

(((PREACHING *the* WORD)))

PHILIPPIANS,
COLOSSIANS,
AND PHILEMON

The FELLOWSHIP *of the* GOSPEL
and the SUPREMACY *of* CHRIST



R. KENT HUGHES

Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon

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A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward

affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes
Wheaton, Illinois

PHILIPPIANS

The Fellowship of the Gospel

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1:1, 2

1

A Particular Joy

PHILIPPIANS 1:1, 2



THIS IS ADMITTEDLY SUBJECTIVE, but it seems to me that the four chapters of Philippians have provided more favorite quotes and sound bites than any other section of Scripture of similar length—certainly it has done that for me. Here are some of my favorites:

- “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (1:21)
- “I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.” (1:23)
- “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” (1:27)
- “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also the interests of others.” (2:3, 4)
- “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (2:5–11)
- “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (2:12, 13)
- “That I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ.” (3:8, 9)
- “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (3:13, 14)

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- “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (3:20)
- “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” (4:4)
- “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4:6, 7)
- “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable . . .” (4:8)
- “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” (4:11)
- “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (4:13)

You can see that I love this Bible book. But there is a danger in knowing these lines so well: they can take on a life of their own apart from their context and become sentimentalized and emptied of their depth.¹ For example, “Rejoice in the Lord always” (4:4) has become for some within the church and outside it a motto for merely willing a superficial happiness, rather than the deep, theologically grounded command that it is.

As a matter of fact, Philippians is not (as is commonly thought) the “Epistle of Joy.” But joy is a motif in Philippians, and when it flashes forth, as it does sixteen times, it is sparked by the deeper themes of Paul’s letter. Philippians calls us to a particular joy, the joy experienced by Paul in Roman captivity facing a capital charge while his leadership was being contested by usurpers within the church. So as we journey through Philippians it is my hope that these favorite verses and other familiar lines of this amazing letter will take on their first-century depth and power.

Paul’s Journey to Philippi

The background of Philippians is this: Paul and Barnabas had returned victoriously from the famous Council in Jerusalem, with the Council’s decisive ruling that Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised or adopt Jewish customs to be saved. It was a watershed ruling. Gentile evangelism was given a mighty, liberating boost. But then Paul and Barnabas separated, and Paul took Silas and set out on his second missionary journey (cf. Acts 15:36–40). Timothy joined them in Lystra (cf. Acts 16:1–5).

Paul’s plan was to retrace the steps of his first missionary journey and encourage the churches. As they traveled west, the trio attempted to go back down to Ephesus, but the Holy Spirit checked them. Then they tried to go north to Bithynia by the Black Sea, and again the Spirit of Jesus did not allow it (cf. Acts 16:6, 7). Thus Paul, Silas, and Timothy were effectively funneled

west to Troas and the mouth of the Dardanelle Straits, the gateway to Europe. There Dr. Luke joined them, forming a dynamic foursome.

It was there at the Dardanelles that Paul beheld standing before him in a night vision a man from Macedonia (a European from what today is northern Greece), urging him and saying, as Luke tells it, “‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:9, 10). In an instant came one of the great turning points in history as Paul and company made a two-day crossing to Neapolis and walked nine miles along the Egnatian Way to Philippi. Rome did not know it, but the flag of Christianity was unfurled in the empire that day.

Philippi was not a big city, no more than 10,000 at the most, and rested on a narrow shoulder of land, crowned by an acropolis guarding the *Via Egnatia*, the famous highway between Rome and her eastern empire. Philippi had been founded by Greeks in the fourth century B.C. Phillip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great, had named it after himself.²

But now it was a Roman colony because in 42 B.C. Philippi achieved note as the place where Mark Anthony and Octavian (Augustus) fought the forces of Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar, defeating Cassius. Later in 31 B.C. when Augustus defeated Mark Anthony in the battle of Actium, Augustus renamed the colony after himself—*Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis*.³ As a Roman town it was governed by Roman law. Roman expatriates made up the citizenry. Latin became the official language, and the citizens wore Roman dress. The public inscriptions in the forum and on all the buildings were exclusively Latin. So the leadership and aristocracy of Philippi were completely Roman and Latin. This naturally created a Greek-speaking underclass that made up the local populace. These were the construction workers and tradesmen and merchants.⁴ It is to this social group that Paul initially came.

Paul’s custom when entering a town was to go first to the Jews, to the synagogue (cf. Acts 14:1). But there were so few Jews in the city that the necessary quorum to form a synagogue of ten men did not exist.⁵ However, after a few days Paul did discover a Sabbath congregation meeting alongside a river outside the city walls. It was a group of God-fearing Gentile women meeting in “a place of prayer” (16:13). Today there is a general agreement that the exact site of that “place of prayer” was just outside the southern gate at the bank of the Gangites River, which still flows only fifty meters from the old city wall.⁶ That was likely where Paul and Silas made initial contact with Gentile women worshipping the God of Israel—women who would soon become the first Christians of Philippi.

Paul's Reception in Philippi

The first of these women was a merchant named Lydia. As Luke tells it, "One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). The man in the Macedonian vision turned out to be a woman! Lydia believed, her entire household believed, and they were all baptized on the spot in the Gangites (v. 15).

Spiritual opposition was almost immediate in the form of a girl who had "a spirit of divination" (v. 16; literally "a pythonic spirit," referencing demonic control). The girl's loud, incessant heralding of the truth about Paul and company—"These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation" (v. 17)—was a demonic attempt to co-opt the gospel and destroy it. Paul exorcised the spirit on the spot—and found himself in deep trouble because he had driven out the girl's owners' source of income! Paul and Silas were seized and were taken to the "Roman" magistrates, were identified as "Jews" (appealing to the Romanness of the officials and their anti-Semitic prejudices), and were savagely beaten by the *lictors*—they got their licks!

We all know the story. As the bruised and bleeding duo sat in stocks in the bowels of the prison and sang songs in the night, "hymns to God" (v. 25), a great earthquake freed them from their stocks and opened the prison doors. And the gospel further invaded Europe when the jailer cried out, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (vv. 30, 31). Then came another round of baptisms!

When the magistrates learned that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, their arrogance turned to quaking fear and profuse apologies as they urged them to quietly leave town. They did leave, but not before visiting Lydia. There were undoubtedly tears and maybe even some laughter and hoots in Lydia's home. Possibly they sang a few "prison songs." Certainly there were praise and thanksgiving to God and prayers for the new church—Lydia and her household, the jailer and his household, perhaps other God-fearing women from the riverbank, maybe even the ex-pythonesse. The flag of the gospel had been raised on a new continent. We should take note in this day of the science of church growth and the promotion of the homogeneous unit principle that this was not a homogeneous church plant but rather the Body of Christ in glorious diversity.

It is important to understand here that the church in Philippi would become Paul's favorite church.⁷ Paul enjoyed a unique closeness to the Phi-

lippians, which we see in exceptionally warm and friendly expressions in this letter. Paul makes this clear right after his greeting as he says, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (vv. 3–5). The word “partnership” is the Greek word *koinonia*, “fellowship”—Paul feels a warm “fellowship in the gospel” with the Philippians. As we will see in our next study, the same word (fellowship, partnership) or its derivatives appear in six verses in Philippians (cf. 1:5, 7; 2:1; 3:10; 4:14, 15 [twice]). And we shall see that this is not a church social fellowship as Christians today often think of the word, but a robust fellowship that rides on their mutual commitment to the gospel. This gospel fellowship grew from their commitment to support Paul’s mission spiritually and materially (cf. 4:15, 16).

What we must understand as we go through Philippians is that while there are various reasons for Paul’s writing, this letter comes from the depth of fellowship that Paul and the Philippians shared in the gospel. This accounts for the feel of this letter and is the basis for what Paul said to the Philippians and how he said it.

This is why this commentary has the subtitle “The Fellowship of the Gospel”—it is an epic fellowship as suggested by Tolkien’s title *The Fellowship of the Ring*. No punch and cookies here. This is the fellowship of compatriots bound together in a great cause. You will not understand the letter if you do not understand this.

Paul’s Letter to the Philippians (vv. 1, 2)

The occasion for Paul’s letter to the Philippians came years after the founding of the church and sprang from their financial support of him as a prisoner in Rome (cf. 4:18). Their monetary gift had been carried to him by a church member named Epaphroditus, who had nearly died during its delivery (cf. 2:27). And when Epaphroditus recovered and prepared to return, Paul asked him to carry the letter home. So the letter arrived late in Paul’s imprisonment, after A.D. 60 and probably after A.D. 62.⁸

Paul’s letter reveals many purposes: to express gratitude for their generosity, to explain why he sent Epaphroditus back so quickly, to catch them up, to inform them that he would shortly be sending Timothy, to warn them of Judaizers, to urge them to stand firm and be united.⁹ But under and around all these purposes was the reality of their fellowship in the gospel.

The very words of Paul’s greeting evoke his attitude of partnership with the Philippians as he tailors his greeting for the occasion. Most noticeably he

omits the use of the title “apostle” and begins, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus” (v. 1). The disuse of his title evidences the familiar warmth that existed between him and the Philippian believers.¹⁰ And his inclusion of Timothy as coauthor indicates that Paul would share his authority with those in the “partnership [fellowship] in the gospel” (v. 5). As Karl Barth put it, “A hero, a genius, a ‘religious personality’ stands alone; an apostle has others beside him like himself and sets them on his own level.”¹¹ Even more, Paul identifies himself and Timothy as “servants [literal translation, “slaves”] of Christ Jesus” (v. 1)—a term that in its Philippian/Roman context carried negative connotations that were just as repugnant to the fashionable middle class of the first century as today.¹² Paul knew exactly what he was saying because the only other use of “slave” in this letter will come in 2:7, used of Christ, who “took the form of a servant [*slave*].”

Along with these careful self-designations Paul identifies his recipients as “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” (1:1). Thus while he recognized the church leaders, he emphasized that he was writing to *all* those in Christ. Paul was not playing favorites. His emphasis on “all” foreshadows the call to unity that he would powerfully voice.

Paul and the Philippians’ fellowship in the gospel, their gospel partnership, gives the theological and relational context and texture for his major themes. At the very heart of the letter is Paul’s call to the Philippians to let their “manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27), and as such, living a gospel-worthy life becomes the theme that extends to the end of chapter 2. Thus, to live worthy of the gospel there must be *unity*—“standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (1:27)—in gospel partnership. They must be “of the same mind” (2:2). They must “look . . . to the interests of others” (2:4). They must have the mind of Christ (cf. 2:5–8). They must “work out [their] own salvation” as Christ works in them (2:12, 13). They must live like Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19–30)—men who walked worthy of the gospel.

This said, Christ is the center of the letter. No other noun occurs more in Philippians than his name. The Christology of the hymn of Christ in 2:6–11 can be said to underpin the thinking of everything else in Philippians.¹³ Philippians is about Christ. Philippians is about people in Christ Jesus (cf. 2:29; 3:1; 4:4, 10). Philippians is about people who are in the fellowship of the gospel because they are in Christ. Philippians is about people whose “citizenship is in heaven” (3:20).

Such grand themes and purposes! And understand this—the motif that sparkles and effervesces throughout them is joy.

- 1:4b: “making my prayer with joy.”
- 1:18b: “Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.”
- 1:25b: “your . . . joy in the faith.”
- 2:2: “complete my joy.”
- 2:17, 18: “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”
- 2:28: “that you may rejoice.”
- 2:29: “So receive him in the Lord with all joy.”
- 3:1: “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.”
- 4:4: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”
- 4:10: “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly.”

Philippians evokes a particular joy. It is the joy *of* Christ and joy *from* Christ. It is a joy that effervesces in the dark places of life. It is available for those “in Christ” (3:3), who stand together as they partner in the fellowship of the gospel. Our studies in Philippians will enhance our experience of this particular joy.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

1:3-6

2

Paul's Joyous Thanksgiving

PHILIPPIANS 1:3–6



WHEN THEOLOGIAN BROUGHTON KNOX was serving as a young chaplain in the British navy on a ship preparing for D-day and the invasion of Normandy, he noted that the minds of all hands on board, regardless of rank, were focused on the invasion's success. No one thought of his own interests, but only on how he could help his shipmates in their commonly shared task. He says, "I remember noting in my mind how I had never been happier."¹

After the invasion and return to England, everyone noticed a difference in the atmosphere on ship. It was still friendly because it was a well-run ship. But several of the sailors, sensing the difference, asked the young chaplain why things had changed. Knox reflects, "The answer was quite simple. During those months that preceded and followed D-day, our thoughts had a minimum of self-centeredness in them. We gave ourselves to our shared activity and objective. . . . Once the undertaking was over we reverted to our own purposes, as we do normally."² Broughton Knox was, of course, reflecting on his ship's experience of the fellowship that people experience in pursuing a common goal. Human friendship is a wonderful thing, but fellowship goes beyond friendship. Fellowship occurs among friends committed to a common cause or goal and flourishes through their common pursuit of it.

J. R. R. Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring* rides upon this reality. The fellowship of the Ring is made up of individuals of disparate origin and ridiculous diversity that exceed any of our ethnic or social differences: four hobbits, tiny beings with large, hairy, shoeless feet—Frodo Baggins and his friends Merry, Sam, and Pippin; two men, warriors of the first rank always dressed for battle—Boromir of Gondor and Aragorn, son of Arathorn II, King of Gondor; one wizard, Gandalf, the ancient nemesis of evil and a repository of wisdom

and supernatural power; an elf, Legolas, from a fair race of archers of the forest with pointed ears; and a dwarf, Gimli, a stout, hairy, axe-wielding creature from the dark chambers under the mountains.

The nine members of the fellowship bore few affinities. The elves and the dwarves were like the English and the French because both had an unspoken agreement to feel superior to the other. However, the nine very different individuals, bound together by their great mission to defeat the forces of darkness and save Middle-Earth, became inseparable and their covenant indissoluble. The man Boromir, despite his lapses, gave his life for the hobbits. And the elf and the dwarf came to form a great friendship, so great that Gimli was inducted into an honored order reserved only for elves.

Such can be earthly human fellowship when the conditions are right. But here in Philippians our text has at its heart a depth of fellowship that exceeds any earthly fellowship—“your partnership [fellowship] in the gospel” (v. 5)—which is rooted in God and is a quest that can only be described as eternal.

The theme of verses 3–6 is that of joyous apostolic thanksgiving ringing from Paul’s prison cell in Rome—a thanksgiving grounded in three things: (1) Paul’s remembrance of the Philippians, (2) the Philippians’ participation (fellowship) in the gospel, and (3) Paul’s confidence in their future.

Thankful Remembrance (vv. 3, 4)

Paul’s Gratitude

As Paul mused in his Roman cell, his mind ranged across Italy and the Adriatic to Macedonia and over the *Via Egnatia* to “little Rome,” the pretentious Roman colony of Philippi—and the beloved faces of Lydia and her clan, the jailer and his family, Euodia and Syntyche and Clement and scores of others who had been added to the church. And Paul smiled as he wrote, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy” (vv. 3, 4). This is so typical of Paul because, in truth, Paul rarely thanked God for *things*. Paul thanked God for *people* who, despite whatever trouble they may have been to him, remained a source of joy and thanksgiving.³

The Apostle Paul is frankly astonishing in this respect. On an earlier occasion when he had not yet been to Rome but was writing his conclusion to his famous epistle to the Romans, he listed no less than thirty-three names in his concluding greetings (Romans 16). Most of those people he had met on his journeys through Asia and Asia Minor and had subsequently taken up residence in Rome. The great theologian was a people person first and fore-

most. Imagine the heart and the energy that went into such ministry. Paul was always inquiring and making note of his people's whereabouts and condition and was thanking God in all his remembrance of them.

Joyful Prayer

And the outcome was not only thankfulness to God but joyous petition—"always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy" (v. 4). This was an intensely emotional matter for Paul as the inclusive words "always," "every," and "all" convey.⁴ When he thought of their names, he automatically prayed for them—and that included *all* of them, not just a favored few. But what is most noteworthy is that here in verse 4 Paul begins to sound the note of joy that rings fifteen more times in this letter as it builds to its ringing crescendo in chapter 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (v. 4).

This early joy note is very significant for two reasons. First, the Macedonian churches, among which the Philippian church was prominent, had been noted for their joy amidst affliction. Paul even challenged the Corinthians with their example:

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. (2 Corinthians 8:1, 2; cf. Acts 16:34)

Perhaps the Philippians, due to the ongoing hostility of their opponents, had begun to lose their abundance of joy. So Paul sounds an early opening note of joy.

Second, Paul himself was in prison, awaiting possible death. This means that joy is not a result of pleasant circumstances or prosperity or success. Joy for Paul (and the Biblical writers) was not an emotion or a mood or a feeling but an *attitude*. And thus it can be commanded, whereas an emotion cannot.⁵ So here in Philippians Paul will command, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord" (3:1), and a few verses later, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (4:4). He even tells them that if he is executed he will rejoice, and so should they (cf. 2:17, 18). He does not urge a feeling but an attitude.

The source of joy is outside itself. It is "in the Lord" (cf. 2:29; 3:1; 4:4, 10). It can be commanded because they are "in the Lord" who gives it.⁶ What Paul does with this early joy note and its fifteen echoes is to assure his close friends who are so burdened about his imprisonment that being in prison has

not robbed him of his joy. Paul consciously models the joy that he will command the Philippians to have.⁷ What a standard Paul's remembrance from his jail sets as it evokes thanksgiving and prayer and joy in his soul. What a call to those of us charged with the care of souls to remember all our people always with thanksgiving and joyful prayer.

Thankful for Fellowship (v. 5)

Paul's thankful, backward look was based on the long-standing reality of the Philippians' "partnership [fellowship] in the gospel from the first day until now" (v. 5), which is the center of verses 3–6.⁸ As we have mentioned, the depth of the fellowship that Paul celebrated here exceeds that of any earthly fellowship. The great reason for this is that there was, as Gordon Fee says, a "three-way bond" between Paul, the Philippians, and Christ.⁹ This provided the spiritual glue of their fellowship. Even more, it infused their fellowship in the gospel with the "other-person-centeredness" that exists between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit—the full and perfect fellowship within the Trinity.¹⁰ Elsewhere the Apostle John writes, "and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). Thus the fact that they were in Christ provided their fellowship with a cohesion and others-directedness that focused them away from self-interest toward the interests of the fellowship (cf. Philippians 2:4).

The intense, pulsating spirituality at the center of the Philippians' fellowship is obvious in the occurrences of the *koinon* word group (fellowship, partnership, share) in Philippians. It was a fellowship of grace as Paul indicates in 1:7: "for you are all partakers [fellowshippers] with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." It was a fellowship in the Holy Spirit, as is seen in 2:1: "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation [fellowship] in the Spirit . . ." It was a fellowship in Christ's sufferings as seen in Paul's prayer in 3:10: "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings [literally, the fellowship of his sufferings]." And, finally, it was a costly fellowship because the Philippians gave to Paul generously, as is seen in verses 14, 15 of chapter 4: "Yet it was kind of you to share [fellowship in] my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership [fellowship] with me in giving and receiving, except you only." Thus the mentions of the *koinon* word group in Philippians indicates that their fellowship was rooted in divine grace and in the Holy Spirit and involved sacrifice and suffering.

Bearing in mind that the Philippians' fellowship rested on a three-way

bond in Christ and was infused with the others-directedness of the Trinity and as such was a fellowship of grace and the Spirit and was, further, a costly fellowship—bearing all this in mind, the thing that made Paul's heart sing with thanksgiving was the Philippians' "partnership [fellowship] in the gospel from the first day until now" (v. 5).

From day one the Philippians had been gospel partners. Upon their salvation Lydia and her household and the jailer and his household and those saved over the years became stalwarts in the fellowship of the gospel. And from prison Paul gave thanks for "every word spoken and every deed done in behalf of the gospel from the moment of their conversion(s) to the present, including their gift" (Fee).¹¹

What a fellowship it was! Brothers and sisters in Christ's three-way bond, bound together in a great quest—nothing less than the evangelization of the Gentile world, sharing the gospel with all who would hear, reaching out to those in need, living out a divine others-directedness, looking not to their own interests but to the interests of others, suffering in fellowship with Christ, giving in such a way that the astonished apostle would recount how that

in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. (2 Corinthians 8:2–5)

How Paul loved them, and how they loved him! Now verses 3–5 of Philippians 1 come alive: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." Joyous thanksgiving rings out over the "fellowship of the gospel."

I recall several years ago a man in the church I was then pastoring musing after his return from a short-term missions project about the wonderful fellowship he had experienced on the trip and wishing that he could experience the same at home. Since then I have reflected that his ten days with a band of brothers and sisters serving in South America united in laboring for the gospel was a happy experience like that of the first-century fellowship of the gospel. Further, I think that when Christians go from church to church looking for good fellowship, they are looking for an illusion.

What do I mean? Fellowship over coffee after a church service is good, but it is not Christian fellowship. It is fellowship among Christians, but not

the fellowship that Paul celebrated. Don't misunderstand—having coffee and meals together is one of our great pleasures. I love a cup of coffee with friends. I will eat anything and all that is placed in front of me, relishing it all the more in the company of good friends and conversation!

But if you are looking for true fellowship, give yourself to the gospel at home and around the world. Serve together with others in women's Bible studies, children's ministries, youth ministries. Do short-term missions. Join mercy work to alleviate suffering in places like the vast area devastated by disasters like Hurricane Katrina. Take the good news to the poor. Join a band of brothers and sisters to pray for the world. That is how you will experience genuine Christian fellowship.

Thankful Confidence (v. 6)

Paul's thankful recollections from prison for the Philippians themselves and then for their fellowship in the gospel is freighted with joyful confidence: "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (v. 6). Philippians 1:6 may well be the first verse I memorized as a newborn Christian over fifty years ago when, on the night I believed, I underlined this verse in red pencil by flashlight. In fact, I still have that tiny Bible with its fine leaves of India paper. I went to sleep that night secure in the astonishing thought that what God had begun would be continued to the day of Christ.

I was right to do so, though my assurance was embedded in a larger promise because, in terms of the context, Paul was assuring the Philippians that the work of the long-term fellowship of the gospel that God had begun in them would be brought to glorious consummation when Christ returns. Though Paul was in prison, he was absolutely confident that the good work of their gospel partnership would succeed gloriously.

How could this bring such assurance to a twelve-year-old boy reading his Bible by flashlight? The answer is that the fellowship of the gospel in Philippi began *individually* with God's sovereign choice of Lydia as the first convert in Europe. Of Lydia, Luke writes, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). God chose Lydia in Christ before the foundation of the world (cf. Ephesians 1:4). God had begun his "good work" in her, and her salvation was part and parcel of the great work in Philippi. God's sovereign initiative and sovereign faithfulness would see them both through to the end. That is why my assurance under the illumination of my flashlight was not misplaced.

Paul's confidence was in the "Godness of God."¹² Moisés Silva writes,

“Theologians who speak of salvation as being God’s from beginning to end are not using mere rhetoric, for this is precisely Paul’s conception as he addresses the Philippians regarding their share in the gospel.”¹³ Everything is from God!

As I reflect on my fifty plus years in Christ it is indeed God who has kept me. It is not my grip on God that has made the difference, but his grip on me. I am not confident in my goodness. I am not confident in my character. I am not confident in my history. I am not confident in my “reverend” persona. I am not confident in my perseverance.

But I am confident in God. I am confident in this word to Lydia and to the jailor and to all the saints in Philippi—and to me: “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (v. 6). This is a promise for every man, woman, and child who turns to Christ, and it is a promise for the great fellowship of the gospel!

The Apostle Paul looked through the bars of his confinement and remembered the Philippians with a smile and with prayers laced with joy as he thanked God in all his remembrances of them. His joy was real—not a futile willing but the attitude of a man who knows God is in control. He thanked God for their awesome fellowship in the gospel from the very first day he met them. No church social here, but rather a deep partnership grounded in Christ and the Holy Trinity and in grace and in the Spirit and in suffering and in sacrifice—a robust band of brothers and sisters in a quest for the souls of the world.

And he was confident that when Jesus returned, the work that Jesus inaugurated, he would complete.

Joy peeled from that prison cell in Rome.

It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

1:7, 8

3

Paul's Joyful Affection

PHILIPPIANS 1:7, 8



I HAD ONE OF THE sweetest honors of my life when I spoke at the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Granada Heights Friends Church, the church in which I grew up. The memories of that weekend—the faces of old friends (the old faces of friends!)—the faces of loved ones and colleagues and mentors and teachers and youth sponsors and the students under my ministry—will be with me until I no longer know their names and the beloved geography of their faces.

I was there as an almost thirteen-year-old when it all began. I was one of the first three in the “youth group.” I was the lone junior high student, all one hundred pounds of me. I was there in the Sunny Hills American Legion Hall on Sunday mornings when the beer cans were swept out so church could begin. I saw the first spade of earth ceremonially turned in the lemon grove on the corner of Leffingwell and Granada in La Mirada, California. I sat with my mother and younger brother in tie and sport coat listening to the pastor unfold to my uncomprehending but awed soul the glories of the gospel.

Granada Heights was the womb that warmed my young soul until it was ready for birth when Pastor Verl Lindley led me to Christ the summer before my freshman year in high school. At that same time I was called to the gospel ministry under his winsome, manly way. He has been my lifelong example and mentor.

I was lovingly nurtured by my twentysomething youth sponsors Howard and Ruby Busse—young, energetic, positive big thinkers—who were astonishingly hospitable. As I think back, I remain amazed by their forbearance—for example, when I and my buddies Dave and Jack woke the Busses

up because we wanted to talk, and Howard invited us into their bedroom, climbed back in bed, and cheerfully engaged three dopey boys.

The church gave me the milk of the Word through the strong teaching of my college group teacher Robert Seelye. My education was this: My freshman year Robert taught us through the book of Romans. My sophomore year he began with chapter 1 of Romans, and by June we were in chapter 16. My junior year, you guessed it—Romans! Robert Seelye not only gave me a theological grounding, but the lifelong conviction that God's Word is wholly inerrant, totally sufficient, and massively potent. He gave me the foundation for a life of Biblical exposition. I also must say, as I have said before, that this man remains the most effective personal evangelist I have ever met. He and his wife Barbara are Pauline and apostolic in their worldwide care of souls.

My home church saw me through hard times through the prayers of spiritual mothers like Roselva Taylor, who, as I well remember, when I came to church with cuts and a black eye from a fight at a party, took me aside and let me know of her commitment to pray for me—and did so for years. Of course, I have had many fathers and mothers of the church, many of whom are now part of the Church Triumphant.

Granada Heights is where I learned ministry from Verl and Lois Lindley. Verl, now in his eighties, still functions for me like the face in a ubiquitous television monitor to whom I look for advice. *What would Verl do?* And his wife, Lois, tiny and lovely with a musical voice, a Bible teacher par excellence, is the reason, I think, I married Barbara, who is so much like her. I served as their high school and college pastor for nearly a decade, and many of my students, now middle aged (including Rick Hicks, the president of Operation Mobilization USA), have been lifelong friends.

So I can relate to Paul's joyous thanksgiving from faraway Rome for the Philippian church.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (vv. 3–6)

How assuring and triumphant it is to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God has in Christ blessed the ministry of my home church and guaranteed its future until the day of Jesus Christ.

I can also relate to Paul's emotional expression of affection for the Phi-

lippians, which so naturally flows from his thankfulness as he continues in verses 7, 8, saying:

It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Here Paul's outpouring of affection for the Philippian church is stronger than in any of his other letters.¹

Affection from the Heart (v. 7a)

Paul begins with an intensely personal declaration: "It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart" (v. 7a). My experience has taught me that it is virtually a law of spiritual relationships that you will hold very dear to your heart those who have come to Christ under your influence or have grown and benefited from your ministry. Paul's first convert in Europe, Lydia, the extraordinary woman merchant, a seller of purple—a mother of the church—was surely a recurrent face on Paul's spiritual landscape and was dear to his heart. From his jail cell, thoughts of Lydia and her family and the Philippian jailer's clan and the excellent women Euodia and Syntyche warmed his soul, despite their feuding. Paul cherished the thought of them.

The extraordinary depth of his affection rests in the fact that he held them in his heart. This was not a casual aside, as we so often glibly refer to our hearts as a vague pleasantry. Paul had no hearts on his underwear! He never mailed a pink valentine. Paul truly meant he had all of them in the very center of his being, the source of his physical and inner life—his thought processes and emotions and will²—the center of his consciousness.³

An experience from the fiftieth anniversary celebration I mentioned is suggestive of Paul's heart affection. In the early seventies a college student named Jody, a serious Christian as a high school student under my ministry, lost her virginity and became pregnant as the result of a single instance with another counselor at one of the famed West Coast Christian camps. When she came to me, she was being pressured by the young man and his parents to get an abortion. The situation was complicated because the boy's father was a leading elder in one of the prominent evangelical churches of Southern California. I called the pastor, and you can imagine the flap. Jody became a single mom to a beautiful little girl. Fourteen years later in the mid-eighties her lovely daughter became one of the top-ranked tennis players in California.

I thought then about how the girl so full of life and promise could have well become refuse to be tossed out at the end of a business day in an abortion clinic. Jody and her daughter have been in my heart for over thirty years. You can imagine my emotion when, after speaking at the evening service of the church's fiftieth anniversary, I turned around to see Jody and her husband standing there along with her daughter and her husband carrying Jody's grandson—three generations! What a celebration of life!

Paul, the great apostle, had all the believers in his heart. The Philippians' physical and spiritual geography was at the center of his life—such was the scope of his affection.

Affection from Fellowship (v. 7b)

Paul's affection likewise rose out of a fellowship of grace that was supercharged with action, as we can see in reading all of verse 7: "It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." Here we have the same *koinon* or fellowship word as in verse 5 where it is rendered "partnership"; here it is rendered "partakers." You can hear the same sound or assonance in the Greek. In verse 5 we have *koinonia* and in verse 7 *synkoinonoi*, which could be rendered "fellowshippers"—"for you are all fellowshippers with me of grace." Again the sense here is Tolkienesque because the partakers of grace are action bound like those in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

This is a revelatory moment in Paul's writings because "grace" here is not just saving grace. Rather Paul considers suffering and sacrifice and struggling for the gospel all to be grace. Proof of this can be seen in 1:29 where the verbal form of *charis* ("grace") is used: "For it has been granted [graced] to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake." Suffering because of the gospel is a grace in Paul's thinking and theology. Few concepts could have been more revolutionary in the Greco-Roman world. Pagans did not think this way!⁴

But Paul exults in this grace of gospel struggle and affliction that produces and sustains their affection. "My imprisonment" (v. 7) is literally "my chains" because he was actually chained between two guards and was understandably smarting under the oppressive arrangement of never being alone.⁵ But the Philippians fellowshiped with him in his chains by virtue of their prayers and financial gifts (cf. 4:14, 15). They remembered Paul in prison as though in prison with him (cf. Hebrews 13:3). Though so far away, he could sense that their hearts beat pulse for pulse with his. The Philippians

were also there to support Paul in his defending the gospel and then confirming it with positive proofs and testimony.⁶ Again, it was the Philippians' love and commitment to the gospel that bound them in their fellowship with Paul. Significantly, the word "gospel" appears more times per line in Philippians than in any book in the New Testament, some nine times (cf. 1:5, 7, 12, 16, 27 [twice]; 2:22; 4:3, 15).

So it was that the richness of the fellowship from the grace of Paul's sufferings for the gospel became the ground of deep affection. How true to my experience. Drawing again upon that distant ministry in California, I recall a spring break at the height of the sixties when a band of my young high-schoolers joined with me to share the gospel. It was 1968, and the place was a fourteen-mile stretch of the Colorado River outside Parker, Arizona, where thousands of students gathered to party with little fear of the meager police force. That, besides the Arizona sun, was the big draw. The going was tough, and my students took their lumps. One even got tossed into the river for his witness! But there was a memorable reward in five students who did come to Christ, several of whom went on to become committed Christians. But above all this there is the affectionate memory of a group of grimy, sunburned students praying together, nursing their wounds, and bravely attempting to share the most important news in the world—partakers of grace in the afflictions and joys that are part and parcel of the defense and confirmation of the gospel. We remain to this day bound with a special affection, which is only a hint of the affection that rose out of Paul's partnership of grace with the Philippians.

What must tie Christians together is this passion for the gospel, this fellowship in the gospel. Nothing else is strong enough to hold us all together. The gospel—this good news that in Jesus, God himself has reconciled us to himself—brings about a precious God-centeredness that we share with other believers.

Christ's Affection (v. 8)

From his prison in Rome, Paul so welled up with emotion that he called God as witness to the depth of his affection: "For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus." Such an oath was rare in Paul's letters, but he wanted to drive the truth of his longing and affection for the Philippians deep into their hearts by calling God as witness because God alone knew the contours of his inner life. The God-attested truth is that Paul yearned (longed) for all of them. Toward the end of the book (in 4:1) Paul will use the same word amidst mounting expressions of affection: "Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown . . ."

But what he wanted them to see most of all was that his God-attested affection for them was “the affection of Christ Jesus.” The word “affection” literally is “the inward parts,” referring to what we call the viscera. Alec Motyer, the esteemed preacher and commentator, explains:

It expresses a yearning that is as much physical as mental, a longing love which moves the whole inner being. But what a remarkable expression Paul uses! He loves them “in the inner being of Christ Jesus.” Certainly this means that he patterns his love for them on that of Christ (*cf.* Eph. 5:1), but the wording demands something more than the notion of “imitation.” Paul is saying that he has so advanced in union with Christ that it is as if Christ were expressing His love through Paul. Two hearts are beating as one—in-
deed one heart, the greater, has taken over and the emotional constitution of Christ Himself has taken possession of His servant.⁷

This was so incredible that Paul felt it necessary, as he wrote from his cell, to call God as witness that it was true. So we see in this culminating expression of affection the standard that we all must pursue—the very affection of Christ Jesus. This is possible because of the three-way bond that exists between us individually, our fellow believers, and Christ—a bond that is charged with the other-person-centeredness of the Holy Trinity as we have fellowship with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Paul’s affection for the Philippians overflowed here because (1) he held the Philippians in his heart, and (2) they shared in the hardships of the ministry of the gospel, and (3) Paul truly longed for them with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Time is flying by for all of us, and over the years we will be separated by distance and time. But whether near or far, may the bonds of our affection be such that we hold each other in our hearts, remembering with fond affection our fellowship together in the grace of gospel ministry—longing for all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

1:9-11

4

Paul's Prayer

PHILIPPIANS 1:9–11



VERSES 3–11 OF THE opening chapter of Philippians form a single paragraph that functions as an introduction to the whole book and as such introduces many of the themes and motifs of the letter. Although this is a cohesive unit, I have chosen to divide verses 3–11 into three studies because they are so theologically packed.

“Paul’s Joyous Thanksgiving” is the title I gave to the study on verses 3–6 because as Paul’s thoughts from his prison cell drifted across the Adriatic into northern Macedonia and Philippi he wrote, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy.” Paul’s deep thanksgiving for the Philippian church then evoked “Paul’s Joyful Affection,” the title of our study on verses 7, 8. Though the apostle was in chains in Rome his heart wasn’t chained, and it was in his unfettered heart that Paul held every last one of the Philippians—at the very center of his being. This was not hyperbole but spiritual reality. Paul’s oath “For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus” (v. 8) was a declaration that the very affection of Christ himself was controlling him. This affection would effervesce again later in 4:1 when he called them “my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown.”

Now, having the breadth of Paul’s thanksgiving for the Philippians before us, along with the depth of Paul’s astonishing affection, we come to Paul’s prayer for the Philippian believers in verses 9–11. Here Paul builds on the mention of his joyful prayer in verse 4 and makes prayer the rising emotional climax to his introduction. Paul’s opening words—“And it is my prayer”—informed the Philippians, and us, that this is *how* and *what* Paul prayed when he prayed for them. This brief text is both humbling and elevating. That is

what it has been for me. Do we pray like this? Have we ever prayed like this? Paul tells us that there are things more important than our day-to-day needs.

Prayer for Abounding Love (v. 9a)

Paul opens with a statement that is stunning in itself: “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more” (v. 9a)—stunning because “love” here has no object. He doesn’t say “that your love *for God* may abound more and more,” nor does he say “that your love *for one another* may abound more and more.”¹ This is because Paul prayed that love would overflow up to God and out to each other in limitless abundance. Paul, always rooted in the Old Testament, knew that the two tables of the Ten Commandments were structured in just this way. The first four command love for God, and the last six command love for others. Vertical love first, horizontal love second. Thus Paul prayed that the Philippians’ love would overflow all dimensions in a lavish, ongoing, limitless love—an unremitting geyser of love up to God and a flood of love out to others. The old Latin commentator Bengel says, “The fire in the apostle never says, It is enough.”² Paul is passionate here—*more love, more love!*

Prayer for Knowledge and Insight (v. 9b)

At the same time, we know that Paul was not praying for a shapeless, uninformed overflow of love because the whole of verse 9 reads, “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.”

Knowledge

Our existential, postmodern culture is very sentimental about love. We have heard from the sixties on, “All you need is love,” as if other-directed goodwill is the answer to life. A modern proverb says, “Love is blind,” suggesting that blissful ignorance is part and parcel of love. Frank Sheed gives us a prophetic word for such foolishness:

A virtuous man may be ignorant, but ignorance is not a virtue. It would be a strange God Who could be loved better by being known less. Love of God is not the same thing as knowledge of God; love of God is immeasurably more important than knowledge of God; but if a man loves God knowing a little about Him, he should love God more from knowing more about Him: for every new thing known about God is a new reason for loving Him.³

The more we know of God, the more reason we will have to love him.

The word that Paul uses here to urge that our overflow of love be “with knowledge” (*epignosis*) is used by Paul in all fifteen occurrences in his letters

to mean the knowledge of God and of Christ.⁴ It is a personal knowledge. It is “profoundly existential, relational and responsive” (Bockmuehl).⁵ And Paul was super-passionate that his converts increase in this knowledge. In fact all four of the “Prison Epistles” pray for this at the end of his introductions.

- Ephesians 1:17: “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.”
- Philippians 1:9: “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.”
- Colossians 1:9, 10: “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”
- Philemon 6: “[A]nd I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.”

We must understand that Christian love is never a matter of sentimentality. Christian love comes from a work of the Holy Spirit bringing the revelation of Christ through the Word of God. And the more you are in the Word, the more your knowledge of God and Christ will increase, and the more your love will overflow. All the Scriptures speak of Christ (cf. John 5:46)! And each new thing you learn of him will become a fresh reason for loving him.

Remember this: a superficial love for God is a sure sign of a superficial knowledge of God. This is why we must give priority to gathered worship with our Bibles and hearts open to God. This is why we must daily open the Scriptures for ourselves and teach them to our children. This is why we must read both the Old and New Testaments with our eyes wide open to Christ, whom God has made known (cf. John 1:18). This is why the Gospels and Epistles must be in our souls. The more you know of him, the more your love will rush up to him and out to the world! This is why Paul prayed that their “love [would] abound more and more, with knowledge” (Philippians 1:9).

Insight

There is, of course, another important word here because “knowledge” is coupled with “all discernment” or more precisely, “all insight.” This Greek word appears only here in the New Testament, but it is used twenty-two times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament book of Proverbs, where it means practical insight, the insight that informs conduct—practical conduct.⁶

What remarkable movement we have in Paul's prayer for his beloved church—a limitless overflow of love to God and others, coupled with a growing knowledge of Christ and God (both reciprocally increasing the other), and all of this producing practical insight for living. Several years ago Dr. Kyung Chik Han, pastor of the Young Nak Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea, was honored at a fifty-year class reunion at Princeton Theological Seminary. He answered several questions at that banquet. Dr. Earl Palmer was there and remembers:

At one point he explained the theological examination process for elders in the Young Nak Church, which with a membership of 50,000 communicants is the largest Presbyterian church in the world. He said that each prospective elder was examined in 'Bible, Theology, Church History and Common Sense.' Yes, of course, I thought to myself when I heard his remarks—common sense should be added to Theology, Church History and Bible!⁷

Indeed. We see that right here in Paul's prayer invoking practical insight for day-to-day living for his dearest friends. Who says theology is irrelevant? Again, overflowing love coupled to a growing personal knowledge of God leads to practical insight for common everyday living—the kind of quality essential for eldership in that vast Korean church and for any success in Christian living. This is what we all so desperately long for as we seek to lead our families and the church.

Prayer for Assessing What Is Best (v. 10a)

What benefits! But there is more as Paul's line of prayer thought extends to a further result—"so that you may approve what is excellent" (v. 10a).

The idea here is intensely practical: it is to examine or test what is before us so as to determine what is excellent or the best. Originally this was applied to determining the best, for example, among metals or livestock. Here it has to do with our lives as Christians. Markus Bockmuehl describes this as "the Spirit-bred ability to discern that which God has already marked off as essential or 'superlative' regarding life in Christ."⁸ This ability includes not only distinguishing right from wrong but also the best from second best.⁹

Life for everyone, and especially believers, is a series of choices. What we choose day to day will shape the course of our lives. Foolish choices will leave us unprepared for the coming King. It is the little choices that determine our spiritual vitality because they in turn govern bigger choices. Most of us have little trouble distinguishing the big issues. We know that theft and murder are wrong and that generosity and justice are right. But in the gray area,

choices involve a range of options that are not so clearly moral or clear cut. It is here that we find difficulty in discerning the best. What confused lives so many Christians lead because they do not have the wherewithal to discern what is best.

To see falsely is worse than blindness. A man who is so blind that he cannot distinguish the ditch from the road still may be able to feel which is which. But if he sees the ditch as the road and the road as the ditch, he is in big trouble. And many today are in big trouble.

However, if God's children overflow with love to God and others, along with a growing personal knowledge of God and Christ and practical insight, they will be able to discern and choose what is superlative—the best over the second best—the best over the good—the best in knowledge of God—the best in priorities—the best in habits—the best in pleasures—the best in pursuits—the best course of action for themselves and for their families.

What a beautiful prayer Paul prays for his beloved! May our prayers for one another be that we will be able to discern what God has marked off as best. That's what you need, fathers. That's what you need, mothers. That's what you need, leaders. And that is what Paul prays for.

Prayer for the Day of Christ (vv. 10b, 11)

Paul's brief account of how he prays concludes with his ultimate purpose for the Philippians, which is readiness for the coming of Christ: ". . . and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (vv. 10b, 11). This is the second mention of "the day of Christ," as Paul already referred to it in the famous words of verse 6. Paul wanted the Philippians to be prepared. You can sense the urgency in the Greek, which literally reads "*against* the day of Christ"¹⁰—Paul wants them to stand well under the divine scrutiny. "Preparation for the day of the Lord was for Paul neither a pious platitude nor a millenarian obsession, but a way of life" (Bockmuehl).¹¹ Christian growth was not an end in itself but had an eye to the grand goal of standing before Christ. Paul was sublimely obsessed with the coming of that day,¹² and this graced obsession controlled his prayer for his beloved Philippians.

Pure and Blameless

His prayer was that they would be "pure and blameless" against that great day (cf. v. 10b). "Pure" means "unmixed," as in unmixed substances. It denotes transparency of heart, a heart with pure and unmixed desires.¹³ Paul prays

for their moral transparency—that “what you see is what you get” with the Philippians, and it is good.

“Blameless” is literally “without stumbling,” “not stumbling.”¹⁴ And this metaphorical sense enhances the picture. Paul’s prayer is that the Philippians will live pure, morally transparent lives, free from stumbling—and thus stand upright and pure on that day in the dazzling presence of Christ who knows all. Oh, to pray like this for each other!

Filled with the Fruit of Righteousness

But Paul wants more than that the Philippians stand pure and tall and acquitted before Christ, because he further prays that they may be filled with the fruit of godly deeds¹⁵—“filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ”—that the righteousness of Christ would be evident in righteous, fruitful living. This means first that the heart qualities Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit—“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22, 23)—would work themselves out in the substantive fruit of godly deeds.

A tree that bears fruit is alive. But a tree that is filled with fruit glorifies the gardener’s care! “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (John 15:5). “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit” (John 15:8). When Christ returns, Paul wants the Philippians to be like fruit trees at harvest, their branches hung low, laden with the good deeds that Christ has worked in and through them.

For the Praise and Glory of God

Predictably, Paul concludes with a doxology. All this is for “the glory and praise of God” (v. 11b). This is a fitting conclusion not only to the prayer but to the whole paragraph. The truth is, as John Piper says, “All who cast themselves on God find that they are carried into endless joy by God’s omnipotent commitment to his own glory.”¹⁶

Paul reveled in the thought of God’s glory. At the climax of the Christ hymn later in Philippians we read, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (2:10). And then there will be the climactic doxology at the letter’s end: “To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen” (4:20). Such elation! Such joy!

This magnificent introductory paragraph that began with Paul’s thanksgiving for the Philippians and then moved to his affection for them has now

concluded with Paul's description of how he prayed for them. This is the substance of real prayers, repeatedly offered in real time and space and history by a real man. This is not pious spiritual musing. This is *how* and *what* Paul prayed.

What the apostle has outlined has relevance for those of us who care at all for our families and the Body of Christ. Certainly we must pray for our jobs and our finances and our health and our children's grades and friendships. But if that is it, we have missed it. We need love to overflow in a limitless geyser up to God and out to others. We need to have our love ride and expand upon an increasing knowledge of God as revealed in Christ Jesus—because the more we know of him, the more we will love him.

We need to grow in all discernment—practiced insight and common sense for living. We need to be able to weigh the choices before us and choose what is excellent, the best. We need to be ready for the day of Christ. We need to be transparently pure and stand upright before Christ in that day. And as we stand tall, our lives need to be hung heavy with the fruit of the righteousness that comes through Jesus. We need our lives to be a doxology to the glory and praise of God as part of the endless, joyous commitment to God's glory.

And more, this is what we need to pray for each other. Parents, this is what we must pray for our children and grandchildren. This is a call for real prayers for real people in real space and real time.

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