place – every piece of info, every motive, and the all-important whodunnit. One clue unlocks all things.

As this wonderful letter to the church in Philippi draws to a close, St Paul talks about his personal circumstances. He thanks the Philippians for their generosity towards him – the only church for a season to do so (v15). But he also shares what he calls the ‘secret of contentment’ (v12), regardless of circumstances. ‘I can do all this through him who gives me strength.’ (v13)

This is one of the best-loved verses in the bible, and it is often misquoted as a formula to achieve the impossible. But the context here is different, it’s about being content in all circumstances. Paul happens to be poor at present, but he gives the same advice to anyone who has plenty as well: and that is *to find our joy, our satisfaction in Christ*. The key to life is to trust in God’s goodness and God’s provision. With those in place, we are equipped for whatever life throws at us.

But it struck me that this phrase – ‘all this through him’ – is one that could equally be applied to everything we’ve learnt in this wonderful little book. Just as one clue unlocks all things in the detective show, so *one person – Christ – unlocks all things in the spiritual life*.

As we’ve journeyed through the letter, we’ve seen how, in and through Christ: God will bring all things to completion, including our spiritual journeys (1:6); God will deepen our love with wisdom (1:9-11); God is able to bring fruit even from mixed motives (1:15-18); God is able to sustain us in life and save us in death (1:21); God is able to exalt those who humble themselves (2:9), and work in us to act according to his will (2:13); God enables us to shine like stars (2:15); God grants us his resurrection power (3:10); God will transform us as citizens of heaven (3:20-21); God will grant us the peace that passes understanding (4:7).

All things through Jesus. That’s a pretty good summary, not just of the letter, but of our spiritual lives in general. It’s all Christ. And, as the letter closes, Paul reaffirms that this glorious God will continue to meet our needs (4:19) and supply us with his grace (4:23).

And so, may God grant us all grace to know ever more deeply that we have all things through Jesus. And may that cause love and gratitude to overflow in our lives, day by day. Amen.