

JOY REVEALED

A DEVOTIONAL STUDY IN PHILIPPIANS

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PUBLISHING HOUSE
wphstore.com
Indianapolis, Indiana



CREST BOOKS

Copyright © 2017 by The Salvation Army National Corporation
Published by Wesleyan Publishing House
Indianapolis, Indiana 46250
Printed in the United States of America
ISBN: 978-1-63257-208-0
ISBN (e-book): 978-1-63257-209-7

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INTRODUCTION

THE SETTING OF PHILIPPIANS



Philippi was founded around 360 BC by colonists from the Greek island of Thasos. Originally called Credides, it is in eastern Macedonia, about ten miles inland from the Aegean Sea.

Naming it after himself, Philip II of Macedon conquered the city in 356 BC because of its proximity to gold mines.

Because it was located on a strategic route that crossed from east to west, Philip established a garrison, built up its fortifications, added an acropolis, and increased its population by bringing in additional colonists. Philippi prospered from its location on a major agricultural plain, the gold mines, and the trading route.

When the Roman Empire conquered Greece, Philippi rose in prominence. It was the scene of two key battles. The first occurred in 46 BC when Mark Antony and Octavian (later Caesar Augustus) defeated the forces of Brutus and Cassius in the civil war that followed Julius Caesar's assassination. Routing their enemy, the victors celebrated by making Philippi a Roman colony. The residents were granted all the rights and privileges usually reserved for cities in Italy.

In 30 BC, Octavian defeated the forces of Antony and Cleopatra in a naval battle just off the Philippian coast. Octavian evicted the soldiers from Italy who had supported Antony, settling some of them in Philippi and further Romanizing the city.

The trade route that was improved under Philip was further upgraded by the Romans and made part of the *Via Egnatia*, the main road between Asia and Rome. The population swelled to 15,000 inhabitants, considered in ancient times to be a major city.

The residents of Philippi were fiercely loyal to Rome, their city being considered an extension of the imperial city.

For any traveler, it was as if one were in both Greece and Rome simultaneously.

CHRISTIANITY IN PHILIPPI

As recounted in Acts 16, Paul founded the church in Philippi during his second missionary journey, after he had a vision of a man from Macedonia urging him to bring the gospel to Europe (vv. 6–10). Paul's point of entry into Europe was Philippi, a wise choice because of its strategic location and because of his status as a Roman citizen.

The first significant event was the conversion of Lydia, a merchant of highly valued purple cloth. Lydia, along with other women who were at the river where Paul and Silas first preached, accepted Christ. She invited the evangelists to stay at her house while in the city (vv. 13–15).

As Paul and Silas continued their ministry, they found themselves followed by a slave girl whom her owners used for fortune-telling. Possessed by an evil spirit, she followed Paul and Silas around. When they finally grew weary of her constant shouting, they cast the demon out. With that, the girl lost her gift of fortune-telling, much to the dismay of her owners. That was the beginning of trouble for the men (vv. 16–21) as the owners stirred up trouble against them, ultimately leading to the arrest of Paul and Silas.

As was customary, the authorities had Paul and Silas stripped and beaten and then thrown into jail for the night. Rather than being intimidated, the evangelists spent the night singing hymns and praying. During the night, an earthquake shook the prison, and at once all the prison doors flew open, and all of the prisoners' chains came loose. The jailer, knowing he would be executed for any prisoners who escaped, was prepared to take his own life when Paul and Silas stopped him, assuring him that no prisoner had escaped. The man fell at their feet and asked how he could be saved. They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved—you and your household" (v. 31). The jailer received Christ, cleaned up their wounds and together they waited for the dawn (vv. 22–37).

When Paul and Silas were ordered released in the morning, they shared that they were Roman citizens. The beatings and humiliation they endured the night before were highly illegal, causing the magistrate tremendous anxiety. So the city leaders had the two given a proper escort out of town. Paul and Silas made a brief visit to Lydia's house and then continued their journey (vv. 35–40).

The fledgling church continued to grow while remaining closely connected to Paul. The great apostle had relationships with many churches, but the Philippians had won a special place in his heart. Writing from prison, he wanted to make sure that potentially the last words he could share

on earth included his beloved Philippians, the namesake of his epistle to them.

When the letter was received, it would have been read aloud, as the literacy rate in the Roman Empire was less than 15 percent. Because of conditioning, people in the ancient world were accustomed to committing large amounts of verbally transmitted information to memory. This was not only because few could read, but because of the relative scarcity and expense of owning handwritten manuscripts. Reading Philippians out loud in one sitting will give one some idea of the effect it would have had with the first-century believers.

Life for Christians in Philippi would not have been easy, as indicated by the content of the letter. A growing antipathy toward the young Christian movement was spreading rapidly throughout the known world, fueled by the opposition of many of the Jewish faith and by factors as outlined below.

Features that were particularly challenging to the newly established church included:

1. *Emperor worship*—a part of the salutation to Caesar during toasts and expressions of homage was the honoring of him as “savior” and “lord.” Since Christians would only honor Christ as Savior and Lord, believers were in conflict with accepted practice.

Caesars also claimed for themselves the status of being gods, complete with temples, priests, and ceremonies. As with the salutation to Caesar, citizens were expected to worship at these temples as part of their patriotic duty. Christians could not participate, which further added to the suspicion regarding their loyalties.

2. *Integration of pagan religions in everyday life*—it was not only emperor worship and veneration that were problematic. Also at conflict was the culture's expectation that at public meetings, as well as at club and trade union gatherings, the celebration feasts were held in dedication to particular gods, to which all in attendance were expected to pay homage. The Christians abstaining from these celebrations further formented hostility.

3. *Lack of significant Jewish presence*—only fifteen Jewish males were needed to form a synagogue in a locale, but Philippi had such a small Jewish population that no synagogue existed. Although this might have been considered an advantage because of widespread Jewish opposition to the gospel, the small number of Jews in Philippi worked against them as well. In cities that had a significant Jewish presence, the local population became aware of their belief in only one God and their allegiance to the Scriptures, as well as their refusal to participate in some civic events. In many places, the Jewish presence had paved the way for Christians to follow with at least some

basis of knowledge locally. This was not the case in Philippi. Everything about Christianity was new and strange to the populace.

Although the book of Philippians is a treasured letter in our New Testament, not much is heard of the church in Philippi after the death of Paul. Perhaps despite his pleading, the problems in the church were not resolved. It may be that some of the enemies Paul warned about gained a foothold and neutralized the church. Whether any of this happened, there was a time when the Philippian church was a shining example of witness in a difficult setting and its spirit captured the apostle Paul's heart.



PART 1

OF SLAVES **AND SERVICE**

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-17

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-2



George MacDonald was quoted to say, “I would rather be what God chose to make me than the most glorious creature that I could think of. For to have been thought about—born in God’s thought—and then made by God, is the dearest, grandest, and most precious thing in all thinking.”¹ It was a similar thought that caused Paul to identify himself and Timothy as “servants of Christ Jesus.”

Paul could have easily gone another direction. As he said later in the letter, he was a “Hebrew of the Hebrews,” since he could trace his pure lineage back through the centuries. Or he could have spoken about his superior education at the feet of the esteemed teacher Gamaliel. He could have spoken about being a Roman citizen with all its privileges and protections. Instead, he chose to call himself a servant, more properly, a slave.

In the Roman Empire, slaves were of no account. Peter Chrysologus wrote, “Whatever a master does to a slave, undeservedly, in anger, willingly, unwillingly, in forgetfulness, after careful thought, knowingly, unknowingly, is judgment, justice, and law.”² Many of those who were slaves were captives of war, and so a slave might have originated from a higher social status than his or her master. Regardless of their background, in the Roman Empire social stratas, slaves occupied the lowest rung of the ladder. The significant difference for Paul was servanthood was the position he chose for himself, rather than having it imposed.

This submission represented his glad abandonment of status so he could serve, first Christ Jesus and then the people of God. In writing to his friends in Philippi, he constantly returned to this theme of abandonment to the lowest place of service in order to glorify God in the highest. Every blow he took, every hour in prison, every slander, every arduous exertion for the grateful as well as for those who betrayed him was an act of a self-appointed slave in service to Jesus Christ.

While taking this low position for himself, Paul called the Philippians by the highest status any believer could attain: “God’s holy people.” They were holy because they were set apart for the service of God. They were holy because they demonstrated the Spirit’s infilling. They were

holy because they evidenced the fruit of the Spirit. It did not matter what they had been, their racial or cultural background, whether they were slave or free. The grace of God had made them into something different.

While this status awakened them to their full potential, at the same time it put them at odds with the world. This was no weak-kneed, whispered profession of faith, but rather a full, determined opening of the heart for God to do His work whatever the consequences might be. While living a holy life put them in the line of fire, at the same time it provided the shield for their souls.

Perhaps you have heard of or even attended a funeral of some widely-recognized scoundrel, and yet he or she was extolled as the saintliest of people whose very breath caused flowers to grow in a barren land. To comfort the family, a new history is created not based on reality, but on how they wished the deceased had been. In this fiction, grace would not be needed because the person was supposedly so lovable, so meritorious, that God could hardly wait to get them into heaven to join Him in setting the world right or perhaps to help God provide notes to the nightingale's song.

The truth is that even the supposed saintliest person is in desperate need of grace, a grace that can only be given by a God whose infinite love bridges the gap between His holiness and our innate sinfulness. Those moments when

we see ourselves at our worst, when we catch ourselves thinking broken thoughts about fallen acts, we only confirm that we need this unfathomable thing called grace.

The Nuremburg trial of Nazi war criminals following the Second World War proved that otherwise civilized and upstanding people could be guilty of horrendous acts. Had we lived in that time in that place, how many of us would have stood alongside them? The depravity of the human race is such that there is always the potential for monsters within us. Grace is what makes the difference, and it is this grace that Paul called upon for the Philippians. They remembered previous acts that now, in light of God's glorious work in them, made them blush to recall. But grace had come. Mercy had flowed. Their lives were not marked by sin's shame, but grace's glorious song.

Paul also wished them peace. The traditional greeting among Jews even in the present is *Shalom*, meaning peace. It spoke not only of an absence of conflict, but of a wholeness and well-being. But it changed as it passed into use among Christians. Boice explained, "For in Christian speech Paul's word *charis* was always associated with the grace of God. Peace . . . in Paul's mouth it must always have some reference to the fruits of justification, the result of the reconciliation of the Christian with God."³ When grace comes, peace is walking alongside, both the proof and blessing of grace in action.

Paul spoke of the highs and lows, of being a slave and a holy person, of being the worst without grace and overwhelmingly blessed because of grace. It is this tension that makes the Christian life not something to be dreaded but an adventure to be lived.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Paul referred to himself as a slave. How do you think he would refer to himself in the twenty-first century?

2. Think of one of your worst moments. What does that say about the operation of God's grace in your life today?

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-8



John Fawcett had the opportunity of a lifetime when he was called to serve a larger and wealthier church in London. Having accepted the position, he and his wife were packing their wagons when one by one the people of his church at Wainsgate came to bid him farewell. Moved by the tears of his people, Fawcett shared with his wife that he felt they shouldn't go. She agreed. They unpacked their wagons, notified the London church that they wouldn't be coming and stayed for a total of fifty-four years. It was from this deep fellowship that Fawcett penned the words:

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.¹

Paul's affection for the Philippians was no more evident than in verse three and further evidenced throughout the letter. Among the spiritual truths he wanted his friends to grasp was the depth of his love and appreciation for them. While there were many who appreciated Paul, these Philippians had reached his heart. Convinced that this might well be his last opportunity to say anything to them, he focused on what he sensed were their deepest spiritual needs while at the same time pouring out his gratitude for all they had meant to him. Other churches had wavered, but the Philippian church had not only remained true, they sought ways to let Paul know they supported him.

While many will speak of their affection or pledge their loyalty in the days of smooth sailing, we remember those who come alongside when we despair of seeing the dawn, when the waves are overwhelming us. These are the memories that warmed Paul's heart when long, lonely hours of isolation might have mocked him for all he believed and stood for.

The joy he spoke of in verse four is the delight that is not a passing emotion but a firm attitude. As parents always delight in their child doing well, Paul found joy in thinking of these dear people. This joy is part and parcel of the Christian life. As Dean Flemming aptly quips, "A joyless Christian makes no more sense than a waterless ocean."²

Paul rejoiced about their partnership in the gospel (v. 5), not only by sharing financially with him but in their active

participation in working toward the same goals in Christ. Like him, they sought to live for Christ. Like him, they actively witnessed, willing to labor and lose as need be. Like him, they were fully convinced there could be no other way. They did not just cheer him on; they were comrades in arms.

The partnership is clearly seen in the stand the Philippians took with Paul in spite of his imprisonment. There was no “out of sight, out of mind” attitude, but rather a drawing closer to him as they forged ahead with the proclamation of the gospel. Why? Because they shared in God’s grace (v. 7). That grace of God did not only represent their standing in Christ, but was the cement of their relationship with each other. They represented widely different backgrounds, but grace was the common ground, the blood that pulsed through their souls and his.

This brought Paul great joy tempered with a touch of sadness for not being with them as he sat in prison. He wrote, “I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus” (v. 8). Our hope for eternal life promises the light of joy without the shadow of melancholy that often accompanies emotions in this life.

The primary relationship of the Christian is with Christ, but God provides the richness of additional fellowship with other believers. While we accept that no one knows us nor understands us as God does, at the same time we need the

human touch, the reassuring voice, the connection we have with the heart of another sharing our pilgrimage. Paul shows that this deep affection is not the exception but the norm of our life in Christ.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does the fellowship in Christ differ from your other friendships?
2. Can you think of a time when someone unexpectedly reached out to you in your time of need? Why do you think he or she did that?

PHILIPPIANS 1:6



On May 21, 1972, a man who later was confirmed to be insane jumped the barrier at St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City and with a hammer attacked Michelangelo's "Pieta," the priceless statue of Mary holding the crucified Christ's limp body on her lap. The man struck the statue fifteen times, damaging Mary's elbow and wrist, shattering the fingers on one hand as well damaging her nose, veil, and left cheek. Under Dr. Deoclecio Redig de Campos, a team of seven scientists and restorers painstakingly gathered over two hundred chips that lay on the floor and, using microscopes, dental drills, and other tools, worked over four months to repair the statue. The results of their work, well hidden from the naked eye, allowed the Pieta to once again occupy its place of honor.

In a far more meticulous and divine manner, God has been at work in you since the hour you first believed. Paul

shared, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (v. 6). The good work refers to the redemption and building up that God continued to do in the life of the believer beginning with the experience of salvation. There is a sense in which the work of salvation is complete the moment someone turns to Christ, so that even if it is a deathbed conversion, one can nevertheless be assured of eternal salvation. But there is also a very real sense in which salvation is a constantly expanding, continuous work of rebuilding what God does in someone through every day of his or her life.

If I blow up a balloon halfway, it is full of air. But as I put more air into it, though the balloon is larger we still say it is full of air. The capacity has changed, but the fullness is there all along. It is the same in the life of a Christian. God is continuing to build our capacity, our understanding—He is maturing us, molding us, conforming us to the image of Christ. Salvation occurs not only in a point in time but in the steady work of God done in us until He receives us unto Himself.

The glory of what God does in this good work is that He does not make us good as new but better than we ever could have otherwise been. Our fallen nature is such that, despite our best efforts, despite our most concentrated efforts at refinement and self-improvement, we will hit a ceiling. As with a rocket, to get beyond the surly bands of

earth, we must have help beyond our own gravity of sin—something other than our own positive mental attitude.

In salvation God not only launches us but propels us to our destination. Along the way, if we allow Him, He uses each experience to mold and repair the damage sin has chipped away from our souls—to reform us into God's original design for us, taking us far beyond anything we could be ourselves. Every joy, every disappointment, every ache, and every success can be sanctified as the Holy Spirit works in the recesses of our hearts, teaching us, leading us, transforming us. The events of our lives are what God's Spirit uses as the building materials of our souls.

In the experience of holiness, we yield the building process to the Holy Spirit. Our experience of salvation redeems us, while our sanctification allows us to give away our limitations to God's fullness.

Rather than trying to get God to bless what we think is best, we want what He wants. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways has God been doing His work in you?
2. The author says that God can use “every joy, every disappointment, every ache, and every success” to do His work in us. Can you recall something in your life that seemed outside the will of God yet proved that God was at work in you?

PHILIPPIANS 1:9–11



Cubic zirconia is a synthesized material that is optically flawless, colorless, and hard. In some ways superior to a real diamond, a cubic zirconia gem can be passed off as a natural diamond unless examined by an expert. By skilled inspection it will be revealed that cubic zirconia fails to be as hard or have the same weight as natural diamonds. Beautiful as they are, they are not the real thing. Paul, writing to his Philippian friends, wanted their lives to stand up to examination as genuine.

Having told the Philippians that he thanked God every time he remembered them, Paul shared the content of his prayers on their behalf. He spoke first of love, using the word for a deep kindred fellowship that overflows with goodwill and kindness, continually growing, ready to meet every circumstance—even misunderstanding.

The Bible always sees righteousness as being about love, and this love is something more than emotion. It also fully engages the intellect and the will. Over all things it is an intelligent, insightful love. True love is not some sentimental infatuation that yanks a person up one minute and down the next. Instead it chooses to love a person regardless of strengths or weaknesses. It seeks to see another's best potential realized, even if that means taking a back seat to make it happen (see 1 Cor. 13).

This kind of love gives discernment. The Greek term Paul used came from the testing of money to ensure it was genuine, not counterfeit. Few things are more devastating than love falsely proclaimed in order to manipulate another. Paul said that the kind of love he was speaking of allowed for discernment to gauge what was best in the life of the believer.

Purity was added to the list. The original word was also translated *sincere*. Dr. James Boice explained:

Dishonest dealers were in the habit of filling in the cracks with a hard pearly wax that would blend in with the color of the pottery. This made the cracks practically undetectable . . . when the pottery was held up to the light, especially the sun. It was said that the artificial element was detected by “sun-testing.” Honest dealers marked their finer products by the caption *sine cera*—“without wax.”¹

So it is that a holy person is what he or she appears to be: one whose life can stand up to inspection. This is a life that is pure and blameless, which, as we saw in the previous verses, can only be accomplished by the “good work” of God’s Holy Spirit carrying on in our lives (v. 6).

Of course, blameless is not the same as faultless. We live in fallen bodies, with minds that have been scarred by original (independence from God) and voluntary sin. Although we are cleansed, the consequential scars of sin require the ongoing repair process by God’s Spirit within us. Though flawed in our own flesh, we can be blameless in Christ.

For instance, a believer can fully love and serve God to the best of his or her ability, and yet find that inherent limitations still result in mistakes and misunderstanding. A man may testify with no thought other than to glorify God, but in the process say something that hurts or offends another. He may well be blameless but not faultless. The true intent will be revealed for all our actions in the “day of Christ” though never fully understood in this world, but we praise God because He knows our hearts and our intent, and that will shine through even the faultiest ways we seek to serve Him or express ourselves.

The result is that we are “filled with the fruit of righteousness.” That righteousness does not originate in us but is implanted in us through the Holy Spirit’s work in our

hearts. It allows us to take on the role of the slave in order to serve others, to take up our cross and follow Christ. It takes for its example the righteousness of Christ, refusing to be distracted by those who might fall at our side or those in prominence who might fail.

This is for the glory and praise of God. The very best thing that can be said of any follower of Christ is how he or she lives glorifies God.

Reading about this should make us pause to ask God if we would bear up to close examination. And when we see how we may fall short, we must acknowledge that the failing is not merely in our performance, but in our failure to rely upon the workings of God's Holy Spirit in us. Pause now, ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart and reveal to you any falseness, any unworthiness, any attitude or practice that stands in the way of you being all that God intends.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways can love engage our thought, emotion, and will?
2. How can a person be at fault but blameless at the same time?

PHILIPPIANS 1:12–17



Paul's imprisonment was more than an inconvenience. By appealing to Caesar (see Acts 25:1–12), Paul was destined to meet one of the most notorious villains of the ancient world. Nero started off well enough as supreme ruler of the Roman Empire, but he found power intoxicating. As he progressed in his reign, he became increasingly more corrupt and cruel, finally becoming a living embodiment of evil. Although never proven, it is generally accepted that in order to build a more glorious Rome, he committed arson to clear out areas where he wanted to make improvement. When the fire blazed out of control, he blamed the despised and misunderstood Christians. Part of his punishment of them included dipping some in pitch and setting them on fire to light his garden at night. It was in this man's hands that Paul sought justice.

Paul was realistic about the uncertainty of his fate. But even with the possibility of his death in view, he saw God at work through all circumstances. In verse 12, he said that what had happened had advanced the gospel. The original Greek for the word *advance* was a military term referring to the team of soldiers who set about clearing trails and building roads so the army could follow. Paul noted that this advance was not in spite of what had happened to this point but rather that the circumstances were the where-withal by which God made things happen. These were not stumbling blocks in the path, but building blocks to accomplish God's will for him and others.

The injustice of his imprisonment was obvious, even to the guards (v. 13). They knew why he was there. Paul had not committed acts of violence or led an insurrection. He was there only because he chose to live for Christ. Even with false charges that stole his freedom, there remained the clarity of his witness about the power of Christ to transform. While we do not know if any guards were converted under his prison ministry, they did hear the message of the gospel. It was customary for a guard to be chained to a prisoner all the time. The rotations of guards for this duty would mean that different guards sat with Paul for hours at a time. We cannot imagine that this great evangelist let the prime opportunity of witnessing to the guards pass. Paul was not out of place, but felt he was appointed to be

here. What appeared to be a hopeless situation was instead a mission field.

A beautiful by-product occurred when those outside the prison walls took advantage of their freedom to proclaim Christ. And as Dr. Richard R. Melick, Jr. noted, “The context assumes their preaching was encouraged by the imprisonment, not by the expected release.”¹ The suffering provided inspiration, not Paul’s possible deliverance! And the hallmark of what made their good works authentic was . . . love (v. 16).

Some of the struggle with sincerity within the early church is seen in verses 15–17. Paul had enemies, not just among the Jewish leaders, but among fellow believers as well. Paul noted that some preached Christ with counterfeit motives—envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition. How could God use those with selfish ambition? Dr. Ben Witherington, III notes, “The proclamation of the true Word does not require a perfect messenger; God can write straight with crooked lines.”² Somehow, even through unworthy motives, the power of the gospel, fueled by the Holy Spirit, accomplished that which glorified God.

Others were more benevolent. They saw in Paul an ally who now was paying the price for refusing to renounce his Lord. They likely deemed that, while Paul was taking care of the inside, they were taking care of the outside. If Paul could stay faithful in the bleakest of circumstances, if he

could be true there, then they had no excuse to shy away from their own witness. The faithful follower does not wait for a big moment or large stage to act. He or she looks at the moment and uses the raw materials at hand.

This challenges us to think of how we act with the opportunities God has given to us. God does not want for us to relegate our committed service to the unknown “someday” or for us to witness when there is the right convergence of circumstances. Following Paul’s example, He wants us to take advantage of what He has placed at our disposal. If we have bricks, we use bricks. If we have sticks, we use sticks, always keeping in mind that none of it is any good without the Holy Spirit’s blessing. Nothing is unworthy if He sanctifies it.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Is it better to wait on God before witnessing or to go ahead and speak out in the moment?
2. Paul said that, regardless of people’s motives, Christ was preached; and he was happy about it. What might make a difference when the falseness of the one preaching Christ undermines the gospel?



PART 2

LOFTY **LOWLINESS**

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-2



The ancient Greek storyteller Aesop told the story of a lion that watched carefully each day for an opportunity to feast on three bulls that shared a pasture. The bulls were the strongest of friends, each coming to the other's aid, thus leaving the lion no hope of ever attacking them successfully. Realizing this, the lion approached each bull secretly, telling him that the others had slandered him or considered themselves better than him. It wasn't long until the bulls argued, went to different pastures so they wouldn't see each other, and with that, became easy prey for the lion.

The love Paul had for the church in Philippi sings through the entire letter. The words *joy* and *rejoicing* are mentioned fifteen times, more than in any other book of the Bible. But it was not a perfect church. With all that was going right, there was still an underlying current of disunity.

And Paul knew that this infection could spread and be fatal.

It would seem that if people share a common salvation they would naturally be unified. However, salvation does not destroy our temperament or wipe away our knowledge or experiences, nor does it program us to sense, act, believe, or think identically to our fellow believers. Unity does not mean uniformity.

Often the ironic reality will be that, for the very reason that we care deeply about the work of God, we will differ on how it is best accomplished. And, after all, the person who gives thoughtless agreement likely does not comprehend what is being talked about or simply doesn't care. Unity is not to be gained at the expense of truth, and less so at the expense of love. There can be agreement in a mob, for instance, but that does not mean it is doing the truly loving thing.

The difference between unity and uniformity is key. Imagine a symphony orchestra that gathered with all the instruments playing only the same note. What could be more boring? Instead, each instrument plays its own part while the others play theirs. The differences create richer, deeper chords and harmonies. The instrumentalists, while paying attention to their own music, are also keenly aware of the conductor and the other instruments. At one time they might be silent while another section takes prominence. At

another, it might be their time to carry the melody or shine with a solo part. Through it all an orchestra shares the same priority as each part moves together to the finish—it is unified, not uniform. In the same way, God wants each believer to employ his or her gifts as each has ability and opportunity, moving together toward a common goal.

Where Christian unity is authentically displayed is in a common love of the Lord and, consequently, love and appreciation for other believers. This is not to mean some people won't rub us wrong. For one reason or another, there are some personalities or something about someone's approach that bothers us. But for the sake of Christ and the unity of His body, we choose to love and appreciate what that person brings to the table. In doing so, we can realize that there are likely those who are making the same allowances for us.

In addition, there is appreciation for different gifts and abilities employed for the same great overall goal. Paul dealt with this issue with the Corinthians when he reminded them that we are all like different parts of the body, performing different functions but all making valuable contributions to the whole (see 1 Cor. 12:12–30).

What do we do when disunity exists? Paul urged the Philippians to move away from scrutinizing what is wrong with the other guy and toward lifting our eyes toward Christ. Those differences and annoyances melt as we focus and rely

upon Christ, fan into flame our love for Him, and remember that the reason we exist as a body at all is because of His redemption and keen interest in who and whose we are.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think of a time when disunity occurred where you were. How was it resolved? Was this the biblical standard?
2. How are you playing your part in God's orchestra?

PHILIPPIANS 2:3-5



It has been reported that the great holiness preacher, Commissioner Samuel Logan Brengle, almost left The Salvation Army early on. Sent to London to train to be an officer, he was at that time the most highly educated man in the fledgling movement. Expecting that his superior education would come with some privileges, he was shocked to find himself sitting in front of a stack of men's boots he was to polish while others were involved in street ministry. He nearly walked away, but then he heard the Lord whisper to him, "If I was willing to wash the dirty feet of the disciples, should you not be willing to polish a few boots?" Ashamed at his pride but inspired by the insight, he found great joy as he worked his way through the pile of muddy, smelly boots.

Philippians 2:3 contrasts two sets of attitudes. Paul speaks of the negatives: selfishness and conceit. The Greek idea

behind selfishness is that of a person who insists on having his or her own way. It is the person who pushes to the head of the line, who jockeys to be noticed. *Conceit*, as Karl Barth interprets the original language, means “decking oneself out with an appearance that has nothing behind it.”¹ We know conceit when we see it in others because of how we are pushed down or disregarded. What is not as apparent is when it is operating in us.

Paul’s call to humility was as counter-cultural in his day as in ours. With our tongues we’ll laud humility, but what still lingers in our minds is that odious word *meek*. It feels like the servility expected of a slave, inferiority not only in attitude but in fact. Our instincts tell us that humility means to count for nothing at all. Among non-Christians in the Roman Empire, there was hardly an attitude that would be less desirable to emulate.

The coming of Christ redeemed the idea of humility by His own example of servanthood. The stark difference between His glorious resurrection and the scene a few days before when He knelt before the dirty feet of the disciples to wash them was difficult to reconcile. But this example was to be lived out among believers as part of the demonstration of the total change that comes in the life of a Christian. Any believer who seriously desires to have a heart’s “attitude the same as Christ Jesus” must begin where God the Son’s heart has always been: humility.

Clearly this godly ideal of humility is not one of groveling or self-loathing, no more than it could have been God the Son's attitude. We don't despise the gifts that God has given us or fail to use them. Rather, we are so assured in who we are before God that we can easily look out for the interests of others before our own. If I am standing at the plate, I should not be ashamed to swing the bat with all my might and feel joy if I hit a homerun. But neither should I demean the skill of the other team's player who dashes my dreams with a brilliant catch.

Humility is proven by our readiness to prioritize other people's interests rather than clinging to our fleshly survival instincts of protecting our own. The same love that allows a mother to clean up messy diapers, when a few years earlier she would have turned aside in disgust at the sight of them, should be evident in we who are in Christ as we deal with other people without a thought about what we deserve (because it is irrelevant). Our profession is more proven in the messiness and inconvenience that come in the moment-by-moment humdrum of life, far more than in our public successes. Humility accepts both the mundane and the special opportunities equally as times to show forth a witness to the transformed life we have in Christ (that is, promoting the interests of others. It's God's will we want to be done, not our own).

In Alcoholics Anonymous, there is frequent reference to "stinking thinking." It refers to destructive thought patterns

or telling oneself lies, resulting in alcoholics returning to their abuse of alcohol. An essential part of recovery is not only abstinence from a substance but a fundamental internal change in thought processes. Abstinence alone, without changed thinking, is not only likely to be unsuccessful but can allow a person to substitute one addictive substance for another.

Paul addressed this same issue with the Christians in Philippi. If they were to understand what it was to live a holy life that pleased God, it would involve more than an outward change of behavior. The standard was high: “Have the same mind-set as Christ Jesus” (v. 5).

The believer is to have the attitude, outlook, and character of Christ—that is, humility. *The New American Commentary* notes that the original Greek would best be rendered, “Think this in you which Christ thought in him.”² There is a loftiness and grandeur in this humility that fairly takes the breath away. We are to think humbly of others’ interests above our own, just like Christ did and does! It hearkens to one of Paul’s most famous statements in Romans: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (12:2). Conformity to the world’s way of thinking is self-promotion; transformed thinking into Christ’s character promotes others.

What exactly does having this humble mind of Christ look like? Paul spent the next few verses explaining what that was.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Who has been an example of humility to you? Why?
2. Take a moment to list the things you can do well as well as the things you cannot. Focus on both lists. How do you feel after thinking about these things?

PHILIPPIANS 2:6–7



After telling the Philippians they were to have the mind of Christ, Paul then shared one of the greatest Christological passages in Scripture. Some feel it was a hymn of the early church because of its poetic quality. Regardless of its origin or function, no pinnacle of praise exceeds it in theological depth or poetic grandeur.

Paul spoke of Jesus, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage” (2:6). It was important to establish that Christ did not aspire nor did He somehow elevate Himself to a higher position. His nature was authentically that of God and as such, He was the truest and fullest expression of God, in human form. What He had already was not something to be grasped—He didn’t need to cling to His status because of who He was and is.

Satan, in contrast, grasped after what he was not, and with no interest in unity. We remember that Satan's fall was because he sought to be equal to God, with no interest in being with God. But Jesus, as part of the three-in-one that is the holy Godhead from all eternity, was so equal with God as to be one with the other persons of the Trinity; that is, triune—three distinct persons, yet so profoundly united as to literally be the one person of God. That kind of unity in God's self-contained, loving community was the basis for Jesus's mind-set—the model of humility for His church.

The setting aside of the advantages of His divine form constituted a sacrifice that allowed in His incarnation not only Christ's taking on human flesh and form, but taking upon Himself a reduction that humans themselves could not fathom. The Creator became His created. The Author became one of His story's characters.

What we celebrate at Christmas was the beginning of the emptying of Himself. The omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God became a finite, a time and place constrained body with tiny, fragile limbs that could not control themselves and with absolute dependence upon the help of others. He whose breath formed humanity, sentenced Himself to a body with all the same human foibles, bruises, sniffles, and frustrations we all have while we are in this mortal flesh.

Paul was clear that this humility practiced by God was self-imposed—He “made Himself nothing.” And what's

more, He did this because of who He was. “Being in very nature God,” the Creator’s reducing Himself to “nothing” for the sake of His creatures must be part and parcel to His very nature. If we could imagine shrinking to become an amoeba, we might have an inkling of what Jesus faced when our all-knowing Creator made Himself a child who would have to grow, not only in physical stature, but remarkably “in wisdom,” and even more remarkably, “in favor with God,” as well as in favor with His now-fellow humans (Luke 2:52).

Even here, Jesus might have at least given Himself a favored position within some royal family where (one might think) His miracles and teachings would have a more ready audience to see Him for who He was. Surely Rome, not Nazareth; Athens, not Bethlehem would have been the preferred stages to present Himself. But no. He sought the lowest place, taking on the form of a slave. As indicated earlier, slaves occupied the bottom rung in the world. And He chose to be there, below every other place.

If we hope to have the mind-set of Christ, we must dwell on what this humility that is in God’s very nature truly is—what it means for us. An athlete might in a way empty him- or herself to win a race. But Christ emptied Himself to lose our life’s race by being killed—a tragically humiliating death. He set aside His glory and privilege to be used and abused. Rather than seeking blessings, He came for beatings.

Rather than seeking out relationships for support, He chose people He knew would fail and betray Him. Rather than seeking comfort, He chose the splinters of a manger, a carpenter's shop, and a cross.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Imagine God the Son before reducing Himself to the point of being conceived by Mary. What thoughts come to mind when you consider He knew He would have to grow in wisdom, from human infancy?

2. Can you think of any human analogy where someone abandoned an advantaged position to seek a lower place? How does this compare with Christ? How is it like Jesus? How is it different?

PHILIPPIANS 2:8



As Paul continued to explore what humble servanthood meant for Christ, he described it in terms of His obedience to death.

You and I have no choice regarding death. Should the Lord tarry, we will all take our final breath and, with but few exceptions, will not have the choice of when or where that might be. That is a sobering thought we all must learn to face. But in the case of Jesus, there was a choice. The previous verses outlined the divinity of Christ that included His eternal nature. As One who was truly God and thus eternal, the termination of life was totally foreign to the divine nature.

He would even taste our death, the consequence of our sin, though He was sinless. Our deaths would have satisfied God's law and justice, but then God (the Son) took upon

Himself sin's consequence of death. In His coming to earth with all the sacrifice that entailed, there was yet more. Though sinless, He died the death of sinners. While the limitation of the human body was alien to the nature of God, how much more this must have been to the Author of life! His loving obedience was absolute, proven by making the choice to die. Humanity, being sinful and separated from God, had no choice but to die. Disobedience in this regard was not an option. But God the Son's humility was such that, though He could choose to justly impose it, He instead chose to obey it in our place.

Greater than this was not only that He chose to die, but He chose how and when that was to happen. *How* was what stunned both the Jews and the Gentiles. No crueller and more painful death was known to humankind than crucifixion. Although crucifixion had existed for hundreds of years, the cold calculation of the Romans had perfected it so that it exacted supreme agony while prolonging it to the limits of what the body could endure, inflicting the victim with the most extreme humiliation. So fearsome was crucifixion that Roman citizens could not, by law, be crucified, regardless of the crime they committed. It was reserved for outsiders, for career criminals, for the traitor and the slave. This is why Paul emphasized the degree of Christ's obedience: "obedient unto death—even death on a cross."

The horror of the cross was not lost on the early Christians.

The early symbol of their faith was primarily a fish, not a cross. Indeed, that first generation of Christians would have been shocked that so cruel a means of execution would in any way find a place of honor. They would be even more surprised at what we have done to the cross by miniaturizing it, casting it in gold, encrusting it with jewels, and smoothing all the splinters away. For a cross to be worn as jewelry would be as shocking to them as it would be for us to encounter someone in our day wearing a guillotine necklace, executioner axe earrings, or encountering a hangman's noose on a worship table. A cross was the worst form of punishment that could be mustered. Although there is certainly nothing wrong with wearing crosses as jewelry, especially if it is meant to be a witness, we would do well to ponder the offensive nature of this form of execution to all who lived in the days of Jesus.

Paul's point in all of this was that, because the plight of humanity was clearly hopeless, the solution must be one so grand, so expansive that nothing less would be enough. And so Jesus came, not as the new caesar, but as a tiny boy, not in Rome or Athens, but in Bethlehem; not schooled at the feet of the most brilliant philosophers, but by meditating in a carpenter's shop after attending a little synagogue in the backwater town of Nazareth.

His fame would not come on the field of battle with troops shouting His name as He charged against the enemy, but

by leprous hands that stretched out for healing and blind eyes that sought to view Him in their first sight. It was down, down, down to the depths of a slave and a slave's service. And when death came, it would be preceded by betrayal, accentuated by the abandonment of His friends, punctuated by a thorny crown pushed upon His brow. He would be led to the most public place, not to be mourned as much as mocked. And the cross. No person had been more unjustly or cruelly betrayed by the ones He came to save nor suffer more exquisitely as His body was wracked in agony and the Father turned His back on Him. The Author and Creator of all life, "obedient to death—even death on a cross."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What would be your reaction if you met someone wearing a guillotine on a necklace? Is that reaction similar or different from how people in the first century reacted to the cross?
2. Is there any way that God could prove Himself more humble than He did?

PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11



In order to unite the empire as well as emphasize their power and glory, the caesars increasingly allowed and then encouraged that they be worshiped. While seeking a glory that was not theirs, the foolishness of their deification was evident when one died or was deposed. The temples erected in their honor were quickly converted to accommodate the new emperor, their statues were taken down and destroyed, and in some cases, efforts were made to expunge their names from official records. In the sharpest of contrasts, the growing movement of Christians worshiped Jesus Christ, whose glory was not coveted, but sacrificed, His power curbed instead of abused, His divine nature not a means of propaganda, but a revealing of the full Trinity.

After outlining Christ's abdication of His divine advantages for a time, Paul reminded believers that the splendor of the

Savior was revealed. First, there was His exaltation. “God highly exalted Him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name” (v. 9). The place He was lifted to was actually an acknowledgement of His return, to assume all that He had denied Himself while accepting the limits of human existence. He could only be restored to His former glory because as the unlimited God, no greater glory existed.

In these verses there are two references to His name. First, the “name that is above every name” (v. 9), and then we were told that all would submit to “the name of Jesus” (v. 10). In our modern thinking it is easy to skip by these references to the name of Jesus. But in ancient times, names were tremendously significant. Names stated the hopes of parents as they named their child. Whenever there were significant events in a place, a name was given to commemorate what happened. Several Bible characters received their names as a result of divine revelation, including Jesus. The name of God was considered so holy it was seldom used, and in our Bibles, God’s proper name, *YHWH*, was almost never used, translators choosing instead to use the term, *Lord*. What was communicated by Paul was the name of Jesus was of the greatest significance, so much so that at the end of the age, it is to His name that all of creation will bow in absolute submission.

The power and glory of the Savior is acknowledged by the reaction to His full revealing in the last day. To Him “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under

the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (vv. 10–11). It is staggering just thinking of the moment when humanity lays aside everything else to kneel before Him in worship. Unity that has been so elusive in the world will be an accomplished fact as every person will at once recognize Christ as Lord. Those living at the time will be joined in adoration and worship by all who have ever lived. That number will be comprised of all living creatures, including Satan and the fallen angels. Should life exist in other places in the universe, even those beings will join the throng. The caesars and the kings, dictators, and presidents will kneel next to beggars and outsiders. All will be involved in their highest possible pursuit—submission to and worship of Jesus Christ as Lord.

This act of worship will not be the sad submission of a vanquished foe, but a moment of high praise, thanksgiving and joy beyond any known in the present life. We were created to glorify God. In that moment, we will realize we are at our best when we offer our best to Him.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. If all will eventually recognize Jesus as Lord anyway, what benefit is it to honor Him now in this life?
2. What does the name of Jesus mean to you?



PART 3

SHINING **BRIGHTLY**

PHILIPPIANS 2:12–30

PHILIPPIANS 2:12–13



The widow of Zarephath who aided Elijah was, at the time of his arrival, making preparations for the last meal for her and her son (see 1 Kings 17:7–16). Elijah interrupted with a seemingly impossible and calloused demand. She was to feed him and give him something to drink with the promise that, if she did so, God would provide for her. She obeyed, and God did indeed supply what she needed until the crisis was over.

Couldn't God have provided for her without this test of faith? Certainly. But this is one more instance of God partnering with people to accomplish His will and blessing. The Bible is strewn with these partnerships that cause us to marvel at God's way among His people.

In these verses Paul instructed the Philippians to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12). What did he mean by that? Isn't salvation the work of God?

Recalling that disunity was a problem among the Philipians, the apostle reminded them that their faith was not some private, secret thing of the heart, but it was meant to be lived out in all relationships and situations. Work out means to live out our salvation. The current climate in the Western world dictates that the things of faith should be kept in their own segregated sphere, preferably to an allotted hour on Sunday morning. The prevailing view is that the business, political, and social world should be untainted by the influence of Christian love. This flies in the face of the biblical teaching that our faith is not only something that is to permeate every area of our lives, but if it fails to do so, it is useless. In his epistle, James launched a frontal assault on that kind of thinking (see James 2:14–26).

This is especially true in the church. We are given no pass to love only the people who are not prickly or to segregate ourselves, gathering in holy huddles among those who share our values and beliefs. Living with people is by its nature difficult. Even the most gregarious person finds that others sometimes bother him or her. And because we all possess a variety of personalities, there will always be people whose differences seem to give them direct access to our spinal cord to attack that last calm nerve. However, if we of the church fail in living out our salvation among fellow believers, we have no right to claim our gospel can change the world.

Beyond that application, working out our salvation also means that, in addition to the initial experience of conversion, we find that God's Holy Spirit continues to show us where change is needed, where He might lead us to greater insight, and how we might employ ourselves for His glory. The new believer and the most aged saint share this in common: they are working out their salvation in their everyday.

That God is at work is what makes working out salvation a possibility. This is not a "turn over a new leaf" kind of Christianity, but one of transformational renewal. Why? "It is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (v. 13).

No matter how accomplished, educated, experienced, or equipped we might be, we are all victims of the fall. We are born in sin, then choose to sin. Beyond the grief caused God by our disobedience, there is residual damage. If we injure ourselves, there is the immediate first aid that is applied, but in the healing process, a scar often remains as a reminder of what happened. In the same way, sin is not only an immediate transgression we commit, but something that often has long-term consequences.

As God works in us to do His good pleasure, He is reshaping us, banging out the dents, polishing away some of the scuffs . . . healing the scars. He is at work not only for our benefit in the moment, but to fit us for our eternal existence as citizens of the kingdom. Just as an infant forms

in the mother's womb for a life outside, we are being fitted for a life that is far different than the one we live now.

If sin had never entered the world, we would be very different than we are now. God knows what our truest potential is, what we could have been had sin not been part of the equation. The Holy Spirit deals with sin and its consequences, whispering here and urging there, to put us back on the path of what we might have been, until one day, when we are glorified in His presence, we see what He has seen our possibility to be. We will stand in wonder at what He has done. It was not His good pleasure to abandon us at our worst, but to work with us and in us. "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How are you working out your salvation?
2. How is God working in you according to His good purpose?

PHILIPPIANS 2:14–16



While on vacation a few years ago, we stopped to worship in a church we selected at random. It was a beautiful service with the pastor delivering a well-thought-out and practical message. As we were leaving we were greeted by one of the church members who immediately began to share what was wrong with the church, compared the present pastor with the previous one, and in so doing doused any sense of blessing we felt. Sadly, my experience is hardly unusual.

As Paul continued to deal with the Philippians regarding their problems within the church, he gave them a breathtaking command: “Do everything without grumbling or arguing” (v. 14). The all-inclusiveness of this command challenges even the saintliest. Clearly, however, Paul only stressed what he had already established as Christ’s model of humility for the Christian, a mind-set that was to fill every

moment and be evident in every situation that an individual faced.

Complaining refers to voiced discontentment. Arguing refers to more of a simmering, internal brooding and whispering to one another. This verse hearkened back to the grumbling or arguing done by the Israelites as they traveled through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Here they had daily evidence of God's provision through the manna in addition to numerous grand miracles that included water where there was none and meat that literally flew into their hands. The presence of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night were further proofs of God among them. Yet the children of Israel seemed to spend more time looking down than looking up. Although their complaining often garnered severe punishment, this seemed to be little deterrent. Paul was warning the Philippians not to be the modern equivalent of the Israelites in the wilderness.

Contrasting with these negatives was the admonition to be blameless and pure. These are hallmarks of the life of holiness.

As previously discussed, those living a holy life are to be blameless, but that is not the same as being faultless. We have limited minds and bodies, possess different personalities, were raised in different families, and live in various cultures. Despite our best efforts, we will not do everything perfectly or be faultless. While that may be true, our hearts

can be blameless. I may give my testimony with horrible grammar and using crude expressions, but the love that motivates that testimony makes my heart blameless. The delivery is faulty, but the intention is blameless.

The Greek word for *pure* was also used to describe metal with no alloy. In the spiritual life, it speaks of a love that is not manipulative or diluted with self-interest. It gives without seeking payback or reward; it serves without thought of keeping a tally of favors in return. Again, the outside manner may not be perfect, but the heart cleansed by the Holy Spirit can be pure. The Bible clearly presented this, not as something only to be gained at death, but to be lived and enjoyed in the present life.

If we avoid grumbling and arguing and instead are blameless and pure, the inevitable result is that we will “shine like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life” (vv. 15–16). The state of the heart and the behaviors Paul described here produce the certain result of love shining against the backdrop of a dark world that by itself can at best produce only a murky dusk for light.

It is interesting that Paul did not command the believers to shine. It is inescapable if we are truly living out our love in Christ. The idea of hiding our light under a bushel is foreign to the one who is animated by the Holy Spirit. Our failure to shine is a denial of the Lord and a colossal abandonment of what we are to be in Christ. As Flemming

remarked, “We have no possibility of changing the culture if we are too much like it.”¹

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you measure up with Paul’s command to “do everything without grumbling or arguing”?
2. In our present culture, how is it easier or more difficult to “shine like stars?”

PHILIPPIANS 2:17-18



The reference Paul made to being “poured out” was very familiar to the people of Philippi. Although also used in the Jewish religious practice of burnt offerings, that ritual would not have been as well known to Philippian Gentiles. So it is more likely Paul was referring to the Roman practice rather than the Jewish form of the ritual. Either way, it presented a very clear picture of Paul’s understanding of how his life might end.

As part of the sacrificial system, the libation to be “poured out” as an offering was most commonly wine. There were three ways it was offered that may have been in Paul’s thinking as he was writing. The first involved pouring the wine out on an empty altar by itself. In this application, it could mean Paul had offered to the Lord all that he was with nothing remaining.

The second involved the worshiper offering a costly sacrificial animal that would then be burned on the altar. As Dr. Boice described it, “Following this sacrifice, the ancient worshiper would make an additional offering called a libation. He would take a cup of wine and pour it on the altar, thus pouring it upon the sacrifice that was already burning. Because the altar was hot, the libation would immediately disappear in a puff of steam.” Here the meaning would be that Paul was poured out like a libation on the crucified Christ, the sacrificial Lamb of God. Gladly adding his own life as a sacrifice, he rejoiced to see his life joined with his Lord’s as he gave all he could offer.

The third was the use of the libation as a part of funeral rites. Here it showed a person’s earthly life was spent, and as the body would return to the elements, so the wine was absorbed by the ground. Although this may have occurred to the first-century believers, its note of hopelessness did not at all represent the joyful Christian message.

Having spoken about the sacrificial nature of his impending death, Paul followed immediately with a declaration of his joy: “I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me” (vv. 17–18).

This idea of being poured out was not the mutterings of a dejected, deserted, and defeated man, but rather it fueled his joy. Having served and suffered for the Savior he adored, to think that his life would culminate in offering, the

absolute last that he had to give, was to Paul a wonderful comfort. While no one should desire or seek to be martyred, his joining in long line of martyrs through the ages who had met their deaths for the Savior was nevertheless cause for joy. Such a joy can only come out of the grace of God fully operative in a heart totally yielded to Him. The survival instinct is overcome by the knowledge that there is a joy higher, more sublime than clinging to a few more years of life in denial of it.

Few of us will be called upon to die in this manner. That some of the Philippians may have themselves died for their faith, there can be little doubt. But it is likely that most lived their lives until natural causes carried them to eternity. For those not called upon to pour themselves out in this manner, the pouring out of martyrs' lives—though tragic and sad—is ultimately encouraging in their own faith.

One of the profound impacts made by those first generations of Christians and many since then was the discovery that joy was not dependent upon circumstances. Our joy is not in getting what we want or accomplishing our goals, nor is it to be found in ticking off the things we wanted to do in life. Our joy is rooted in the Lord. As such, we have confidence that, since He is with us in everything, there is nothing that can exist where He cannot reach us and turn to blessing. Here, the one on her deathbed reflects a joyful radiance; there, though surrounded by enemies and poverty,

the songs of praise are sung with enthusiasm. Our joy is never contingent upon what happens or what we possess—it springs unquenchably from the Lord.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How might your life be poured out before the Lord?
2. Have you ever had an occasion of joy when circumstances did not seem to warrant it? Why?

PHILIPPIANS 2:19-24



During the First World War, two young men named Mike and Joe, best friends from their youngest days, enlisted together in what they agreed was their patriotic duty. They were sent to the front where bloody and seemingly endless conflict caused troops from both sides to hurl themselves at each other, to die together on the no man's land that separated the lines.

During one of these charges and the subsequent retreat back to the trenches, Mike looked around for Joe. He heard Joe calling his name. Quickly, Mike jumped up to bring Joe back.

The sergeant yelled, "Don't go out there. He's a goner. There's nothing you can do."

Mike looked back, then charged forward to reach Joe amid bullets fired from the other side. A few minutes later,

Mike returned with Joe in his arms, but it was obvious that the reward for his bravery was a mortal wound. The sergeant rushed over and checked Joe's pulse, confirming he was already dead. Furious, he ran over to Mike and yelled, "I told you not to go. Joe is dead and now you're going to die. And for what?"

Mike lifted his head and said, "It was worth it. When I got to him, Joe said, 'I knew you'd come for me.'"

Just as God made us for fellowship with Him, He also made us for relationship with each other. For good reason, we need the touch of a human hand, the sound of a human voice; Paul was no different. This spiritual giant, whose truths have shaped our understanding of the Christian faith, needed a friend like Timothy. Although Paul was clearly the more prominent of the two as he served in a fatherly role, he found strength and encouragement in what Timothy had to offer. We can see some of this in how he commended his young friend to the Philippians.

"I have no one else like him, who will show a genuine concern for your welfare . . . you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel" (vv. 20–22).

The phrase that speaks the deepest of their friendship says, "I have no one else like him." In the ancient world, the idea of such close friendship was found in the Greek word Paul used, *isopsychos*, which means, "having one

soul.” The modern equivalent is to call someone a soulmate (even if it has become unfortunately clichéd). Perhaps the most common setting for this deep abiding friendship is within the context of a marriage in which the husband and wife are also best friends. Without compromising the sacred bonds of marriage, there can still be similarly close friendships outside of marriage such as that which Paul and Timothy enjoyed. These kinds of friendships are unselfish in nature, encouraging the growth and success of the other rather than viewing the other as a rival—in short, selfless friendships in Christlike humility.

Paul’s humble love for Timothy was not in denial of his friend’s imperfections. Uncharacteristically, Paul deviated from what he preached, feeling compelled to circumcise Timothy to better enable him to fit in with the Jews among whom he was working (Acts 16:3). What may have contributed to this was Paul’s understanding that Timothy tended to be fearful in nature (see his admonishment of Timothy in 2 Tim. 1:7). While Paul was able to argue toe-to-toe with his enemies, Timothy might have felt intimidated to the point of it affecting his usefulness or even willingness to accompany Paul. And while Paul may have been comfortable living a celibate life, Timothy may not have been fully convinced it was what he wanted. For whatever reason, Paul warned Timothy to “flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and

peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22).

Paul had complete trust in Timothy because of his faith and proven ability, sending him to represent Paul when he could not come himself. He knew that his young protégé would see things as he did, would deal with the situations he found as Paul himself might, and would then bring a faithful, unblemished report back.

While Paul clearly depended upon the Lord for all things, he was also grateful that God had given him the gift of friendship with Timothy. That friendship did not divide Paul’s loyalties. Rather, it further enriched his life and only confirmed and proved his love for Christ.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In thinking about the friendships you have or have had, which ones were beneficial and which ones were not? What was different about them?
2. How can friendships between two believers be more enriching than friendships between those who do not share in the fellowship of Christ?

PHILIPPIANS 2:25–30



Rome's armies were feared throughout the known world. One reason was they adapted one of the fighting styles of the Greeks. Most armies were little more than mobs of men who threw themselves wildly into battle or, at best, stood in long lines as they marched forward to the enemy. The Romans, however, were organized to fight side by side, forming phalanxes. Locking their shields together, they marched together toward the enemy, their shields extended and their swords at the ready. An enemy rarely faced a solitary Roman soldier in the initial battle. Instead they found soldiers who were not just fighting for themselves but their comrade beside them.

Paul spoke of Epaphroditus, who he calls his brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier. In this great salvation war they were waging, Epaphroditus had proven himself

to be a reliable companion at Paul's side. Beyond that, by using military terminology, Paul spoke of the urgency of the task before them, of the need for decisive action and a do-or-die spirit.

Epaphroditus had come to Paul from Philippi to minister to him and deliver a financial gift. Although we do not know the nature of the illness, along the way he had become very ill, so much so that it seemed almost certain he would die. We are told in Acts of the gift of healing Paul had so that even handkerchiefs he touched had a healing effect (see Acts 19:12). No doubt Paul prayed for his friend, but for reasons known only to God, Epaphroditus was not healed. Unlike what is sometimes preached today, miracles were not on demand but done in accordance with God's will.

The concern of the Philippians was such that when Epaphroditus heard of it he was "distressed." The Greek word for *distressed* speaks of intense emotion, used elsewhere to describe Jesus's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (see Matt. 26:38; Mark 14:33). Epaphroditus was one of those souls who was more moved by the pain of others than anything he suffered. With communication so slow in those days, he knew that even when he recovered they would still think him ill and continue to be concerned for him.

Apparently Paul was sending his letter to the Philippians by the hand of Epaphroditus because he told them to "welcome him in the Lord." Paul cited Epaphroditus's willingness to

risk his life for the work of Christ. In speaking of this, Paul used an interesting expression. The word *risk* in the original Greek was a gambling term. Dr. Witherington notes:

The participle . . . which means “staked,” “gambled,” or “risked,” may have been coined by Paul. The name Epaphroditus means “favorite of Aphrodite,” the goddess of gambling, whose name one would invoke for luck when rolling the dice, but in the work of the Lord he staked his very life in order to fill up the lack of service the Philippians would not have been able to give otherwise.¹

Paul considered Epaphroditus an example of the highest Christian values of selflessness and noble action. The danger he faced did not dissuade him from the goal before him. In a culture that promoted self-centeredness, Epaphroditus willingly went against that culture in order to serve Christ.

Chuck Swindoll in his book *Laugh Again*, quotes William Hendrickson’s story of reckless risk for the sake of Christ.

In the early church there were societies of men and women who called themselves *the parabolani*, that is, *the riskers and the gamblers*. They ministered to the sick and imprisoned, and they saw to it that, if at

all possible, martyrs and sometimes even enemies would receive an honorable burial. Thus in the city of Carthage during the great pestilence of AD 252 Cyprian, the bishop, showed remarkable courage. In self-sacrificing fidelity to his flock, and love even for his enemies, he took upon himself the care of the sick, and bade his congregation nurse them and bury the dead. What a contrast with the practice of the heathen who were throwing the corpses out of the plague-stricken city and were running away in terror.²

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What do you make of God not healing Epaphroditus when, through Paul's hands, He had healed so many others?
2. What would be a risk for you to take for the gospel's sake? Are you willing? Why or why not?



PART 4

KNOWING **HIM**

PHILIPPIANS 3:1-11

PHILIPPIANS 3:1–4



During the early 1500s, the Catholic Church was facing an economic crisis because of the expense of erecting the expansive St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. In order to generate more income and meet a demand among those concerned about the afterlife, the church promoted the sale of indulgences that were essentially gift certificates to reduce time in purgatory.

A young German priest, Martin Luther, was already conflicted about the teachings of the church, including the efficacy of some of the sacraments. But when the sale of indulgences started, it was too much. He drafted a document called the "Ninety-five Theses," nailing it to a church door in Wittenburg, Germany. With that act in 1517, the Protestant Reformation began. Discovering through prayer and research that grace was not for sale, nor the result of any

kind of personal works, Luther came to believe the scriptural teaching that “the righteous will live by faith” (Rom. 1:17). It remains a key foundational principle among the Protestant churches.

Paul himself had dealt with this age-old problem of works being substituted for grace—just when the fledgling church had seemed to have been free of the idolatry of legalism that plagued the Jewish faith, the teaching of the Judaizers began to work its way in. Judaizers were Jewish believers who insisted that the Mosaic law in all its detail be practiced by Christian converts. The key battle was over the rite of circumcision, and to a lesser extent, the eating of kosher food as prescribed in the Pentateuch. Paul, supported by the apostles and church leaders, had decided that Gentile converts were not bound by the Jewish ceremonies (see Acts 15).

Even though the church leaders had absolved Gentile converts of the need to be circumcised as well as most restrictions on food, the Judaizers continued to teach otherwise. Most of the Gentile believers were totally new to the teaching of Scripture and so were understandably confused. Paul fought against the teaching of the Judaizers, arguing they were seeking to enslave the new believers in ceremonies that the Jewish people themselves found difficult to observe and, in fact, seldom fulfilled.

Some of Paul’s strongest words against the Judaizer teachers are found in Philippians. “Watch out for those

dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” (vv. 2-3). Each phrase Paul used was like the lashing of a whip.

Paul called them dogs. While dogs are domesticated and beloved parts of many families today, the dogs during biblical times were largely untamed scavengers that ran in packs, often attacking passersby. Dogs were unclean animals to the Jews (see Lev. 11:27). They could not be eaten because they fed off the rotting corpses of other animals. To call a person a dog, then, was a sharp insult. Paul knew the Jews of his day commonly referred to Gentiles as dogs. Paul has turned the insult back on them.

He also called them “mutilators of the flesh,” referring to the rite of circumcision. Fee points out, “The Greek word for circumcision is *peritome* (“to cut around”); *katatome*, used here, denotes “cutting to pieces,” hence, “mutilate.”¹ The words sounded similar when spoken but obviously had hugely different meanings. By calling circumcision mutilation, Paul accused the Judaizers of being like the heathen people the Jews conquered to take the Promised Land. Their worship often included horrific mutilations of animals and people as part of their worship, so these practices were forbidden among the Jews (see Lev. 21:5).

Contrary to the Judaizers' teaching, Paul insisted what mattered was the work of God in the heart. Outward observances had their place, and certainly a sacrament or ordinance can by its symbolism speak powerfully into the life of a believer—but the point was the life of the believer in relationship with God.

In and of themselves, symbols do not possess the ability to confer grace. Water is still water and bread is still bread. Paul wanted the Philippians to understand that the work of God was not dependent upon any rite or ceremony. Moreover, if there were any act that a person could do to receive saving merit, then the cross of Christ would be unnecessary. It is because we cannot earn our salvation or God's favor that grace is necessary. His grace is enough.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Should Christians follow Paul's example in insulting enemies of grace within the church? Why or why not?
2. What are the benefits of church ordinances or ceremonies? What are their limitations?

PHILIPPIANS 3:4–6



Richard DeHaan, in *Daily Bread*, shared the story of an instant cake mix that flopped. “The instructions said all you had to do was add water and bake. The company couldn’t understand why it didn’t sell—until their research discovered that the buying public felt uneasy about a mix that required only water. Apparently people thought it was too easy. So the company altered the formula and changed the directions to call for adding an egg to the mix in addition to the water. The idea worked and sales jumped dramatically.”¹

As Paul was dealing with the problem of salvation by works taught by the Judaizers, he decided to meet them on their own ground. It was important for Paul to establish to the Philippians and the church at large that the reason he forsook the Jewish faith was not because he was

unqualified, that he failed, or that he was somehow mediocre in his pursuit of the kind of righteousness in which they believed.

Although it was distasteful to him, he laid out his pedigree. He began by stating that, even in infancy, he conformed to the law and was in good standing. “Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews” (v. 5).

His circumcision on the eighth day proved that he was born into a devout Jewish family who followed the letter of the law regarding when a boy should be circumcised (Gen. 17:12).

Equally important was his reference to his lineage in the tribe of Benjamin. Many Jewish families lost track of their lineage during the time of the Babylonian captivity, but Paul’s family had been careful to keep track of theirs to prove their ethnic purity. The tribe of Benjamin was noted because their forefather, Benjamin, was the only child of Jacob born in the Promised Land, the child of his favorite wife, Rachel. The first king of Israel, Saul, was from the tribe of Benjamin. Furthermore, when the nation of Israel separated into two nations, Israel and Judah, only the tribe of Benjamin sided with the tribe of Judah in seeking to be faithful to the Lord. Later it was the Benjamite, Mordecai, who was instrumental in the deliverance of the Jews as recorded in the book of Esther. To be a member of the tribe of Benjamin was to enjoy an especially honored place.

Now focusing on his practice as a Jew, Paul stated that he was a Hebrew of Hebrews. In this he meant that he was not just ethnically a Jew but had embraced all that it meant to be a Jew. The Jewish people preferred to call themselves Hebrews, so Paul recalled that special name in his account. Here Paul could cite his Hebrew parents who took him faithfully to the Hebrew synagogue, and who placed him in a highly honored Hebrew school where he sat at the feet of one of the great Hebrew scholars, Gamaliel. He spoke the Hebrew language, not just the common language of Aramaic. He read, not from the Greek translation of the Scriptures called the Septuagint, but from the original Hebrew that he used when citing Scriptures in his writing.

He then remarked that he was a Pharisee. The Pharisees' name meant "pure ones." They originally formed in the period between the testaments, during the Greek occupation of the Holy Land, as a people who set themselves aside to strictly observe Jewish practices and safeguard the Jewish religion from the encroachment of outside influences, particularly Greek. They were the fundamentalists of their day. It was their goal not only to observe what the law required, but to go above and beyond. While their goals were good, too many had become enamored with their self-righteousness by the time Jesus came. Nonetheless, to be a Pharisee was to dedicate oneself to the highest standards

in one's practice of the Jewish faith. Pharisees were highly respected as a result.

Paul then spoke of his zeal in persecuting the church. At that time, he was determined to see those who converted to the Christian faith hunted down to recant their heresy or be killed. He wanted nothing more than to see the church driven to extinction. There is no evidence that in those days he saw his actions as anything less than totally righteous. He felt no guilt for defending his faith against what he saw at that time as the pollution of the heresy that was Christianity. He threw himself into it body and soul until stopped suddenly along the road to Damascus by the risen Christ (see Acts 9:1–31). Up until then he thought he was good and all he had done was good. He had no idea he was, in fact, attacking God Himself.

This is where Paul used to be. He had gone much further than the Judaizers ever had. They had nothing on him. Unlike them, however, he was made to realize the idolatry of his lost condition.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What advantages or disadvantages can there be with families who have a long history as believers?
2. Did Paul's allegiance to the Jewish faith work for or against him? Why?

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-8



“The Prince Albert Coat” aired originally on May 10, 1957, as part of the *Adventures of Superman* series. It told the story of a young boy who wanted to help a charity drive by giving his great-grandfather’s coat. The problem was that the coat had sewn into its lining ten thousand dollars, the man’s life savings. Some criminals found out about the fortune and stole the coat. Through the help of the superhero, the coat eventually was recovered, but when it was opened, in the lining was Confederate money. What the boy had seen as so very valuable was worthless.

In the previous verses Paul defended himself against his critics by proving he was more Jewish than most of his accusers. This message of Paul hammered mercilessly against the teaching of the Judaizers. He had been born and had accomplished what they all longed for. Having laid that

out, he gave his valuation of what the supposed faith advantages all meant to him. “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ” (v. 8).

The language Paul used to describe his past accomplishments was strong and extreme. He used accounting terms, setting gain against loss. In doing so, the word for *gain* was plural while the word for *loss* was singular. By doing this he showed that those gains for which he had so long labored and dedicated himself were gone in a moment. When he spoke of all the past being lost, he was saying that it was not only gone but it was never to be touched again. There was no door open, no bridge to cross over to the other side again. Paul knew that the old affections could not be salvaged, nor could he pull back part of the sacrifice from the altar. Remembering Lot’s wife’s fatal longing look (see Gen. 19:26), Paul knew he must never cast a wishful glance backwards.

He went even further to say that the works of the past were garbage. Dr. J. B. Lightfoot has helpfully described the shades of meaning to the Greek word *skybala* that the NIV translates as “garbage”:

1. “Excrement,” the portion of food rejected by the body as not possessing any nutritive qualities. This sense is frequent in medical writers.

2. “The refuse or leavings of a feast,” the food thrown away from the table. The Judaizers spoke of themselves as banqueters seated at the Father’s table, of Gentile Christians as dogs greedily snatching up the refuse meat which fell from there. St. Paul reversed the image. The Judaizers [were] themselves “dogs” (see Phil. 3:2); the meats served to the sons of God [were] spiritual meats; the ordinances, which the formalists value[d] so highly, [were] the mere refuse of the feast.¹

Paul realized that no matter how “good” everything might have seemed, it was actually harmful because it had stood in the way of his knowing Christ as Savior. The believer joins Paul in this recognition. Sometimes we work or long for things that, once gained, actually work against us because they keep us from Christ. An example of how this works could be found with the king of Thailand, who by law had to be a Buddhist. If he did not remain Buddhist, he must abdicate. So in spite of the wealth, honor, and power in his position as king, these things became a road-block to his salvation in Christ. This is an extreme example. For most people it is far, far less that keeps them from Christ. The supposed good then is sin in that it separates us from God (the definition of sin).

Paul has replaced all of this with “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord . . . that I may gain

Christ” (v. 8). It is not just that the former things were so much clutter and garbage, but that their true value, or rather their poverty, became apparent when Jesus Christ came into view.

Most little girls love plastic jewelry with gaudy fake gems, but when compared to a diamond ring in a gold setting, their true value becomes obvious. So also when Christ comes and we know Him, the old things look cheap and useless. The excellence of Christ puts everything into its proper place and shows its true worth.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Has there been anything in your life that you longed to have, but when you got it, you wished you hadn't?
2. What things from our past can be salvaged and what things should be treated as garbage?

PHILIPPIANS 3:9



In 2009, a developer in Rhode Island hired an engineering firm to survey beachfront land on which he wanted to build a 2-million-dollar home which, when completed, he planned to put on the market. Everything checked out and the house went up without any problems. A buyer was found, but when he had an independent engineer check things out, it was discovered that the home was built on the wrong land owned by a park. In spite of the developer's pleading, the court ruled in favor of the park, telling the developer that he would have to move it or tear it down.¹

Paul established in the earlier verses that he had previously built his life in the wrong place. That discovery came at the precise moment he found Christ as Savior.

Paul described the new placement of his life as being “found in Him.” This is far more than an intellectual belief

in the doctrinal truth that Christ came through the incarnation, was crucified, and rose again for our salvation. That is part of it. But it is a heart knowledge that causes the life to pivot from one direction and head in another. Being found in Christ meant that Paul was not presenting himself any longer as a good person or a Hebrew of Hebrews, but rather clothing himself in the righteousness of Christ.

When he stands before God at the end of his life, it will not be with a long list of accomplishments or a recitation of his good works. Imagine the question being asked, “By what right do you enter heaven?” Paul would reply, “By the righteousness of Christ.” Nothing more and certainly nothing less.

The phrase “in Christ” or similar wording is sprinkled throughout Paul’s writing. It is the beautiful expression of a living, abiding, and intimate fellowship with the Savior that nourishes, protects, cleanses, and equips the child of God. It represents all our innate inadequacies and shortcomings being met with the sufficiency of our Lord. As an embryo in the mother is fed, warmed, protected, and given all that is needed to grow, so we who are in Christ find our present protection and future provision in this relationship with Him.

Paul spoke of “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ” (v. 9). Righteousness suggests a legal standing

before God, when we are justified through the work of the Savior on our behalf. But it is more than that. It speaks of a restoration of our right relationship with God. The offenses that separated us from Him are now as far as the east is from the west. The stains of sin have been washed away in the blood of Christ. And with that, He claims us as His children and we claim Him as our Lord.

That restoration of relationship is not only with God but with other people as well. The social aspect of salvation is part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian. The closer we grow to the Lord, the more concerned we are with relationships with others. As His life continues to grow within us, it is not enough for our salvation to be assured. We are concerned about the lost world around us. It is more than a mental assent that something should be done; it is the motivation to be up and doing. Relationship is more than a concept, it is a reality because of the work of Christ's righteousness in us.

All this is beautifully expressed in a poem entitled, "My Master" that is included in Chuck Swindoll's book *Laugh Again*.

I had walked life's path with an easy tread,
Had followed where comfort and pleasure led;
And then by chance in a quiet place—
I met my Master face to face.

With station and rank and wealth for goal,
Much thought for body but none for soul,
I had entered to win this life's mad race—
When I met my Master face to face.

I had built my castles, reared them high,
Till their towers had pierced the blue of the sky;
I had sworn to rule with an iron mace—
When I met my Master face to face.

I met Him and knew Him, and blushed to see
That His eyes full of sorrow were fixed on me;
And I faltered, and fell at His feet that day
While my castles vanished and melted away.

Melted and vanished; and in their place
I saw naught else but my Master's face;
And I cried aloud: "Oh, make me meet
To follow the marks of Thy wounded feet."

My thought is now for the souls of men;
I have lost my life to find it again
Ever since alone in that holy place
My Master and I stood face to face.²

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe being found in Christ to someone who is not a Christian?
2. In what way does your faith in Christ affect your relationships?

PHILIPPIANS 3:10–11



Having laid out the foundation for his relationship with Christ, Paul then said, “I want to know [Him]” (v.10). The word used for *know* in Greek has a corresponding identical meaning in Hebrew. The word represents the most personal and thorough knowledge. In Genesis, it referred to the sexual union between a man and a woman, that most intimately loving of human acts. Without the sexual overtones, Paul said he wanted to know Christ as intimately as a husband and wife know each other or a mother knows her child. It is not just to have a collection of facts. It is to know the motives, the priorities, what hurts and what helps another person, what makes him or her happy or sad.

Paul understood the more he knew Christ, the greater his devotion to Him would be. Paul concluded that every

important fact in the world led to Christ. Creation spoke of Him. The rituals of Jewish religion were patterns of His work. The temple with its furnishings all spoke of Him. The prophets saw Him over the ruin of the world around them. The history of the world itself, even the truths that survived through the distortions of other religions, spoke of Christ. He learned of Him from all legitimate teachings, and learned the significance and proper place of all these things by knowing Christ.

So Christ is made known to us by our worship, by the Word of God, by prayer. He is known by our experience of Him. We can describe the sweetness of honey and tell of its chemical makeup, but it can only be truly known by tasting it. Painted fires do not burn, and just looking at water will not wash dirty hands. It is only in experiencing the real thing that anything is accomplished. Christ must be known experientially or He is not known at all.

Paul then said that he wanted to know the “power of his resurrection” (v. 10). This great central truth for all of Christianity, this foundational fact upon which all Christian belief and teaching pivots, must never be ignored or given a mere token nod. It was not so for the early Christians. Even a cursory reading of the New Testament and the early church fathers revealed that they found this one fact was more than important. They hardly could keep themselves from speaking about it. The thrill of it leaped from the

pages as certainly as the stone rolled away on that resurrection morning.

The power of the resurrection fooled the disciples. They were sure the power arrived on that Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem. No king would have been welcomed with greater enthusiasm. As conquering heroes, the disciples walked in the wake of Christ's train, sure (they must have thought) to be the advisors in the new kingdom being born on this day.

And the common wisdom might have been, if not in the victory parade, then the betrayal or even the crucifixion would surely be the next place for power to be displayed. Pilate and the Roman soldiers should have faded away like dew before the morning sun. The Jewish leaders who opposed Christ should have run for their lives like refugees ahead of a ruthless army. But no such thing came to be. Perhaps the mocking tones of those surrounding the cross reflected the dashed hopes among the disciples: "Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God'" (Matt. 27:39-40).

What better display of power could there be than ripping one's hands and feet from the cross and coming down in power to banish all enemies? But Jesus stayed.

And in staying He died, with the anticlimax of His limp body being borne away by a handful of grief-stricken women.

Power would come when every human possibility was fully accounted for and eliminated. Power would flash in a lightless tomb, spreading like the rays of the rising sun.

It is the glorious power of that Easter morning that Paul wanted to know. Why? Because there was no power greater. Why? Because there was no power more transforming. Why? Because when Christ arose, He reached out His hand to take you and me up with Him.

Finally, Paul spoke of wanting to intimately know “participation in his sufferings,” what some versions translate as the *fellowship* of his sufferings (v. 10). Paul knew this meant understanding pain at a deeper level than ever before fathomed. Christ’s suffering also was for different reasons than what is the common lot of humanity.

Christ’s suffering was intended to happen. The natural response to pain is to avoid it or end it as quickly as possible. Touch your finger to a hot stove. Your reaction is to get away from the stove and then to find a way to make your finger stop hurting.

There are times when we undergo a painful experience intentionally, but it is usually in order to accomplish a self-benefiting end. A person submits to surgery not because he relishes having himself cut open, but because the suffering in surgery is the price to be paid to prevent a worse calamity.

Not so for Jesus. When He chose to suffer, it was His intention to undergo it, to feel the full force of pain in the moments of His betrayal, humiliation, and crucifixion. He intended to do it not because it would meet any good end for Himself, but so it would accomplish His intended purposes for us. Had He not come to earth to live, suffer, and die, the galaxies would have continued to spin, the seasons would still follow one after another, and the angels would go on about their heavenly services, but the people of this world would remain hopelessly lost in sin. Jesus's suffering was for our sake.

Paul knew he could not share the sufferings of Christ in their intensity. Only the Son of God could take onto Himself the sins of the world, suffer the consequence of separation from the Father, and yet remain the only pure soul amid the swamp of sin that earth had become. Only Christ could bear it, but in doing so, he was afflicted by it through and through.

Paul specified that he wanted to share in the “fellowship” of His suffering. The word *fellowship* in the original language is the same one used for the partnership Peter and Andrew had in their fishing businesses. As Jesus's partners, we fall in behind Him while He plows the way ahead. We walk in the footsteps of bleeding feet; we carry our cross in His way with the stains of nail-scarred hands; we bend our head with Him beneath the press of thorns on His head.

And we do this intentionally. The criminal had his cross sentenced to him and would escape it if he could have. But the follower of Christ purposely takes up his cross to follow Jesus.

Paul would seek a crown, yes. But he would do so as did his Master. Through the cross. Through the fellowship of suffering.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you seek to know Christ more intimately?
2. How can you share in the sufferings of Christ?



PART 5

WHAT'S BECOMING **OF US?**

PHILIPPIANS 3:12–21

PHILIPPIANS 3:12



C. S. Lewis, although raised to attend church and pray, declared himself an atheist in his college years. He was troubled by both the existence of evil and what he perceived to be the meaninglessness of life. Speaking of this time, he said, “Nearly all I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real, I thought grim and meaningless.”¹ Although he hoped for better things, he felt reality was dark and hopeless. Drawn to Christian authors, particularly G.K. Chesterton, he was surprised by the growing interest he was having in the Christian faith. As he read, his objections to Christianity began to fade away.

While riding a bus in Oxford, Lewis felt he was, as he said it, “holding something at bay, or shutting something out.” He could either open the door or let it stay shut, but to open the door “meant the incalculable.” He finally submitted

himself to God, the most “dejected and reluctant convert” in all England. This belief in God happened in 1929, but it was not until 1931 that he surrendered himself to Christ. From the time of his conversion in 1931, Lewis sought to know more and more about his newfound Lord. Although still writing about medieval literature while serving as a professor at Oxford, he also turned his considerable writing talent and sharp mind to Christian fantasy, for example, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and apologetics, *Mere Christianity*, his most well-known non-fiction work. His British Broadcasting Corporation radio addresses were legendary while his books continued to influence Christians and non-believers alike, generations after his death.

C.S. Lewis’s experience somewhat mirrored Paul’s. Although Paul was not an atheist, his abhorrence to Christianity rivaled Lewis’s. In Philippians, he carefully laid out his previous status and his view of those former days. He spoke about his change of priorities from disdaining Christ to seeking above all else to “know Him,” from inflicting suffering on believers to seeking “participation in his sufferings” (3:10).

Paul qualified, “Not that I have already obtained all this” (v. 12). The church father Theodoret paraphrased Paul’s perspective: “‘It was he who first caught me in the net,’ said Paul in effect, ‘for I was fleeing him and was turned well away. He caught me as I fled. But now I in turn

am the pursuer in my desire to catching him, that I may not be a disappointment to his saving work.”³ Paul, who ran away, was now running toward the Lord he had spurned.

Paul then talked about one side of a Christian paradox. Christian perfection remains a highly controversial subject, mostly because those who decry it view it from a very narrow perspective. The Christian who lives a holy life dedicated to perfectly loving God and neighbors is in one most important way “perfect” or complete. And yet in another way his or her life remains “imperfect” or still incomplete. We can be perfect in the sense we have submitted everything we know to the Lord’s control, that He has become the supreme ruler of our lives. We desire Him above any sin or temptation that might lure us away. In God’s eyes, that is a perfect heart as spoken of throughout Scripture.

Enjoying this kind of perfection, however, hardly means we are a finished product. While I may in this moment open my heart fully to the Holy Spirit, asking Him to reveal any harbored, sinful attitude or action contrary to His will, He may show me something or nothing at all. The Lord knows what we can take, and to reveal to us all at once all of our imperfections and areas that need growth might overwhelm us. As we are ready, He leads us along to new truth and deeper understanding until when the problem area is brought to our attention, we can then seek His help in dealing with whatever it is.

Along with this is the reality that we change as we enter and then go through different stages of life. The dimension of grace needed for a new parent is different than the dimension of grace needed as a person faces the end of his or her life. What we need to know is shown to us at the point of our need. Because we continue to grow as people and continue to expand in our roles and responsibilities, we continue to need to grow spiritually. So even while living a holy life with perfect hearts, we can find we are not perfectly finished or fitted for everything. The Holy Spirit works with our yielded will so He can accomplish His work. With Paul, we can honestly say we have not already arrived at our goal of perfection.

Like Paul, we “press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of [us].” We understand that today’s surrender is not the last one, that yesterday’s breakthrough, while wonderful, is not the end of the battles ahead of us. Our hope is that we can take hold of Christ, because He who leads us holds us as well. We are safe where He leads, only in danger if we refuse to follow.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever tried to run from God? What brought you back?
2. How is it for you to live in the tension between perfect and imperfect?

PHILIPPIANS 3:13-14



The 1936 Olympic games were held in Berlin, the premiere city of what was then Nazi Germany. Adolf Hitler yearned for the games to prove to the world the strength of Germany as well as the superiority of what he termed the “pure Aryan race.” The Nazis’ disdain for other races, while particularly focused on Jews, also included many people of other races. The times were tense as Hitler was openly arming his nation for the war that would engulf the world three years later. At this point, Hitler wanted to win the propaganda war with the Olympic games as his showpiece.

Enter Jesse Owens, an African American and supremely skilled runner. Although he was a representative of the United States (US), his skin color subjected him to discrimination before and after the games in his home country. Many white supremacists in the US were embarrassed that a

Black man was America's representative. Knowing of this as well as the antipathy of the Nazis, Owens refused to be distracted and in dazzling fashion won gold medals in the one-hundred meter, two-hundred meter, long jump, and four by one-hundred meter relay. If anyone could have blamed defeat on the distractions around him, it would have been Jesse Owens. But he kept his eye on the prize and ran to victory.

Paul spoke of that very same idea with the metaphor of a spiritual race. In describing how he viewed his spiritual journey, he first said that he was "forgetting what [was] behind" (v. 13). Chuck Swindoll commenting on this forgetting, said it like this.

The original word Paul used when he wrote, "forgetting what lies behind," was a Greek term that meant fully forgetting, *completely* forgetting. Actually, it was an ancient athletic term used of a runner who outran another in the same race: Once he got into the lead, he would never turn and look back; he would forget about the other runner.¹

While we cannot totally forget our past, nor is it wise to do so, the forgetting spoken of here is about putting thoughts out of the mind—a refusal to dwell on the past. There are people who are obsessed with what could or should have happened, often blaming others for their poor

station in life or lack of success. How much better their life would be if they'd commit their ways to the Lord and chose, as Paul, to forget everything but pursuing Christ! Instead Paul described his "straining toward what is ahead" (v. 13). He would not be distracted by side issues nor would he be burdened with the weight of ceremonies or attitudes that slowed his progress.

A Greek fable tells of two runners preparing for a race. One knew he had no chance of winning because he was not as fast as his competitor. He surprised the other runner when he showed up at the starting line with five golden apples. Bolting out into the lead, as he ran and could feel the other runner getting close, he would drop an apple. As he expected, the runner would stop to pick it up. Each time he sensed the other runner, he dropped another apple. As he did so, he relieved himself of the weight he was carrying while the other racer lost distance and took on the extra weight of the apples. The slow runner won because the faster runner had his mind on something other than the race. Paul said he was straining, focusing on what was ahead, and he would not allow himself to be turned aside.

He noted that "one thing" was on his mind. The English rendering is not strong enough. Actually, it should emphasize "*but* one thing," at the exclusion of everything else. That single-minded focus was propelling him forward.

Although he sat in prison, likely chained, he was free to run the race of Christ totally focused.

Where was Paul going? “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (v. 14). He was headed for the reward that was his for eternity. It is the tendency in our time to not talk too much about heaven or the reward that awaits the believer except, perhaps, at funerals. While we should be relevant to the time in which we live, we need to remember that our life here on earth is like the opening credits of a movie—the real story follows. Paul knew that, and as he got closer to the end of his life, he was energized by what was awaiting him. Death for him was not going to be some sad occasion or approached with armfuls of regret. It was the ribbon that was to be broken as he crossed the finish line. Then, in a glory we could not comprehend, he would receive his reward.

Flemming explains, “The picture would be of the presiding judge calling up the victor at the race’s end to receive a prize, usually a laurel.”² The promise to the believer is what awaits us: the flush of victory and the commendation of our Lord. And unlike earthly races where there is but one victor, we all can cross the finish line in victory as we pursue the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What should you forget and what should you remember?
2. When you think of entering heaven, what do you think it will be like? How can your life either prepare you or hinder you in winning the race?

PHILIPPIANS 3:15–17



When I have had the opportunity to teach, I often encounter people with different views on the subject at hand. After I discuss a point with them, we explore the validity of each other's point, then I like to jokingly say, "Of course, you are entitled to your own opinion—if you don't mind being wrong." There is a bit of that in this passage as Paul continued to address his Philippian friends.

The NIV weakens the strength of the passage by using the word *mature* instead of the more correct rendering of *perfect* as is found in a number of other translations. Some compromise and use a hybrid, *perfectly mature*, whatever that may mean. It is clear that it is easier in the present to speak of maturity rather than perfection, but as we previously discussed, the perfection spoken of in relation to the believer is not the idea of someone who is absolutely perfect, with

no room for improvement. It is rather the idea of complete and whole. Flemming points out that in the Septuagint, the word *perfect* means “those whose hearts are wholly devoted to God.”¹

Maturity is certainly an important and desirable trait, especially in spiritual matters, but it lacks the strength Paul apparently meant to convey in choosing the word he did. While maturity speaks of experience and the wisdom gained through study and reflection, the full devotion and total commitment found in the word *perfect* are the grounds on which Paul spoke to the Philippians. Maturity is a part of biblical perfection, but the reverse is not necessarily so.

There was a slight edge in Paul's statement that said, “And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you” (v. 15). Paul was not talking so much about the way people expressed themselves. What he was trying to convey was while there may be flexibility in some things, there are others that are non-negotiable. In a way he was saying, “If you love the Lord fully and have grown in your faith, you will reach these same conclusions.” He was arguing that the Spirit of God will not lead to thoughts that contradict Scripture or the wisdom of the Christian faith. Although postmodernism dismisses the notion of absolute truth, it doesn't mean that absolute truth fails to exist. There are certainly areas of faith that are not clear

cut and that are subject to some individual interpretation. Believers can explore those areas even if it vexed Paul a bit.

His answer was to encourage believers to follow his example. While that sounds conceited to our modern minds, it was a common practice in ancient times for philosophers and teachers to place themselves before their students as examples of their teaching. As we think about it, whenever we give advice to another person by speaking of lessons we have learned, or telling of how we handled this or that, we are essentially saying, “Imitate me.” Perhaps we aren’t putting it as bluntly as Paul said it here, but it delivers the same message.

Paul was in good standing in offering himself as an example of Christlike humility. In his second letter to the Corinthians, when being maligned by those who tried to dilute his influence, he answered with an incredible rendition of the selfless love he had been living out by the power of and love for Christ and for those neighbors whom God placed in his path:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked,

I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:23–28).

On the positive side, Paul's letters became and have remained incredibly helpful in understanding and applying the Christian faith. Obviously God the Holy Spirit found a quick and ready mind to inspire to write the various letters that make up more than half the books of our New Testament. Literally it can be said that Paul had every right to refer to himself as an example since he had experienced firsthand the deep joy of participating in the fellowship of Christ's suffering for the sake of others.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you deal with people who view matters of faith differently than you?
2. Could you say to someone, “Follow my example”? Why or why not?

PHILIPPIANS 3:18–19



In the original preface to C. S. Lewis's classic *The Screwtape Letters*, he aptly characterized the primary, terrible characteristic of hell's population—a self-consuming self-centeredness that was disturbingly reminiscent of worldly mind-sets prevalent here and now:

[Hell is] an official society held together entirely by fear and greed. On the surface, manners are normally suave. Rudeness to one's superiors would obviously be suicidal; rudeness to one's equals might put them on their guard before you were ready to spring your mine. For of course "Dog eat dog" is the principle of the whole organization. Everyone wishes everyone else's discrediting, demotion, and ruin; everyone is an expert in the confidential report, the pretended

alliance, the stab in the back. Over all this their good manners, their expressions of grave respect, their “tributes” to one another’s invaluable services form a thin crust. Every now and then it gets punctured, and the scalding lava of their hatred spurts out.¹

In contrast to his own model of self-sacrificing humility, Paul cautioned against the “many [who] live as enemies of the cross of Christ” (v. 18). These are the proud occupants of hell on earth—they are ruled by the anti-humility spirit of self-centeredness and self-promotion. Far from the mind-set of Jesus Christ that would lower oneself for the sake of others (even to the point of dying so painfully on a cross), the person whose “mind is set on earthly things” (v. 19) is about lifting self above all others. This is the survival-of-the-fittest mind-set, always looking out for number one. The way of the world is about putting up crosses for others to bear; the furthest thing from their minds is taking any up for themselves. Any capacity for love or relationship they might have is notoriously only as deep as their own shallow self—thus “their god is [nothing more than] their stomach” (v. 19).

If Paul had the Judaizers in mind, his irony was thick here. The reference to their god being their belly could likewise have implied their obsessively legalistic lording over others through dietary laws. No doubt they were scandalized

when they saw the Gentile Christians freely eating pork or meat that was not kosher.

The other reference of “their glory is in their shame” (v. 19) could very well be a reference to their private parts. With the insistence that all Gentile men be circumcised, the Judaizers obsessively were making reference to male anatomy, something ordinarily rarely spoken about publicly in Jewish circles. That which should have been private, or handled with healthy modesty, was something they gloried in. It was almost like they were saying, “I am one of God’s chosen. Come view my privates.” Unbelievable.

There is also thought that some of these who were enemies were those who claimed to be Christians yet lived grossly immoral lives. The *Beacon Commentary* notes that often in ancient literature the belly refers to the womb.² It is not surprising that with the large influx of Gentiles into the church there would be some who came along who brought with them the practices of their heathen religions. Many of these involved temple prostitutes or orgies that were part of their so-called worship.

Syncretism, the attempt to combine different religions, was common among first-generation believers, as it is even to this day. The suggestion that self-serving immorality was part of worship would not have sounded out of line to the new convert who may have come from religions that practiced it. But once involved, it was difficult to extricate them

from the deviant behavior, especially if a respected person was telling him or her it was all right. Paul insisted on the biblical standard of sexual purity in marriage—intimacy with a spouse rather than self-gratification without committed love for another.

What church father John Chrysostom said in the fourth century is relevant for us today: “Your body is given to you that you may rule it, not so that you may have it as a mistress.”³ We need to be careful. Obviously there can be good pleasure in eating, and looking nice is not bad. Exercise is beneficial. But when any of these becomes a selfish obsession that makes it the primary motivator in life, it is on par with the enemies of the cross that Paul addressed.

There should be alarm as well about any symptoms of loose morality that can still be as prevalent in the church as out. The telling attitude is notoriously, “If I don’t feel bad, it can’t be wrong,” or even worse, “It’s what makes me happy.” Such should be obviously antithetical to the humble mind-set of Christ, whose concern is not about serving one’s own interests. The Bible makes no such allowances for a so-called faith that prioritizes narcissism or self-serving interests.

How will these people end up? “Their destiny is destruction” (v. 19). Paul left no doubt of the end result of this kind of lifestyle—the self-destructive hell they lived now on earth was only a foreshadowing of their misery in

eternity. When people choose self-interest over God's will, they cut themselves off from their only hope of salvation. Contrast that with previous verses where Paul spoke of the goal set before him. As Psalm 1 says so succinctly, "For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction" (v. 6). Self-serving is nothing other than self-destruction.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How can essential and good things progress to the place where they are a hindrance to faith?
2. Describe ways your body can serve as the temple of the Holy Spirit. Is your body helping or hindering you?

PHILIPPIANS 3:20-21



When my family and I lived overseas, we had to have permission from the country's government that allowed us to live and work there. Papers were issued to us that we were to carry in case we needed to prove we were legally admitted. Even though we were immersed in the country, we remained citizens of the United States of America. Although far from home, we had every right and privilege as any other American citizen. We also knew that if certain needs arose, we could call upon the government of the United States to come to our aid. We also knew at some point we would leave to return to our home country. Although we lived there, our citizenship was somewhere else.

The first century church was increasingly a melting pot of nationalities, races, and ages. In the congregations there were a mixture of the rich and poor, the cultured and barbaric.

The master might find himself taught by his slave while the former prostitute broke bread with the one steeped in religious tradition. Though their backgrounds varied widely, they found common ground at the feet of Christ. Each would go out, plunged into cultures that neither understood nor liked them. But they gathered back together where their voices blended in songs to the Savior and they fed upon the Word as they moved forward in their faith.

In a hostile environment, they formed what was a colony of fellow citizens of heaven. Here there was the beginning of eternal life, and these believers among whom they sat and worshiped were their countrymen in the kingdom of God. No Greek or Jew, or barbarian or foreigner. Christ united them as fellow citizens. The world had never seen this before. The Roman Empire began to see in this a growing threat as the church drew people of all kinds together, something that the Roman Empire hoped to do but never accomplished. It was a great wonder, and it still is.

We are united by our hope of the return of Christ and His reclamation of the earth. Satan is called the god of this age (see 2 Cor. 4:3–4), but in reality he is a squatter. God holds the title deed to this earth. When Christ returns, the squatter will be swept away, and our Lord will once again reclaim what is His. Even as He comes to reclaim the earth, He will allow us to reclaim our bodies.

The Greeks believed that the soul would shed the body much as a snake sheds its skin. Other religions have taught that the body is like a suit of clothes we wear out, and then through reincarnation we are fitted with a new one for a time. But the Bible knows nothing of these concepts. The artificial separation of the physical from the spiritual is not a Christian belief. God created us as integrated units. The body is more than a vehicle or vessel for the soul because the two are unified. Evidence of this comes when we are sick. Who feels like shouting praises when they have the flu? The body most decidedly affects the spirit. On the other hand, when we are unwell we find that our praise and labors for the Lord can lift us so we feel physically better. The body and soul are organically linked.

Paul said Jesus “by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (v. 21). This is a startling declaration. These bodies, which serve us so well one minute only to betray us the next, will finally become what they were always meant to be, had our first parents not brought sin into the world. The prototype of what we can expect is found in Christ Himself in His resurrection body, “Like his glorious body,” (v. 21) Paul said. Dr. Witherington succinctly summarized, “Christ’s history is the believer’s destiny.”¹

The *Beacon Bible Commentary* notes further that the new outward appearance of the glorified body will be fashioned and formed in ways “appropriate to its inner spiritual character.”² Apparently we will be recognizable somehow in our physical form, but the inner us will now supplement that appearance in some way. We see people of whom we say, “She is the picture of love.” Perhaps that is a foretaste of life in the kingdom. We will be on the outside what we are on the inside. All we are becoming now in Christ is the DNA of our resurrection bodies.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. If we take seriously the idea that our citizenship is in heaven, how does that change what we are doing now?
2. Imagine your glorified body that reflects the condition of your soul as well. What will you look like?



PART 6

ABASED **AND ABOUNDING**

PHILIPPIANS 4:1–23

PHILIPPIANS 4:1-3



A few years ago I was talking to my superior about some frustrations I was having with other members of the staff. He acknowledged that there were some problems but very gently reminded me, “We are swimming in a small pool. We are bound to bump into each other from time to time.” I forget what I complained about, but have often thought about his wisdom.

Before dealing with dissension, Paul called upon the believers to “stand firm in the Lord” (v. 1). Richard R. Melick, Jr. noted that “Roman armies were known for standing unmoved against the enemy. The church was to stand in the same way.”¹ Standing together means being unified in purpose and with healthy dependence upon each other. We would say now that he expected them to work as a team.

Throughout his letter to the Philippians, Paul returned, to the issue of disunity. In this passage, he singled out two women whose differences must have been so sharp as to merit special mention. Paul did not need to demonstrate his authority but took a different tack, saying, “I plead” (v. 2). No doubt he had great affection and appreciation for both women. Their dispute was not something to attack but instead caused him grief. In Philippi as now, we sometimes find ourselves bystanders of disputes, and if not drawn in by one faction or another, just longing for the parties involved to settle their differences with a humble spirit of forgiveness.

Paul requested an unnamed person to mediate, calling him or her “my true companion.” The King James Version translates this as *yokefellow*, which is a beautiful picture of someone sharing closely alongside us, working as hard as two oxen yoked together. In this Paul was saying that this person was one he treated as an equal, a true companion whose reliability was well known.

If Paul were there, he would have mediated the dispute, but since he could not, this trusted colleague was called upon to act in his stead. Since the women apparently could not or chose not to work it through on their own, a gentle hand to guide them was what was needed. As any who have tried to insert themselves into a disagreement will know, this is no easy task. Paul’s confidence in his friend must have been very high to put before that person such a difficult task.

It is important to notice the women's place of leadership in the church. Chrysostom noted, "These women seem to me to be the chief of the Church which was there."² There is no indication from Scripture that women were considered inferior in any way; in fact, they were respected leaders. The Holy Spirit does not discriminate as to whom He gifts, and certainly not because of gender.

The Salvation Army was the first denomination to declare women were equals in ministry with men. There is little doubt that The Salvation Army could not have reached as many with the gospel without the full engagement of women with their gifting in leadership in its global outreach. Catherine Booth, dubbed the mother of The Salvation Army, wrote concerning women in ministry:

If she has the necessary gifts, and feels herself called by the Spirit to preach, there is not a single word in the whole Book of God to restrain her, but many, very many to urge and encourage her. God says she shall do so, and Paul prescribed the manner in which she shall do it, and Phebe, Junia, Phillip's four daughters, and many other women actually did preach and speak in the primitive churches. If this had not been the case, there would have been less freedom under the new than under the old dispensation.³

Despite many passages popularly cited by other spectrums of Christianity, most are about the marriage relationship, not church leadership dynamics. And on those few occasions Paul did speak to women's roles in churches, he clearly expressed his own preference in dealing with the difficult realities of cultural norms at that time. For instance, despite the favorite (though unique) reference cited by those opposed to ordination of women in 1 Timothy, it is clear from this passage in Philippians and several others that there were several scenarios in which Paul did indeed "permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man" (2:12).

Though a believer, in reality, Paul taught that in Christ there was "neither male nor female" (Gal. 3:28), Paul was working in a human culture and religious tradition that was stiff necked and patriarchal. As did Jesus himself, Paul had to condescend and deal with cultural injustices as they were, be they slavery or misogyny.

Paul then spoke not only about women but about Clement and others who had shared in the work of the gospel. He noted that their names were written in the "Book of Life" (v. 3). The idea of a registration book was familiar to the ancient people. The Bible tells of such a registry for the Jewish people (see Ps. 69:28; Isa. 4:3). At the death of a prominent person, it was the practice to read out their name for a praiseworthy life, an honor that was cherished.

The Philippians whose names were found in the Book of Life had the assurance of salvation that comes with faith in Christ. These who had been so faithful could expect the honor and peace that comes from knowing they had a place in the kingdom.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is the best strategy for dealing with disputes in the church?
2. What qualifies a person for ministry? Should gender be an issue?

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7



Prisons in Paul's day were not places to punish people as they are now. They most often served as holding places for those awaiting execution or transfer. As such, they were filthy, full of disease, and dimly lit. Food rations were poor and wholly inadequate. There was no concern about conditions being overcrowded or any violence that might occur since the prisoners were already considered hopeless and helpless creatures undeserving of any kindness. To be in a prison made a person long for death. When Paul wrote to the Philippians, it was from a pit of gloom. And what did he speak about? Joy.

The word *joy* or its derivative appears fifteen times in Philippians. Given Paul's dark circumstances, the words leapt off the page signaling a light in that dismal place only the redeemed could perceive. "Rejoice in the Lord always I will say it again: Rejoice!" (v. 4). It's significant that Paul

expressed this as an imperative—it's something you do, not feel according to the circumstances. Christian joy is never based on what is going on around us, but what is happening in us because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is also not something to be pumped up like the courage needed to enter a darkened room. Joy is the natural by-product of a life aligned with the Savior. Joy is more a symptom of one's intimacy with and reliance upon God's indwelling Holy Spirit; that is, if joy is lacking, look to your relationship with God (rather than within yourself or your circumstances).

With joy comes expectations. Regardless of the outer circumstances or who may be mistreating us, Paul said to "Let your gentleness be evident to all" (v. 5). Gentleness is understood as the willing surrender of our own personal rights. In the Septuagint it is equated with our word *noble* or used to demonstrate kindly restraint. Why do this? "The Lord is near" (v. 5). This was likely a common expression in the early church that not only voiced the hope of the Lord's return, but also was a reminder that all that now exists is only temporary. In the light of eternity, much of what was bothersome now would evaporate without a trace.

Anxiety is rejected, to be replaced instead by "prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present[ing] your requests to God" (v. 6). Being in a constant state of anxiety is denying the power of God over our situations. Of course, there are times when we are anxious if we are in physical danger

or facing an uncertain situation—that’s the fight-or-flight animal instinct God gave us. Moments of anxiety in the face of threat are not the subject at hand, but rather it’s the constant state of emotional anxiety that is problematic.

The antidote to the poison of anxiety is prayer and thanksgiving. When we pray we are claiming God’s interest in us. Just saying a prayer is an acknowledgement of God and a realization that no matter where we are, we are never out of His sight. God is always greater than anything we face, always set on doing what is best for His child. Reminding ourselves of that reality eases any anxious feelings we might have.

Thanksgiving is part of our defense as well. Being grateful is not something restricted to a certain day in the year but like joy, a constant hallmark of the Spirit-filled believer. To be unthankful is not only wrong, but dangerous. Gordon Fee asserts that “lack of gratitude is the first step to idolatry.”¹ And Karl Barth says, “Man is unguarded, open to every enemy and every danger, as long as he does not give thanks.”²

Paul closed this section with a much beloved promise. “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7). When the Bible speaks of peace, it is based on the Jewish word *shalom*, and includes the idea of a general sense of wellbeing and wholesomeness. There are times

when hostilities may have ceased, but there is hardly any sense of peace in the heart.

Some families, while not in open conflict, have a pervasive seething just under the surface. Nations can stop firing at each other, but the antipathy the citizens feel toward each other hardly constitutes a desirable state. Nor can giving in to bullying behavior so as to avoid conflict be considered peace. On the other hand, there can be tremendous outer conflict and a total state of uncertainty, but a profound peace that steadies the soul. This latter idea is what Paul was speaking about. His environment was hardly peaceful, his prospects bleak at best, but he was a man dwelling in the peace that Christ gives.

Using a military metaphor, Paul said peace stood sentry as a guard over our hearts and minds. There is a paradox here in using the military framework because the military guarantees the peace with weapons of war. Paul may have been emphasizing that the peace of God was as militant in guarding our hearts, fighting against those enemies that would steal our sense of God's protection and care. This is not some pale, "peace at any price," spineless state of affairs. It is a robust, active securing of peace over and against all that is happening around.

It "transcends all understanding" (v. 7). It is a peace that, to those who are not believers, makes no sense whatsoever. Sometimes it makes no sense to us, but during times we

thought we might fall apart, strength we cannot explain apart from the Lord's presence, is experienced. It goes beyond our understanding because it is, in fact, beyond us.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How would Paul express joy to others around while he was in prison?
2. In what circumstances has God guarded your heart with His peace?

PHILIPPIANS 4:8–9



The whole idea of a cookbook is to present not only different ideas for foods, but details on the ingredients needed, the measurements for each, steps needed for preparation, how to tell if the item is ready, and how many servings can be expected. Supposedly, whether you're an expert or a novice, following the recipe will result in your final production looking just like the picture. That is the theory, at any rate.

Having spoken about the peace of God guarding our hearts (v. 7), Paul provided the ingredients that when integrated into our thought life and practiced would result in God's peace—in His humility that transcended all the disunity and contention that wanted to dominate our lives. Like a recipe, each built on the other, and though worthwhile in and of themselves, were meant to be blended into our lives.

We are to think about what is:

True: Besides the obvious meaning of something that is not false, the word carries the idea of truthfulness and dependability. It can mean what is authentic, real, and reliable.

Noble: When we see this word we think about chivalry, and that is certainly true to what it meant in Paul's day as well. But more commonly, it referred to a moral quality that was honorable and worthy of respect.

Right: The definition of *right* was not left to individual interpretation. There was no concept of situation ethics or doing whatever felt right, varying as it did from one person to another. Rather, it meant what was right by God's standards. It included applying principles of justice.

Pure: There were two complementary ways that *pure* was applied. First, it meant to be upright and honest at a heart level that showed itself in a person's authentic attitudes, motives, and actions. It also included the idea of sexual purity for the same reasons: upright and honest with respect to the marriage bed, by abstinence when not married, and when married, fidelity to one's spouse.

Lovely: This is the only occasion that this word appears in the New Testament. It embraces not only what is beautiful but what is lovable as well. It approves of what is morally lovely and aesthetically pleasing. It would be evident in approving the good actions of a child as well as admiring a sunset.

Admirable: Dr. Gordon Fee explains, “Rather than referring to a virtue in the moral sense, it represents the kind of conduct that is worth considering because it is well spoken of by people in general.”¹ It is attractive and engaging, not only to those within the church, but to people in general.

Excellent: This word was the principal term used for what was virtuous or morally excellent. To the Greek philosophers, it was essential in any discussion of ethics. It represented the highest standard people should seek to incorporate into their lives.

Praiseworthy: Any other good thing that would make for a better person is included in this catch-all word.

Paul urged the believers to “think about such things” (v. 8). There was a very strong implication that the sources of at least some of these needed not reside solely within Christianity. A beautiful piece of music, for example, is so because of the intrinsic structure and harmony, and the truth it communicates, appreciated whether the composer was a believer or not. A secular movie may have a valuable lesson that is worth considering in spite of the lifestyles of the actors, the motivation of the writers and producers, or the less-than-perfect portrayals of the characters.

This is not a call to be prudish or cloistered, turning our nose up or covering our eyes and ears at any and everything that does not have a purely religious meaning or origin. Paul urged people to sift through the elements of the culture

where they lived to weigh them, knowing full well that some may be salvaged while some may have to be rejected. Someone has said, “All truth is God’s truth.” It can also be said that all beauty is God’s beauty. Christ affirmed what the Scriptures teach us the greatest truth—the standard upon which all other laws hinge: love for God and love for neighbors. So as we think on what claims to be truth and beauty, perhaps the first measure should always be against love—as Paul described it throughout this book, love applied in terms of selfless, sacrificial humility.

Paul again referred to himself as the example (v. 9). By doing so, he reminded the Philippians that he was able to sort through what was usable in the culture and what was not. He employed discretion in the writing of this letter when he freely used military and athletic imagery, clearly secular aspects of the culture that were not influenced by the Christian message.

Further to this point, it means that when we present something to the world, whether the audience is composed of believers or not, it should be the best it can be. Thinking something will be effective simply because it is Christian is unrealistic and unbiblical. If we produce books, they should be well written. If we preach, the sermons need to be well considered and practical. If we produce magazines, movies, or design and construct buildings, they should have an attractiveness that invites people in. Even as we can glean

things from the larger culture, those who are not believers should feel they can find something beautiful in the way we express our message. They must first be attracted by the loveliness of a song before being taken by what the song says.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does Paul's list show itself in your life?
2. Do you agree with what the author has said regarding how we present the Christian message to the world? Why or why not?

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-13



Radio personality Steve Brown told the story of a king who was discontented. He was so anxious he couldn't sleep, think, or rest. He called his wise men and asked them what he could do. One old wise man said, "Find a man in your kingdom who is content. Then wear his shirt for a day and night, and you will be content." That sounded like a good idea, so the king ordered some of his servants to search for such a person. Days blended into weeks before his servants returned. "Where is his shirt?" asked the king. "Your majesty, he did not have one."¹

As is for most of us today, it was uncomfortable in Paul's day to speak of one's personal financial situation, especially when things were not going well. But when the Philippians shared sacrificially with him, he opened his heart and shared a lesson with them as well. Concerning

the gift they sent, he said, “I rejoice[d] greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me” (v. 10). This is again an agricultural term: what the NIV translates *renewed* was the word used for the seasonal blossoming of a plant, much as trees that have lost their leaves bloom in the spring.

Paul wanted them to know he did not speak from his need. He told them, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (v. 11). Note that he spoke of having learned to be content. It is not natural to be content, but something acquired. Even as infants, we come forth grabbing and wanting because our survival depends on it. However, over time the grabbing and wanting goes from survival needs to all aspects of life. To learn contentment requires experience, and Paul’s experience had taught him this valuable lesson.

He said he has learned to be content in need and plenty. His early Jewish upbringing and the all-embracing knowledge that came later with his conversion to Christ taught him the full meaning of David’s statement: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:26). It may be true that Paul experienced his possessions being swept away as in a flood, friends treating him as a leper, and a nagging malady that felt like a thorn in his flesh; but the Lord was his portion.

On at least one occasion Paul had awakened under a pile of stones thrown in anger by his enemies. Another time he

was alone, all alone, in a tiny cell with bars blocking the windows. Yet the Lord remained his portion. As sure as the Israelites found their daily ration of manna, Paul knew that for this day the Lord would be the portion he needed. And so one old man's voice lifted in song over the complaints and curses of the prison where he was. Even a prison was a cathedral in the presence of Christ.

It is most interesting that Paul went to both extremes in describing his contentment: "Whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (v. 12). Ironically it can sometimes be the more difficult duty to find contentment when we have abundance. When everything is stripped away, when all that is in hand is a moldy piece of bread, it is not hard to look away to fix our eyes on Christ. But when the banquet table is full, the guest of honor can be forgotten as we gorge ourselves on the food in front of us.

In a land of plenty, the challenge to the Christian is how to handle abundance. When surrounded by gems, is it not in our nature to want to put some in our pockets? When I have a comfortable chair to sit in, is it not normal to hate the idea of getting out of it? When my stereo system reproduces the full sound of the symphony, shouldn't I want to hear it? God put us in a world of sensations, and because of that certain things will appeal to our senses. But knowing how to properly handle them takes heavenly knowledge. Paul discovered he had to know how to handle having

plenty. He learned not to feast his eyes on the things in front of him, but to fix his eyes on the Lord, his Portion.

How could he do this?

“I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (v. 13).

Paul spoke this famous line in relation to the extremes of being in want and having plenty. Wherever he was on the economic ladder, whether he was in prison or walking free, no matter if his preaching brought a revival or a riot, Paul knew confidently that in these situations he was there because of God’s leading. Unfortunately, in our age this verse is grossly misused to support the notion that God will help an individual to do anything from lifting weights to losing weight. While these and many other things are good ends in themselves, the verse is not to be taken as a *carte blanche* promise to be applied anywhere and everywhere apart from the condition of a person’s heart and obedience to God. Paul could claim Christ’s strength because he had yielded utterly to Christ’s lordship.

If we are thrown in a situation too large for us, but it is by God’s bidding, we can claim the verse in godly humility. If we are serving Him and are led into the valley of the shadow of death, we can selflessly claim the verse. If we find in following the Lord we are abandoned, abused, and scorned, we can love our enemies and promote their well-being by claiming this the verse. When we are in those or

any other situations at the Lord's leading, what a great verse to call out with confidence! You can do everything that Christ did in sacrificing Himself for love of the world, through Him who gives you strength. Hallelujah!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why can it seem easier to trust the Lord when we have less than when we have more?
2. What does Philippians 4:13 say to you about following where the Lord leads?

PHILIPPIANS 4:14-23



Henry Ford, famed founder of Ford Motor Company, was approached for a donation to build a new hospital. He pledged five thousand dollars, but was shocked to read the newspaper the next day that announced, “Henry Ford contributes fifty thousand dollars to local hospital.” The fundraiser promised to have the newspaper print a retraction that read, “Henry Ford reduces his donation by forty-five thousand dollars.” Knowing the reaction that this would create, Ford reluctantly agreed to raise his donation to fifty thousand dollars with one condition: over the entrance door a loose paraphrase of a biblical reference would be carved: “I came among you and you took me in” (probably Matt. 25:35).

There was none of this kind of reluctant giving among the Philippians. The culture of the day included certain

understandings about how friendships were to work. As friends supporting Paul, the Philippians also shared in the humiliation and disgrace of his imprisonment.

Friendship also included the sharing of benefits. Accordingly, the gift received by Paul was consistent with this understanding. It was expected that when a specific benefit was received, something of equal value from the recipient should be given back of equal value. Quite obviously, Paul's situation made it impossible for him to reciprocate as etiquette demanded. What heightened this even more was that in giving, the Philippians' generosity was so great they put their own financial standing at risk. The Philippians understood Paul's situation and so were more than willing to waive any expectation. But it still left things feeling unfinished and out of balance.

While he was grateful for their remembrance, Paul stated again that he was not expecting any financial gift at all. But since they had given, he reported, "what I desire is that more be credited to your account" (v. 17). He noted that he appreciated not only the monetary value of what was shared, but also the thoughtfulness, calling the gifts "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (v. 18). By hearkening back to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, Paul reminded them there were specific requirements for the sacrifice. Among other things, the sacrificial animal had to be without blemish, not one that was

sick or lame, but given at the height of its strength. It was to be only the best to make it acceptable. These friends had offered something that, had it been a temple sacrifice, would have created a beautiful fragrance whose aroma symbolically wafted upward to the throne of God.

With this, Paul rewrote the rules of the culture of the day. The gift was more than something given to him; it was an offering to God. There were now three parties involved in the transaction: God, Paul, and the Philippians. Paul could not repay them, but God could. “My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (v. 19).

Once overwhelmed by their gift, Paul now had the Philippians overwhelmed by God’s reward for their faithful giving. He called upon God to meet all their needs, careful not to imply they would have all their wants. Flemming wrote,

The place of this promise at the climax of the letter points to a more sweeping reference. God is sufficient for *all* their needs: contentment in the face of adversity; steadfastness in the midst of opposition and suffering; divine joy and peace as an answer to anxiety; purity in a crooked world, just to name a few.¹

God would do this “according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (v. 19). There would be no shortage, no time limit, no coming too often.

Billy Graham used to tell the story of a man walking along the road carrying a huge bundle on his back. A neighbor came alongside him in a wagon and offered him a ride home. The man gratefully accepted, but when the driver looked over, he saw the man still had the bundle on his back. “Why don’t you put that down?” he asked. “No, no. I don’t want to add to your burden.” In the same way, our legitimate needs are in no danger of adding to God’s burdens or His ability to deliver what is needed.

Paul ended his letter with his usual closing salutations. Intriguing is the reference to “those who belong to Caesar’s household” (v. 22). The caesar was Nero, who was the first of the Roman emperors to persecute Christians. Yet here under that enemy there were believers, known believers, in his household. While some were no doubt slaves, church history testifies that believers were from all classes, some even blood relatives of the emperor himself.

The Christian presence was not a fluke. Their numbers continued to grow, their boldness stunning their enemies. The strange strategy initiated by the crucifixion and sealed by the resurrection was already at work. It was only a matter of time.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When have you had the opportunity to give sacrificially?
How did you respond?

2. If God is willing to meet all of our needs according to
His riches in Christ Jesus, what does that say about the things
you want now?

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