

NT Lesson #40

I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST

(Philippians; Colossians; Philemon)

by Ted L. Gibbons

“Indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul. . .” This phrase from the 13th Article of Faith suggests a link between the members of the Church and Paul’s writings. That link is found in Philippians 4:8.

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

Joseph, in the midst of his trials and persecutions—indeed, from the beginning of his ministry, identified with Paul. Paul’s defense of his vision and conversion before Agrippa and others must have reminded Joseph of his constant need to defend himself before his detractors. He wrote

However, it was nevertheless a fact that I had beheld a vision. I have thought since, that I felt much like Paul, when he made his defense before King Agrippa, and related the account of the vision he had when he saw a light, and heard a voice; but still there were but few who believed him; some said he was dishonest, others said he was mad; and he was ridiculed and reviled. But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision. He had seen a vision, he knew he had, and all the persecution under heaven could not make it otherwise; and though they should persecute him unto death, yet he knew, and would know to his latest breath, that he had both seen a light and heard a voice speaking unto him, and all the world could not make him think or believe otherwise. So it was with me. . . . (JSH 1:24,25)

It was probably more than the similarity of conversion and the divine mandate to bear testimony that made Joseph identify with Paul. Part of that intimacy must have come from the parallel determination to do the will of God regardless of the personal hazard or difficulty involved. It was Paul (but might as well have been Joseph Smith) who wrote

13 I can do *all things* through Christ which strengtheneth me.
(Philippians 4:13, emphasis added)

Thus Joseph, when he paraphrased Phil. 4:8, wrote:

. . . we believe *all things*, we hope *all things*, we have endured many things and hope to be able to endure *all things*. (Article of Faith #13, emphasis added)

Nephi understood. In his most famous of statements (1 Nephi 3:7) he declared that he would be obedient, because he knew that God would not make an impossible demand of him. He knew he could do all things through Christ, who would strengthen him.

The books of Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon tell us some of the things we must do to have the strength of Christ at work in our lives.

I. PAUL ENCOURAGES THE PHILIPPIAN SAINTS TO FOLLOW CHRIST

This letter to the Philippian saints has been called the “happy letter.” In Acts 16 when Paul was unjustly accused, illegally beaten, and unlawfully imprisoned, he terrified city officials by announcing that he was a Roman. (See Acts 16:22-37) It may be that Paul’s price for silence regarding this breach of Roman law was that the rulers leave the church in Philippi alone. There are no great problems addressed in this letter, no stirring calls to repentance, no reproof nor rebuke, but rather a gentle admonition to the believers to “be filled with the fruits of righteousness.” (1:11) Those fruits can fill our lives only as we follow Christ implicitly. Philippians suggests at least five wonderful ways to do that.

A. Paul is writing this letter from Rome, where he is in bondage (1:7,13) But even in those conditions he teaches that *we should let our lives be an example of the goodness and glory and grace of Christ*. In 3 Nephi 27:27 the Lord asks, “What manner of men ought ye to be? Even as I am.” Paul wrote:

13 So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places;

14 And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

15 Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will:

16 The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds:

17 But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel.

18 What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached . . . (Philippians 1:13-18)

The question we must ask ourselves here is this one: “What kind of Christ does my life preach?” If someone were to learn all he or she would ever know about Christ from watching me follow him and live his gospel, how accurate would his perception be? Do we preach a Christ of contention and strife, or a Christ of love and good will?

B. *Our lives must be a blessing to others.* Paul had no fear of death, for that event would increase his closeness to his Redeemer, but he knew that his converts still needed his influence in the flesh. He wrote:

20 According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether [it be] by life, or by death.

21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

22 But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not.

23 For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better:

24 Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.

25 And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith... (Phil. 1:20-25)

Acts 10:38 gives a wonderful insight into the ministry of Christ. This verse tells us that

. . . God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: *who went about doing good* ...(emphasis added)

Jesus went about doing good, blessing the lives of others. My mother passed away just over two years ago. She had been widowed twice, losing her first husband to kidney failure and her second to cancer. She had lost much of her hearing and then her eyesight. In her final months she was essentially confined to a bed and a chair where she listened to the scriptures on tape and memorized the hymns of the Church. But that was not enough. She had a need, a passion, to do good. And so she decided to make Afghans for all of her grand- and great-grandchildren. She went to work, spending about 50 hours on each creation. When she was finished, 100 of them had been given to her loved ones. She took the remnants of the yarn for one final production, which she gave to me. It is an explosion of diversity and color, and it is a testimony to the love of one who was anxious to go home to her family, but who, while she was in mortality, was determined to *do good* so that her life could bless the lives of others.

C. *We must love one another and care for each other.* Paul wrote:

2 Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, [being] of one accord, of one mind.

3 [Let] nothing [be done] through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.

4 Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with

God:

One winter night, actually at 1:00 a.m., a son came in from a date and announced that the neighbor's sprinklers were on. It was January. The temperature was well below freezing. Six inches of snow were on the ground. My neighbor is a lovely, elderly woman, a widow of five or six years. I dressed and went to her home to wake her. We tried the valves but the water remained on, the silver drops reflecting a nearby streetlight in a continuous cycle.

I am not a plumber. Once I realized that the shut off valve would not shut the water off, I called for help. A contractor in the ward who did not know plumbing any better than I knew it, did know someone who installed sprinklers. He made a second call. At 2:00 a.m. a man appeared with a shovel and other tools and found a way to stop the flow of water. When the water was off, he suggested that my neighbor wait for spring to repair the rupture that had caused the problem. He prepared to leave and a thankful woman tried to pay him. He would not hear of it. He was the servant of the Savior, doing the Savior's work, practicing pure religion in the middle of a winter night at the home of a perfect stranger, looking not just on his own things, but on the things of others. Paul would have loved such a man.

D. *We must be blameless and harmless regardless of our surroundings.* Paul taught:

Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world . . . (Phil. 2:14,15)

Laman and Lemuel were murmurers, their constant complaining a cross of iron on the back of their parents and brothers. We have all seen such attitudes around us, when it is time for a service project, or the assessment for the Friends of Scouting comes due, or the Bishop extends an invitation to serve in the nursery. I remember when the Bishop called me to coach the Senior Softball team in our ward. I wasn't particularly excited, but I expected to be there for the games anyway. I loved to play softball. But as a concluding comment to the call, the Bishop remarked, "I think you ought only to coach, not play."

That put a new slant on things and my immediate inclination was to do some serious disputing and some extensive murmuring. But somehow I was helped to understand that this was a test—a matter of sacrifice. I bit my tongue and served: perhaps not with brightness and enthusiasm, but I served.

We are invited to live without blame and without inflicting harm in a world determined to point the finger of culpability and responsibility in any direction but inward. What a terror it would be to become a stumblingblock to the conversion or reactivation of one of our brothers or sisters.

I remember when one of only two non-member families on our block in Logan was scheduled for baptism. What a delight it was to members of the ward that Brother Whoeveritwas had finally seen the light. But the baptism never took place. The day before the service was scheduled, the newly converted but unbaptized brother saw the High Priest Group Leader drinking coffee in a downtown café. Perhaps this investigator was looking for an excuse to back out, but he said (as it was told to me) “If he can’t live his religion, there is no way I can live it.”

In this context, consider the language and lesson of I Corinthians 8. Corinthian saints have written to Paul asking for permission to eat the meat left over from pagan sacrifices. Paul’s response includes an observation that meat is not the real issue here.

. . .meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse. (I Cor 8:8)

His message seems to be that eating meat offered to idols is an acceptable practice, since “we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.” (1 Cor. 8:4)

But Paul sounds a solemn warning to those of us who would be blameless and harmless “in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation.”

“But take heed,” he says, “lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.” (1 Cor. 8:9) What a terrible thing it would be if one weak in the faith saw a faithful member eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol, and from that observation took license worship idols or to

partake of things that were truly forbidden.

“But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.” (1 Cor 8:12)

I was standing in front of a 7-11 in Durham, N.C. one hot summer day drinking a Coke. With me was a non-member, one with whom I had had many extended and serious gospel conversations. He watched me guzzle in silence for a time and then said, “Gibbons, you are a real hypocrite.”

“Me?” I responded. I was *wounded* by his observation.

“You make such a big deal about the caffeine in tea and coffee, but you drink Coke like it is going out of style.” He said more, but I had heard enough. Never mind that the cola drink would not prevent me from getting a temple recommend and taking the sacrament. Never mind that better men than me drank the stuff regularly. *This liberty of mine had become a stumblingblock to one who was weak.* And regardless of any questions my Stake President asked or did not ask, for me to drink Coke under those circumstances was a sin. That was one of the few times I have instantly and successfully repented.

Paul’s concluding thought on this matter is a favorite verse from the New Testament. Forgive my paraphrasing:

Wherefore, if Coke make my brother to offend, I will drink no Coke while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend. (1 Cor 8:13, author’s edit)

E. *Christ must come first in our lives.* Nothing can take precedence over our love for him and our relationship with him. Paul explained:

But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ. . . (Phil. 3:8)

Elder Maxwell expressed this very thought as follows:

Let others, if they choose, advocate lesser lords or causes for mankind. Only Jesus, truly and fully, advocates the basic and central cause of mankind. Christ's advocacy is advocacy with perfect empathy and mercy. Being sinless Himself, the wounds and scars He bears are actually ours. After all, He was "wounded for our transgressions." He loved us so dearly that He voluntarily laid down His life for us. Furthermore, even though He gives us demanding commandments and stern tasks, He has mercifully promised to prepare a way for us to keep and to fulfill all of them. (Neal A. Maxwell, *Even As I Am*, p.33 - p.34)

What is there about the Savior of us all that would cause us to offer this kind of allegiance? He can do things for us that no other lord or cause could ever do. He can

. . . change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself. (Phil. 3:21)

Thus Paul implores us that we "stand fast in the Lord." (Phil. 4:1)

II. PAUL REMINDS THE COLOSSIANS THAT REDEMPTION COMES ONLY THROUGH CHRIST.

No matter how difficult or depressing life becomes, we have hope for something finer. Mortality is not all of our existence, nor is it the most important part of our existence. This life is a test, an opportunity for us to prepare for something much more important, something better that comes later.

We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love [which ye have] to all the saints, For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; Which is come unto you, as [it is] in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as [it doth] also in you, since the day ye heard

[of it], and knew the grace of God in truth . . . (Col 1:1-5)

Our faith in Christ must give us hope of something “which is laid up in heaven.” And that hope “bringeth forth fruit.” We live our lives differently both in times of joy and in times of sadness because of that hope. Someone watching you deal with a crisis has probably asked you, “How can you keep going? How can you keep smiling? How can you keep believing?” Whatever answer you may have given was based in part at least on the hope that has come to you through your faith in Christ. Your willingness to continue in spite of pain and opposition is based on your longing to

. . . walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing [that is, to please the Lord in everything,] by being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light. (Col 1:10-12)

The goodness of the Father has brought us from our sins unto the fulness (Col 1:19) of Christ, and offered us the immeasurable glories of heaven, and a reconciliation with the Father of us all.

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in [your] mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight: If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and [be] not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, [and] which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister . . . (Col. 1:21-23)

In order for this to happen, we must “continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away” from the place where the Lord has planted us. What does it mean to be settled? The Lord suggested a meaning in Luke.

Wherefore, settle this in your hearts, that ye will do the things which I shall teach, and command you. (JST Luke 14:28)

We should let our hearts be settled, not “carried about with every wind of doctrine.”

Our conduct and our words should communicate this to the world: “Here I stand and I will not be moved.”

We are expected to be *grounded*. Paul suggests this understanding of that idea:

That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what [is] the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. (Eph. 3:17-19)

And how do we accomplish this? We who are the elect of God and who are waiting and hoping for the redemption of Christ?

1. “Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.” (Col 2:2)
2. “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” (That is, put off the natural man, which is an enemy to God. See Mosiah 3:19)
3. “. . .put on the new [man] . . .Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. (Col 3:10,12-14)
4. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom . . . (Col 3:16)
5. And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; (Col. 3:23)
6. Continue in prayer . . . (Col. 4:6)
7. Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man. (Col. 4:6)

III. PAUL ENCOURAGES PHILEMON TO BE FORGIVING TOWARD ONESIMUS

Philemon lived in Colosse. He was, in the pattern of the day, a slave owner. In fact the Roman Empire at this time included about 10,000,000 slaves. One of

Philemon's slaves, Onesimus, had apparently stolen something from him (see v. 18) and then had run away to Rome where he met Paul and was converted. Under Roman law, Onesimus's actions were punishable by death, but Paul wrote to ask Philemon to forgive whatever debt Onesimus owed, and to accept him as a brother in Christ. In fact, Paul offered himself as surety for the loss suffered by Philemon: "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account." (Philemon 1:18)

You can identify with this dilemma. Suppose a non-Mormon friend or neighbor has stolen your new Lexus and fled to Salt Lake City where, by great good fortune, he encounters one of the Twelve. While you are stewing and fuming at your loss, a letter comes from the Church Administration Building, from the office of a prophet, seer, and revelator. The letter tells you how a church leader met your corrupt neighbor, and of his conversion to the Gospel.

"I know what he has done to you," he writes. "If the debt must be paid, send the bill to me. I'll take care of it. But receive this man not as a thief, and not even as a neighbor, but as 'a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord.'" (Philemon 1:15)

How would you react to such a letter? What bill would you send? What grudge would you nourish?

Someone once suggested to me that I read Philemon as though it were a letter from the Savior to me, asking me to forgive someone. You might consider reading it in that way, all the while asking yourself these questions: "Whom do I need to forgive?" and "How can I let the Lord know that I have done so?"

CONCLUSION

It seems to me to be impossible to read very much of Paul without a change of heart. This persecutor of the Christians, this participant in the martyrdom of Stephen, this most zealous of Pharisees found himself at the feet of the Savior, and allowed his life to be transformed by the Love of the Christ. From that moment to the end of his life (and certainly in the multitude of years since spent in the Mission Fields of the spirit world) Paul toiled and prayed and preached in a monumental effort to share the goodness of what he had found. We who have been born of the Spirit and who have this same hope can do no less. We must forgive all men, follow Christ and

claim the redemption offered to us by the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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