

LIVING THE LIFE OF DOGS (WARNINGS ABOUT DOGS)

Philippians 3:1-2

By Dub McClish

Introduction

When compared to the Corinthian epistles or to the respective letters to the Galatians, Timothy, or Titus, the letter to the Philippians is written in mild terms. The reason for this is not hard to discover. There were severe, catastrophic problems threatening the very existence of the churches involved in the aforementioned letters, and Paul had to meet those problems directly, forcefully, and immediately. The Philippian church was apparently free of such major problems, and Paul was therefore able to spend much of his letter to them commending their faithfulness and giving them rather general exhortations. There is at least one explosion of forceful terminology in Philippians, however, and it is in the passage before us. It stands out even more forcefully than it might otherwise because it is in such bold contrast with the generally mild tone of the epistle otherwise. I will first present an exegesis of the text, followed by some applications to current conditions in the church.

Exegesis of the Text

"Finally, my brethren..."

Some commentators are quick to jump to strange conclusions when they see the word *finally* in this text. Some say that it shows that Paul was rather aimless in what he was writing, intending to end the letter at this point, but kept digressing to various subjects.¹ Others take *finally* as a signal that the section between 3:1 and 4:8 (where Paul uses *finally* a second time) is from a second mysterious, lost epistle (except for this portion, of course), which was combined with another complete letter.² The Greek phrase (*to loipon*) translated *finally*, literally means "as for the rest." Although Paul sometimes used it as a signal that he is planning to draw his words to a close (as perhaps in 4:8), he is by no means consistent in this use of it.

Robertson's insight is helpful:

But Paul uses the idiom elsewhere also as in I Corinthians 7:29 and I Thessalonians 4:1 before the close of the letter is in sight. It is wholly needless to understand Paul as about to finish and then suddenly changing his mind like some preachers who announce the end a half dozen times.³

Wuest suggests that the idea of the Greek phrase is of "something left over."⁴ In other words, after Paul had discussed things pertaining to internal matters in the church in the first two chapters, he then used this phrase to introduce a threat from without.

"Rejoice in the Lord"

From the beginning of this letter, Paul has expressed the attitude and emotion of joy, in spite of the fact that he was in prison at the time he wrote (1:13). Not only did he rejoice, but he urged all of his brethren to rejoice, as well. In spite of the suffering, pain, toil, and tears suffered for Christ, Paul never became cynical or embittered. His remarkable spirit provides the example for every Christian that the consistent approach to life should be one of gratitude and joy.

The foundation of the unique joy of the Christian life is Christ—we rejoice "in the Lord"! It matters not how much money one has, how many privileges or powers are his, whom one knows, or what one knows, if he is not "in the Lord" (i.e., a Christian, a member of the church of Christ), he can never know true rejoicing.

Contrariwise, although one is impoverished and persecuted and a fool in the eyes of the world, if he is "in Christ" he knows a joy beyond description. Indeed, the "brother of low degree" is able to "glory in his high estate" as a Christian (Jam. 1:9). How essential and blessed it is to be "in the Lord"! In Him are all spiritual blessings (Eph. 1:3). How tragic it is that the vast majority of professed believers in Christ and His Word have taken an adamant position against the very act chosen by Deity upon which one comes into Christ and His church, namely immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 6:3–4; Gal. 3:27).

"To write the same things to you..."

In these words Paul indicated that he had taught the Philippians before on the subject he was about to introduce once more. He admittedly was repetitious in the warning he was about to issue and he did not apologize for covering the same ground once more. The next phrase gives his rationale for the repetition.

"To me indeed is not irksome, but for you it is safe"

Paul did not mind repeating a message, especially one that was necessary to their spiritual safety. Here we see the patience of the apostle in tirelessly covering ground that he had already covered. He used repetition, the time-honored tool of educators, to keep the brethren safe (literally, to keep them from reeling or tottering). Robert Taylor correctly points out that inspiration often makes use of this educational principle:

Deuteronomy is a rehearsal of Sinaitic statutes. Much is repeated in the historical books of 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. There is repetition among the synoptics—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Peter is thrice interrogated relative to his feelings for the now Risen Redeemer (John 21:15–17). Peter employed repetition (2 Pet. 1:12ff). The charge to hear with the ear the Spirit's message is repeated again and again by the Christ in Revelation, chapters 2 and 3.⁵

It is my studied conviction that the variations between the synoptic accounts of the details of some of the parables and other illustrations of the Lord, as well as the variant occasions and times at which the Lord used similar statements and illustrations, are most naturally understood as repetitive teaching presented in various places and to various audiences. The Lord varied some details of his illustrations from time to time to fit particular audiences and occasions. All such occurrences are therefore complementary rather than contradictory. Paul's use of repetition to the Philippians was not at all unusual when compared with other Scripture.

"Beware of the dogs"

This is the first of a triplet of warnings. The thrice-repeated word, *beware*, lends emphasis to the dangers of which those brethren were being warned. The ones of whom they were to beware are one group, referred to by three different terms. The "dogs" were not literal four-legged animals, but human beings who were behaving as dogs. It becomes apparent when one reads the second and third warnings in this series that the "dogs" were the Jews who had been baptized and who were determined to force Gentiles who would be saved to keep the law of Moses, especially circumcision.

There is irony in Paul's application of "dogs" to Jews. To the Jews, dogs were despised and unclean animals. The Gentiles were "dogs" in the eyes of the Jews. Paul took their term of derision and turned it back on them. There were several ways in which those infamous Judaizers were like dogs. They were constantly "barking" out their false doctrine. They "hounded" Paul from city to city, persistently spreading their heresy. Like rabid dogs, they constantly attacked the body of Christ, biting and devouring all they could. Also like rabid dogs, their bite was poisonous, destructive, and spiritually fatal if allowed to go unopposed. The apostle could hardly have used a stronger or more odious term to describe those false teachers. They needed to be described in just such terms so that none of the Philippians could mistake the significance of the warning.

"Beware of the evil workers"

The Jews were noted for their zeal, even their fanatical zeal. The Lord observed that the scribes and Pharisees compassed sea and land to make one proselyte (Mat. 23:15). Paul

remarked that his countrymen had a zeal for God (Rom. 10:2). In both passages just mentioned the zeal of the Jews was condemned as misdirected. When one reads of the indefatigable way the Judaizing teachers worked to impose the law of Moses on the church of Christ, we do not wonder that Paul called them "workers."

Lamentably, they were **evil** workers. There is apparently no hesitation on the part of the apostle to so describe the work of those false teachers. They were a corrupt tree that could produce nought but corrupt fruit (Mat. 7:17–18). They were sowing to the flesh, of which they could but reap corruption (Gal. 6:8). To pretend or wish that the work of these men was not destructive, false, and evil would not change the fact that it was. How wonderful it would be if all who are zealous in religion could be commended and encouraged because they were zealous in truth rather than error! However, it was not so in ancient times and it certainly is not so now. When one is involved in error, his zeal simply makes him a more destructive tool in the devil's hand. The false teachers of whom Paul warned the Philippians, as all false teachers, must never be ignored or tolerated. Regardless of how kind, jovial, well known, and likable they may be, how many good works they may seem to do or how zealous they are, false teachers are still "evil workers" and they must be correctly identified as such.

"Beware of the concision"

In this third warning Paul made specific identification of the "dogs" and "evil- workers." "Concision" is the translation of a term that means to make an incision, to mutilate by cutting the flesh. This is the only occurrence of this word in the New Testament. Paul used this term with biting sarcasm and irony to refer to those Jews (thus the circumcised ones) who had been baptized, but who insisted that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). He refused to call them "circumcised" here, however, but rather made a play on words to indicate that they were not the true "circumcision."

What they were insisting upon as a condition of salvation (the old fleshly rite of circumcision) was a mere fleshly incision, mutilation, or cutting of the flesh. It was rendered so by the death of Christ (Col. 2:14) and had absolutely nothing to do with salvation through Christ. Those false teachers thought they were preaching circumcision, but actually (as far as any spiritual value was concerned) they were only preaching flesh cutting or mutilation. By calling them the "concision" Paul boldly exposes the utter vanity of their contention. By use of this exceptionally strong and biting term, Paul once more underscored the falseness and evil of those teachers.

It seems apparent that the work of those false teachers had not had a serious effect upon the Philippian saints at the time Paul wrote. Paul did not write words that indicated they were already moving away from the Gospel through the influence of the circumcision sect, as he did to the Galatians (Gal. 1:6). He wrote to tell them to watch for the Judaizers so as to avoid them. Like the readers of Peter's first letter, the Philippians were to be "sober" and "watchful" lest they be devoured by the doctrine of those servants of the devil (1 Pet. 5:8). It would appear that Paul anticipated the arrival of these evil men in Philippi and urged the brethren to prepare a "welcoming party" for them.

Applications of the Text

One of the powerful evidences of the inspiration of the words of the Bible is not only their timeliness for their original recipients, but for their timelessness—they are ever applicable and never obsolete.

The joy of being a Christian

Paul wrote in this letter of his own joy and he exhorted the Philippian brethren to rejoice numerous times. Not only is this a prominent theme of this epistle, but the kindred element of gratitude is often mentioned as well. Closely related to gratitude and the joy produced by it are the elements of freedom from anxiety, the "peace of God, which passeth all understanding" and contentment regardless of one's circumstances (Phi. 4:6–7, 10–13).

These are all beautiful qualities that all admire, and the Christian ought to be clothed with them if anyone is. Paul was in prison when he wrote, but still he was not complaining or wringing his hands in worry and fretfulness. Rather, he rejoiced, gave thanks and enjoyed peace. It is not sinful for one to become discouraged and grieved to tears at times. God's great men of old, including His Son, have sometimes been overwhelmed by such emotions. There are many things about which many saints ought to be shedding tears, but about which they are totally unconcerned. However, discouragement and grief must not be allowed to dominate us and become our constant state of mind.

To "rejoice in the Lord" does not mean that one is to paste a fake smile on his face and walk around like a zombie. However, Christians should likewise guard against being perpetual sour-pusses and turning into cynics. We have the means of maintaining a constant level of joy that springs from our gratitude to God and His Son for all of the blessings that are ours in the eternal kingdom (Eph. 1:3). In spite of all of the evils and false doctrines in the world and among the brethren, let us be a people of calm, serene joy.

The place of repetition in our teaching

All effective teachers have realized that repetition is a fundamental principle of learning. The human brain is somewhat like a blank phonograph record that learns and records information to which it is exposed. The more frequent the exposure, the deeper the "groove" is cut in one's memory. This was most surely understood by the Holy Spirit as evidenced by the numerous lessons, principles, and incidents that are recorded more than one time in Holy Writ.

We need to frequently repeat how essential repetition is in learning God's revealed Truth. We who are preachers sometimes forget the importance of repetition. If we are not careful we can forget to review the frequency of our preaching on certain fundamental themes that are necessary if the church is to remain pure and distinctive. It is easy to think that since we have preached on a certain subject or exposed a given false doctrine in a sermon or a series of sermons or classes, those matters need not be dealt with again. However, there are at least three good reasons this is not so: (1) We have the example of inspired men who kept repeating God's message—they must have had good reason for doing so, (2) there will always be those among our hearers who did not understand and/or who were not present when we dealt earlier with a given subject, and (3) there will always be the need to reinforce what even mature brethren have already understood and learned.

It is my conviction that many of the serious doctrinal problems now plaguing the church of the Lord can be traced to a failure to follow the cardinal rule of the necessity of repetition. When the great division of 1906 occurred, principally over the use of instrumental music in worship, it seems that many of those who faithfully stood for the Truth assumed that this issue had been so thoroughly discussed and the lack of authority for the instrument so fully proved that this would never again trouble the Lord's people. This confidence led to negligence in preaching and teaching on this subject for a long period of time. The results have been predictable—there is now a large element within the church that sees nothing wrong with the instrument. Furthermore, these brethren do not want to hear what is wrong with the instrument and they are campaigning for unity with those who divided the church over it and who still use it without apology or repentance.

The same things are generally true about the rise of Neo-Pentecostalism, premillennialism, Calvinism, theistic evolution, marriage-divorce-remarriage errors, fellowship errors and other issues that presently trouble the body of Christ. There are some congregations that have not heard a strong sermon that definitively preached the Truth and exposed the error related to such subjects in years, perhaps in decades in some cases.

Some elders and preachers did not intentionally avoid these fundamental subjects, but simply did not keep up with what was being taught and not taught in their respective local congregations. It is evident, however, that some preachers and elders (I say it to their shame!) have **intentionally** avoided these important themes. Some have engaged in this willful neglect because such subjects were considered "offensive" to outsiders and "legalistic" and/or "unpopular" with some of the high-society types within the church. Others neglected these themes because they counted them relatively unimportant in their misguided zeal to speak only in "positive" terms ("love," "peace," "kindness," "unity," "tolerance," "forbearance," etc., of course, as they would define them). I do not argue that the latter themes (**Scripturally** defined) should not be taught, for such would constitute imbalance in the opposite direction. The words of the Lord to the scribes and Pharisees come to mind: "but these ye ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone" (Mat. 23:23). Surely, none will be so naive as to deny that "doctrinal" (yea, "Bible" preaching) is foreign to many of our pulpits anymore, and has been for a long time in several cases.

Many have gone for so long without hearing a real Bible sermon that demands some kind of conviction or decision of its hearers that when they do hear one they think it is false doctrine and are ready to stone the preacher. Lamentably, many souls have been lost because of weak and unbalanced preaching and we shall never reclaim them. What can we do to salvage as many as possible? (1) Elders must insist that preachers preach on the great doctrinal themes and issues. If their preacher will not do it they should send him on his way and find one who will help them feed the flock a balanced diet.

(2) Preachers need to review continually the subjects on which they have preached, taught, and written in the church bulletin. Some might be surprised how long it has been since they preached on acceptable worship, premillennialism, the Holy Spirit, the identity of the church, baptism, marriage-divorce-remarriage, the significance of the silence of Scripture, the inspiration of the Word of God, and other such essential themes. Moreover, if a preacher has been in a place two or three years and has only touched on these matters once, it's time to preach on them again. (3) Besides using the local church bulletin as a teaching tool, every congregation should subscribe to at least one reliable Gospel paper for the entire membership to keep repeating and reinforcing the great truths in their minds. If individuals are left to subscribe on their own, inevitably, those who most need the material will not get it.

(4) Elders and preachers should encourage brethren to buy good books and read them. Books such as this one and others like it will further reinforce and confirm what faithful teachers

and preachers are delivering. Preachers and elders who object to making good books readily available to church members (perhaps in the foyer of the church building) with appropriate announcements concerning them and encouragement to purchase them are lacking in vision. Further, they are an enigma. On the one hand, they desire brethren to grow and mature in the faith, but they withhold one of the finest sources of that growth—good books!

(5) Gospel preachers should very deliberately fill their sermons in Gospel meetings with fundamental doctrinal subjects, for the sake of both members and non-members alike. Many of the efforts now being styled "Gospel meetings" are just about all "meetings" with very little "Gospel" in them! We need a great revival of preaching on the old themes that make the Lord's church distinctive. All of the aforementioned suggestions have one thing in common: the need for and the power of repetition in our teaching. I repeat: **We must repeat and keep on repeating the grand themes of God's Word!**

The appropriateness of warnings

Warnings about spiritual dangers are appropriate or the Bible would not be so full of them. Notice the following necessities relating to warnings concerning false doctrines and their purveyors: (1) There is a need to issue such warnings as a preventive measure. Preventive medicine and/or treatment is the best kind and usually the least painful. While no righteous person rejoices in the news of a brother, a school, or an entire congregation that has abandoned the Truth, it is better to be warned of such than to be led astray by such through ignorance and/or innocence. Appropriate and timely warnings of men gone astray and of what they are teaching (whether within or without) are a necessary preventative measure. By sounding forth warnings of the errors being circulated many brethren can be fortified and prepared for meeting them. This is what Paul did in his three-fold "beware" of our text.

(2) Warnings are also needed to cure problems that have already developed from false teaching. Paul did not get the warnings about the evil workers to the Galatians in time to prevent grievous problems from occurring, but he did not hesitate to sound forth the warnings of the follies and consequences of succumbing to the false teachers although they had done their dirty work. Ignoring them can never cure problems caused by false doctrine. The sources as well as the errors of the heresies must be exposed by due warnings concerning them if any of those ensnared by them are to be rescued.

(3) When warnings are given they must be in such terms that those who hear may recognize and identify the source of the danger. Otherwise, the warnings are worthless. Paul used great plainness in the warnings of our text, identifying the "dogs" and the "evil workers" as

the Judaizing teachers. He was even more specific when he warned Timothy to shun Hymenaeus and Philetus because their doctrine (that the resurrection was already past) was erroneous and cancerous and had already corrupted some (2 Tim. 2:16–18). We are commanded to mark those who cause division through false doctrine so as to identify them, and warn others of them (Rom. 16:17). We should always take great care not to slander or falsely accuse others, nor should anyone want to defame another person or institution unnecessarily for any reason. However, when souls are at stake we are derelict in our duty if we do not sound the warnings plainly, including calling the names of men, institutions, or congregations where necessary. May all of our warnings be issued from a broken heart full of love for the sinner, but even more for the Lord and His Word.

(4) There is the need to hear and act upon the warnings. We live in a strange time in church history when even the elect have come under the influence of so much human philosophy that they do not want to hear the warnings upon which the salvation of their very souls depends. Because of such shallow thinking, brethren are critical of preachers, churches, or publications that are "issue-oriented," in their opinion. Some members of the church are hyper-sensitive to any exposure or identity of a false teacher or his doctrine, regardless of how destructive it may be. Others will come right out and tell you that they do not want to hear about any "problems."

However, the admonitions are frequent that we hear reliable spiritual warnings so as to act upon them and thereby avoid many dangers. The Lord wrote seven letters to as many churches, issuing many warnings designed to save their souls (Rev. 2–3). At the conclusion of each letter he urged, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, et al.). Many preachers take pride in not keeping up with "the issues," as if doing so is somehow unspiritual or tainted activity. Such things were not "irksome" to Paul, but they are to these preachers! Few elderships in my acquaintance are careful to stay abreast of what is being taught and who is teaching it throughout the brotherhood. Preachers and elders who are wise will stay informed themselves and will keep their respective congregations informed. Not all will listen with appreciation, but all need to hear the warnings anyway. Paul wrote the warnings in our passage (and in many others) because he knew brethren needed to hear them for their own spiritual safety.

Conclusion

Let children of God ever rejoice in their high calling in Christ Jesus, in spite of trials and temptations and even the "dogs" among the flock. Let us ever be alert to the spiritual dangers

lurking about us so that we may expose them and warn others about them, thereby saving ourselves and those whom we may warn.

Endnotes

1. Ralph P. Martin, *The Epistle of Paul To the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1983), p. 134.
2. Pat Edwin Harrell, *The Letter of Paul To the Philippians* (Austin, TX: R. B. Sweet Co., Inc., 1969), p. III.
3. Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures In the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1931), v. iv, p. 451.
4. Kenneth S. Wuest, *Philippians in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956), p. 86.
5. Robert R. Taylor, Jr., *Studies in Galatians and Philippians* (Ripley, TN: Taylor Publications, 1986), p. 145.

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