

CITIZENS



A DEVOTIONAL GUIDE
THROUGH THE LETTER TO
THE PHILIPPIANS

THE WAY CHURCH

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Citizens: A Devotional Guide through The Letter to the Philippians
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A DEVOTIONAL GUIDE
THROUGH THE LETTER TO
THE PHILIPPIANS

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Introduction

The purpose of this short book is to invite you more fully into the letter the apostle Paul wrote to the first century church in Philippi.

The pages that follow aren't an in-depth, scholarly commentary. Rather, members of The Way Church staff have written a series of devotionals with the purpose of helping you apply God's word to your life.

In addition to devotional write-ups on different sections of the letter, there will also be questions for reflection and "going deeper" sections that will provide supplementary information about the passage in question, all with the goal of deepening your understanding.

Reading scripture is never just an intellectual exercise; it is a spiritual discipline that puts us in the path of God's transforming power. As such, these pages are an invitation to reimagine and reprioritize our lives in light of the greater redemptive story that God is inviting us into as a community.

Our prayer is that what follows would help scripture come alive in your heart and bring about a fuller revelation of God's plans and purposes for your life, our community and our city, as we live together as citizens of heaven.

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

1

VERSES

1–2

¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of
Christ Jesus,

To all God's holy people in Christ
Jesus at Philippi, together with
the overseers and deacons ² Grace
and peace to you from God our
Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

CHRIS PRICE

Going Deeper: Setting and Main Themes

In order to understand this letter, we first need to understand Paul. Let's consider a few important facts about him.

Paul used to be named Saul.

Saul was a Roman citizen, Jewish by ethnicity, and a budding rabbi by profession, studying under the well-known teacher Gamaliel in the city of Jerusalem.

Saul was zealous for the Torah and the traditions of his people. He was disturbed by those who claimed that Jesus, the crucified would-be Messiah, was actually the true Lord and King of the world and the fulfillment of the law and the Prophets. More than disturbed, Saul was violently opposed to Jesus and those who claimed to follow him. We read in Acts chapter 8 that Saul made it his mission to destroy the church, dragging believers to prison and breathing murderous threats against this new, upstart sect.

But Jesus had other plans for Saul.

On the road to Damascus, on yet another mission to oppose

Christians, Saul encountered the resurrected Lord. He was struck blind for three days until a Christian named Ananias prayed for him to regain sight. You can read about it in the book of Acts, chapter 9.

From that point on he was a changed man. He flipped from a persecutor of Christians to a pastor and church planter willing to suffer great loss and hardship for the sake of the gospel. In fact, you could conclude that one of the great historical pieces of evidence for the reality of Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead is the transformed life of Saul; a transformation that led not just to a change in lifestyle, but also to a change in name. Not long afterward, he would be known as the apostle Paul; a man who planted many churches and wrote 13 letters that got into the New Testament.

At the start of his letter to the Philippians, we see that Paul had a man named Timothy with him. Timothy was a young man whom Paul was mentoring; he knew Timothy's family and took the young man under his wing, training and equipping him for a life of vocational ministry and pastoring.

Whatever authority, renown or wisdom Paul and Timothy possessed, whatever influence they wielded, ultimately they viewed themselves as servants of Christ Jesus. They were two men totally sold out for the mission of Jesus and deeply acquainted with the grace (unmerited favor) He gives and the peace He brings into troubled lives and minds; a grace and peace they are happy to share with the Philippian church.

That is how this famous letter begins; an introduction and a blessing of grace and peace—grace from God that makes possible peace with God.

Before moving on, we encourage you to read about the start of the Philippian church in the book of Acts.

Go ahead and read Acts 16 now.

After reading the story, we want to highlight three things about the start of the Philippian church:

1. It was an **unlikely place**.

Paul never intended to go to Philippi, but the Holy Spirit re-routed him there (Acts 16:6-10).

2. It began with an **unlikely people**.

The first people in Philippi open to receiving the gospel were women. Lydia became the first convert to Christianity in Europe. And it was with Lydia and a group of women who gathered for prayer on a riverbank that Paul's mission to Greece—and ultimately the history of Christianity in Europe—first began (Acts 16:11-15).

3. It became an **unlikely plant**.

Paul faced serious obstacles in Philippi. He inadvertently started an insurrection and got thrown in jail. Even so, people were coming to faith in Christ, and it was among these new believers that Paul essentially planted a church (Acts 16:15; 34; 40).

This was Paul's first visit to Philippi, around 50 AD. When he wrote the letter to the Philippians, it was about 10 years later, in 60-62 AD. It's also important to note that, during this time, Nero was the emperor of Rome. Under Nero's rule, Christians were severely persecuted. So then, as you study Philippians, consider not only that Paul is writing to a 10-year-old church he planted—a church full of friends he loves and in whom he has a vested interest—consider also that they may be experiencing persecution under Nero's rule.

THE CITY OF PHILIPPI

The city of Philippi was located in the Roman province of Macedonia in Northern Greece. It was not a large city like Ephesus, but it was significant within the Roman Empire. It was named after Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great, who conquered the city in 356 BC.

Philippi was the site of many renowned battles and the Emperor Octavian honored the city of Philippi by refounding it as a Roman colony. In doing so, citizens of Philippi were given the unique privilege of Roman citizenship. The people of

Philippi were proud Roman citizens, a reality that has significance for the apostle Paul when it comes to the main theme of his epistle to the church.

After one of Octavian's military victories, he populated the city with discharged veterans. This made Philippi a military town that was extremely loyal to Caesar and all things Rome. The city even had an outpost of the Praetorian Guard: the elite, fiercely-committed protectors of the Emperor.

All of this background information comes into play in Paul's letter.

THEME: CITIZENSHIP IN HEAVEN

One significant theme in Paul's epistle to the Philippians is found in the author's first exhortation. In this letter it does not come until 1:27—"conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

"Conduct yourselves" is civic language.

Conduct yourselves as those who live in Philippi, the Roman authorities would say.

You live in a Roman Colony.

Act like it.

Be unswerving in your loyalty to the Emperor and the Roman peace he has accomplished.

As a colony of Rome, when people arrived in Philippi they would get a taste of Rome in style and architecture and worship and customs.

In fact, Philippi was like a Rome away from Rome.

Act like you belong to Rome, the civic authorities demanded.

No, says Paul, conduct yourselves as those alive in the gospel, for "our citizenship is in heaven" (3:20).

You are citizens of heaven, Paul claims, so conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel.

When people enter into your community they should experience a taste of heaven or, better yet, a taste of the new world that God intends to bring about through Jesus and by the Spirit.

In the meantime, the culture of heaven, the humility of heaven, the joy of heaven and the love of heaven should be apparent in your relationships as a foretaste of what God will one day bring about in fullness.

So, live as citizens of heaven.

Live in this current world as citizens of the future world.

The primary burden of this epistle is to teach followers of Jesus what that looks like in the here and now.

The letter is all about living in this world as citizens of the new world!

THEME: JOY

Another theme in this letter is joy.

It could be argued that this is the Apostle Paul's most celebratory and joyous of epistles.

Paul consistently tells the believers in Philippi to rejoice.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" he writes (4:4).

"Because of this I rejoice..." (1:18).

Again and again Paul hits a note of joy, even while writing from prison.

Paul teaches us through his words and his example how we can rejoice even in struggle and hardship.

In a world filled with difficulty and strife, an invitation to joy is an invitation to increased health and spiritual vibrancy.

When our sorrow becomes like the entire ocean instead of just the odd island in our lives, we can still “do all things through Christ who strengthens us” (4:13) and that includes choosing joy in a world flooded with heartache.

And a stubborn commitment to joy is part of living in this world as citizens of God’s new world.

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

1

VERSES

3–11

³ I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. ⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in

knowledge and depth of insight,
10 so that you may be able to discern
what is best and may be pure and
blameless for the day of Christ,
11 filled with the fruit of righteousness
that comes through Jesus Christ—to
the glory and praise of God.

ELITA FRIESEN

Pray Like Paul

What does your prayer life look like? Or rather, what does your prayer life *sound* like?

I'm the kind of person who prays best through my pen—that is, I write most of my prayers down in a journal. The good part about this is that I have years, decades actually, of recorded prayers. I recently went back and read some of these prayers from my teens and early twenties. I was struck, and not in a good way, by how *me-centered* they were. I rarely prayed for other people. Most of my prayers were about me, money and marriage. Bless my young heart.

In this opening passage of Paul's letter to his friends in Philippi, Paul shows us that part of functioning as a healthy community of believers means we are to move beyond praying only for ourselves; we are to pray for others as well. Remember: Paul is in jail while writing this letter. He has every reason to be "me-centered." Every reason to ask for help or prayer or money or provisions right at the start of his letter. But he doesn't do this. Instead, he remembers his friends above himself. In doing so, Paul leaves us an example of how we ought to pray for those we are in community with.

Paul starts by telling the Philippians that he prays for them

with *thankfulness*: “I thank my God *every time* I remember you” (1:3). When I think of someone—even someone I deeply love and am in a relationship with—it’s not my natural inclination to pray for them every time they cross my mind. But I wonder: what if this were *precisely* how we as the church functioned? What if every time someone in our community popped into our mind, we prayed for them? Something as simple as “Thank you Jesus for ____.” I cannot think of anything more appropriate to do when someone comes to my mind.

Paul goes on to say he prays for the church in Philippi with *joy* (1:4). At the start of this devotional we mentioned that joy is a major recurring theme in this letter. But it’s important to note that the kind of joy Paul is talking about here isn’t just “being happy.” It’s much deeper than that. We cannot forget that he is writing from jail. The joy Paul has in praying for others isn’t based on emotion or circumstance. It’s based on the reality of what Jesus Christ has done for him—and no circumstance in the world (good or bad) can alter or overshadow Christ’s sacrifice. And so, Paul is indeed praying for his friends with joy *despite* his current reality. I think there’s a lesson here for us: being in community means that we are not just fair-weather prayers. We need to learn to pray for others with joy—even when we are experiencing our own desperate situations—remembering that we live in light of eternity, not in light of our current reality.

Did you notice not just *how* Paul prays for the Philippians, but *what* he prays for them? Pause now and take note of verses

9-11. Imagine someone praying this for *you*. Over *your* life. That you'd have more love. More knowledge. That you'd experience depth of insight. That you'd have discernment to know what's best, pure and blameless. For you to be filled with the fruit of righteousness. This is no light-weight praying Paul is doing here. He shows us what it sounds like to pray for our community with some serious gumption and grit.

Part of following the way of Jesus means learning to function as a community. *Even* with all of our stuff: our different backgrounds, ethnicities, personalities and baggage. The church in Philippi had to sort through this kind of stuff, too. We'd be wrong to assume everything was A-OK with them. As we read through the rest of Philippians, we find out they had their own relational issues within the church. Even so, Paul prays for them—despite their issues and despite his own circumstances.

How about us? Are we committed to praying for the people in our community? Today's a great day to start.

Questions For Reflection

- 1** What did you find most striking about the apostle Paul's prayer?

DARRELL JOHNSON

Going Deeper

God had begun a good work in the church in Philippi. And none of the news Paul heard could thwart that work. Conflict within, pressures from without—none of it could stop God from completing the work He began. Let Paul's language burn its way into your hearts and minds and souls: "...for I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (1:6, NASB1995).

I think you can see that there are a number of implications of this great indicative of the gospel.

First, it is God, not we, who began the good work. Second, it is God, not we, who keeps the work going. Third, it is God, not we, who will see it through to the end.

What is the "good work" Paul refers to?

Everything that is announced in the gospel of Christ Jesus!

Our salvation—in all its dimensions.

The world's salvation—in all its dimensions.

Creation's salvation—in all its dimensions.

The "good work" is our justification, our sanctification and our

glorification. The “good work” is being forgiven and acquitted of all charges against us. The “good work” is being set free from the powers of sin and evil and death, and being brought into the Kingdom of God and the family of God. The “good work” is being changed—transformed—into the likeness of Jesus. The “good work” is being brought into the friendship of the Trinity; into the inner life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And what Paul rejoices in is that the “good work” is all God’s work: beginning, middle and end. None of us began the good work of salvation. None of us. You realize this, do you not? We like to think that we somehow had a hand in beginning the new life in Christ. We like to think that after careful reasoning, after weighing all the facts and alternatives, we decided that the wisest thing to do was to throw in our lot with Jesus Christ, receive Him as Saviour and surrender to Him as Lord.

We, therefore, subtly pat ourselves on our back. How wise of me to seek after God and find Him in Jesus.

But that is not what happened.

No human being, on our own, seeks after God. This is why Paul quotes the Psalmist in his letter to the Romans: “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God” (3:10-11, NASB1995).

Apart from the saving grace of God, our natural posture is one of rejecting God and His claims on us. Apart from grace, we

run from the one, true, living God. Some of us overtly so. Most of us in subtle, sophisticated ways. And in running from the one, true, living God, we create gods in our own image. We create a god with whom we can feel comfortable. We create a god who affirms our ways and our thoughts. We create a god who dances to our tunes. We create a god who puts no demands on us.

No one, apart from grace, runs after God. Which means that we all stand in need of a miracle.

Everyone.

We all stand in need of the miracle of God Himself breaking through barriers, breaking into hiding places, breaking through doubts and fears and winning us to Himself.

The conversion of C.S. Lewis illustrates this wonderfully. Lewis was a brilliant thinker and writer of the last century. He claimed to be a thoroughgoing agnostic. Yet, he came to faith.

How?

In his autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*, he describes God's good work in him:

In the Trinity term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed; perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in

all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal son, at least, walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore the love that will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?*

It is God, not we, who begins the good work of salvation. As Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one may boast" (2:8-9, NASB1995).

Rejoice, yes! Boast, no. None of us begins the good work. God begins the good work.

And God keeps the good work moving forward. None of us does, for none of us can. We are talking about a new life we ourselves cannot sustain. Only Christ Himself can create life "in Christ."

And only Christ Himself can keep life "in Christ" going.

God starts the good work.

God keeps the good work going.

And God will perfect the good work in us.

* C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 228, 229.

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

1

VERSES

12–26

PART ONE

12 Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. **13** As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. **14** And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

15 It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. **16** The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. **17** The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me

while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance

²⁰ I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not

know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

CHRIS PRICE

To Live is Christ

Most superheroes have a catchphrase.

Captain America: "I can do this all day."

Thor: "Odin's beard!"

"With great power comes great responsibility." A classic nugget from Spiderman.

Catch phrases have sticking power.

They become forever associated in people's minds with the superhero in question.

Though the apostle Paul may be a spiritual hero for many, he didn't have a catchphrase.

Nevertheless, if he were going to have one, I would vote for Philippians 1:21 where he writes, "To live is Christ and to die is gain."

In this one powerful sentence Paul reveals his heart.

His deepest desire is to live for Christ; it is the purpose and goal of his life.

This burning desire didn't just impact how Paul lived his life, it radically shaped how he viewed the possibility of his death.

For the apostle Paul, death is gain.

Why?

Because death would bring him into the presence of the one he has been living for—Christ Jesus.

"For me, to live is _____"...what would you put in that blank?

What would your catch phrase be?

Here is what is curious:

If "for me, to live is to make money..."

If "for me, to live is to travel..."

If "for me, to live is to work..."

If the purpose of living is to accumulate pleasurable experiences...

Even if the ultimate purpose for living is something as valuable as family or friendship...

If any of those good gifts become ultimate in our lives, taking

the place of God as the reason for which we live and the thing in which we put our trust and hope...

Then death is loss.

Living for Christ is the only thing that turns death into gain.

It is the only thing that removes the ultimate sting of death.

Death is not the worst thing that can happen.

Living and dying without God and His love is the worst thing that can happen.

Christ removes the period after the sentence of death and replaces it with a comma that catapults us into the presence of Jesus—the one for whom we are ultimately living to know and to please.

Let me put it another way:

If Jesus is our treasure, then each day we live brings us a step closer to fully embracing our treasure. This allows our joy to increase with age.

If Jesus is not our treasure, then each day we live brings us a step closer to losing whatever treasure we put in the place of Jesus. Therefore, our joy decreases with age.

Because Jesus is Paul's treasure, for Paul, death is gain.

Having an attitude like this turned Paul into an unstoppable missionary.

Imprison him and he is thrilled to tell his guards about Jesus. He has a captive audience in the soldiers guarding him.

Release him from prison and he gets to tell more people about Jesus.

Kill him and you usher him into the very presence of Jesus, which is the thing he most longs to experience.

There is no person more free than the one who is truly living for eternity.

Paul is free, even in his chains.

You cannot stop a man, or a woman, who says with fervency and authenticity, "for me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

There is no persecution that can stop such a person.

There is no country closed off to such a person. There are, in fact, no countries closed off to the gospel, though there may be one-way trips.

There is no government that can stomp out the spiritual impact

created by such a person.

Heaven rejoices and hell trembles at such a person.

I am not sure I am such a person.

But I pray that God will make me one.

In closing, there is also deep comfort in taking Paul's attitude as our own.

I am writing these words on the anniversary of my father's death.

He knew Jesus.

And this passage reminds me that he went to be with Jesus.

Though his absence is a deep loss for me, it is a great gain for him because he is in the presence of Jesus.

My dad is in good hands and, even if he could come back, he wouldn't.

He is where he most wanted to be—with Jesus.

And in that I rejoice.

The preacher D.L. Moody once said that, "Some day you will

read in the papers that D.L. Moody of East Northfield is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now!"*

That is Paul's perspective.

That is the Christian perspective.

And it can hold up.

Even under shackles and suffering.

*William Moody, *The Life of D.L. Moody by His Son*, Preface.

Questions For Reflection

1 What do you find inspiring about the apostle Paul's attitude in this text?

2 What do you find challenging?

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

1

VERSES

12–26

PART TWO

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me

while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,
¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

²⁰ I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not

know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

CHRIS PRICE

Rejoicing In Prison

As mentioned in the introduction of this book, the letter to the Philippians is filled with Paul's rejoicing.

His attitude of joy is remarkable considering that he finds himself in prison.

What is the cause of Paul's joy in chapter one of this letter?

He lists several reasons for his attitude.

First, Paul tells us that the whole imperial guard has come to hear the gospel because of his imprisonment.

When you hear that someone is in prison, or that they have been in prison, what is the first question you feel the urge to ask?

What did you do? What are you in for?

There was no shame in Paul's answer.

There was no lowering of his eyes or cowering before the unspoken accusation of his questioner.

Paul loved this question.

He longed to give an answer to this question.

He smiled in anticipation at the natural human curiosity that would pose such a question, because it meant he got to talk about the gospel.

He rejoiced in the unique opportunity his hardship brought him to testify about Jesus.

Because of his imprisonment, he had access to soldiers and Caesar's household that he would not have had otherwise.

Paul was imprisoned in Rome, and the guard he was referring to was likely Caesar's elite guard made up of around 8,000 soldiers.

Again, an audience he wouldn't have otherwise had.

Not only that, in Philippians chapter 4 he writes these words: "All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household."

Who are these fellow believers from Caesar's household who send their greetings?

Likely Roman soldiers who have been converted by the preaching of Paul!

Remember, the city of Philippi is a Roman colony that was populated with retired soldiers.

He wants the young church to be encouraged that soldiers in Caesar's household are coming to Christ!

Also remember: Nero was emperor during the time Paul was writing this letter and Nero was famous for his persecution of Christians. The Philippian Christians may very well be experiencing some opposition from a city deeply loyal to Rome.

Nevertheless, Paul informs them that, through his imprisonment, Roman soldiers are coming to Christ!

For this reason, Paul rejoices.

And he invites the Philippians to follow his example in rejoicing.

Second, Paul rejoices because his witness has caused other Christians to be more bold.

Boldness often inspires more boldness.

Paul's willingness to be imprisoned for the cause of Christ has inspired other Christians to be more bold in sharing the gospel, whatever the cost.

Third, Paul rejoices because of the Philippians' partnership with him in the gospel.

Paul felt supported and loved by the Philippians, even while in prison.

The church prayed for him.

The church sent messengers to encourage him.

The church provided for his needs.

More than that, he believed that through the prayers of the church he would be delivered into the hands of Jesus, whether in his life or in his death.

In that, he rejoiced.

In all three of these examples, we see that the joy of a believer can dwarf difficult circumstances.

In his collection of sermons on suffering, Charles Spurgeon gave a beautiful picture for this: though a tree loses all its leaves in the winter, it is only then that the otherwise hidden bird's nest is revealed to the curious onlooker.*

His parable was meant to illustrate a very powerful point.

Hardship may strip us of our comforts and benefits—comforts and benefits which the onlooker may point to as the source of our joy, or optimism.

* Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon on Suffering: Reflections on Our Pain and God's Grace*, 160.

You have joy because of your money. You have joy because of your health. You have joy because of your freedom, etc.

However, if we are *still* able to rejoice once these benefits are stripped away, then the beauty and worth of Christ—at times hidden from sight by the blessings in our lives—will be glimpsed more clearly.

Surely this was the apostle Paul's view of his imprisonment.

It was a unique opportunity to testify to the worth and sufficiency of Christ.

In *that* he rejoiced.

Questions For Reflection

1 How might our hardship give us unique opportunities to rejoice in Christ, or testify to His sufficiency?

2 In what ways might God use our difficulties to move his mission forward in the world?

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

1

VERSES

27–30

27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel **28** without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.

29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, **30** since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

ELITA FRIESEN

Live Worthy

There is a scene at the end of the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, that has haunted me since I first saw it: an elderly man stands at the graveside of a soldier who saved his life during the second world war. We discover that the dead soldier is actually one of six men who'd died to save this one man. With tears pooling in his eyes, the elderly man stands at the graveside and recalls the last thing the dying soldier whispered to him some sixty years earlier: "Earn this."

Can you imagine?

Earn your life.

Earn the fact that others have died that you might live.

Earn what you've been given.

Earn this.

When I first read this portion of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, I wondered if he wasn't issuing a similar command to the believers there. After all, what does Paul mean when he tells them that they ought to "conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel?" Or, as the CSB translation puts it, that

they should *live worthy* of the gospel? Sounds to me like a hard, maybe even impossible, thing to live up to.

Call me strange, but scenes often play through my head when I read the Bible. I try to imagine the believers in Philippi, all gathered in a house listening to Paul's newest letter being read aloud to them. Certainly, they smiled hearing how he prayed for them (1:3-11), maybe even got teary-eyed hearing how he was chained-up in body but not spirit (1:12-26). And then they arrive here (1:27), Paul's first pastoral exhortation in the whole letter, and they hear him authoritatively say: "Live worthy of the gospel." What must they have thought? Did they catch one another's eyes across the room thinking, "Well now, Paul. How in the world can we live in a way that we'd be worthy of the gospel of Jesus? We can't. None of us are worthy."

Thankfully, the command Paul issued to the Philippian church wasn't meant to be a measuring rod they could never live up to, and it isn't meant to be an impossible undertaking for us either. The Greek word Paul uses here is *politeuomai*; it means "to live as a citizen." In other words, Paul is exhorting them (and, by extension, us!) to live as citizens of the gospel in their everyday lives. In fact, if we keep reading the letter, Paul expands on this citizenship language and calls the Philippians "citizens of heaven" (3:20).

The question, then, is what does all of this mean for us practically?

It means that as citizens of the gospel we are to live differently because Jesus has made, and is making, a difference in our lives.

When people enter into your community they should experience a taste of heaven or, better yet, a taste of the new world that God intends to bring about through Jesus and by the Spirit. The culture of heaven, the humility of heaven and the joy and love of heaven should be apparent in your relationships as a foretaste of what God will one day bring about in fullness. We live in this world as citizens of the new world.

We do not have to exhaust ourselves trying to earn the gospel of Jesus. It simply cannot be done. But, as Paul exhorts us, we can and should allow the gospel to inform the way we live our everyday lives.

Questions for Reflection

1

What would it look like for you, in a practical sense, to live this day not just as a citizen of Canada or Vancouver or Surrey, but as a citizen of the gospel of Jesus Christ, a citizen of heaven?

2

How does this, or how should this, re-shape your interactions, your decisions, even your plans for *this* day?

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

2

VERSES

1–11

¹ Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

- ⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with
God something to be used to his
own advantage;
- ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of
a servant,
being made in human likeness.
- ⁸ And being found in appearance
as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
- ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the
highest place
and gave him the name that is
above every name,

10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

CHRIS PRICE

The Mind of Christ

One of the reasons the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Philippi was to address some conflict and infighting in the church. At the start of chapter two he writes, “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” (2:3).

This is a direct reference to various factions and possible power plays in the church—the result of people pursuing their own agendas, or their own ways, at the expense of others; people viewing themselves as more important and prominent than others in the community.

In other words, these rivalries and divisions resulted from pride.

And in the Christian tradition pride is the great sin. Pride gives birth to all other sins.

As C.S. Lewis writes, “According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.”*

* C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 121, 122.

Theologically, pride is contending for supremacy with God—
“I’m at the center, not God”

Socially, pride is elevating our position and value above those
around us—“I’m at the center, not you. In fact, I matter more
than you.”

Psychologically, pride is exaggerating our strengths and refus-
ing to really acknowledge our weaknesses.

In this passage Paul is describing the social dimension of pride,
for pride is nothing more than “thinking of oneself more highly
than we ought.”

The consequences of pride are many.

Pride makes it difficult to say sorry and admit that we
are wrong.

Pride is the great barrier to believing and acknowledging that
we need God to save us. To quote C.S. Lewis again,

It is pride which has been the chief cause of misery
in every nation and every family since the world began.
Other vices may sometimes bring people together:
you may find good fellowship and jokes and friendli-
ness among drunk people or unchaste people. But
pride always leads to enmity—it is enmity. And not

only enmity between people and people, but enmity to God.”*

Being proud of a job well done, or trying to please another person, or acknowledging your personal strengths—these are not pride.

Rather, pride is an inflated view of self.

Thinking of yourself more highly than you ought.

And thinking of oneself more highly than you ought can lead to division and the breakdown of community—the very thing that is threatening the congregation in Philippi.

The antidote to pride is humility.

Theologically, humility recognizes that all things revolve around God.

There is a name above every name and it is not my name—it is the name of Jesus.

Socially, the humble heart is willing to look out for the needs of others.

It is not thinking less of oneself, it is thinking of oneself less

* Ibid, 124.

and, thereby, elevating the needs of others.

Psychologically, humility leads to a realistic, rather than an inflated, assessment of one's strengths and weaknesses.

Humility *does not* mean you can't have strong convictions. It means you are willing to entertain the possibility that your convictions may be wrong.

Humility is not about thinking highly of oneself or lowly of oneself, it is counting others more significant than oneself.

Humility makes it easier to repent of sin, forgive others and pursue reconciliation.

Humility is the key to harmony and profound unity in the midst of diversity.

Humility is beautiful.

And in chapter two of Philippians the apostle Paul reminds us that humility is at the heart of Christianity and at the heart of our salvation.

Human pride led to sin; divine humility led to salvation.

After all, what does this passage tell us about Jesus?

Jesus humbled himself and became human.

But he did even more than that.

He humbled himself to be the lowliest servant.

But he did even more than that.

He humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Without actually saying the words, it is like the apostle Paul is asking the church in Philippi, "How can a follower of Jesus be proud and divisive and envious, when standing next to the cross?"

The cross humbles the proud and exalts the humble.

Always.

Questions For Reflection

1

In what ways do you see pride manifesting itself in your life?

2

On the flip side, in what ways does believing the good news of Jesus humble you?

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

2

VERSES

12–18

PART ONE

12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,
13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

14 Do everything without grumbling or arguing, **15** so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky **16** as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. **17** But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering

on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. ¹⁸ So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

CHRIS PRICE

Work Out Your Salvation

Work out your salvation?

What on earth can that mean?

Is Paul saying that we work for our salvation?

Wouldn't that destroy the central message of Christianity?

After all, the good news of Christianity is that we are made acceptable to God and brought into relationship with God, not on the basis of our efforts, but on the basis of Jesus' finished work on the cross.

Therefore, it is important to pay close attention to what Paul is *actually* saying.

Paul didn't say work *for* your salvation.

He said work *out* your salvation.

Salvation is a gift from God.

God saves us from our sin.

God saves us from our own stubborn selves.

God saves us from His righteous wrath against our rebellion.

And this salvation is not worked *for*, it is worked *out*—we work out its implications in our lives.

We don't work *for* our salvation, but we work *out* our formation.

We cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work in forming us into the image and likeness of Christ.

More than that, Paul says, “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12).

Work out your salvation in fear?

That sounds terrible.

Fear that God will get us?

Fear that God will turn on us?

Some of us may have grown up in a fear-based religious environment; a reactionary environment filled with super-heated rhetoric masquerading as serious faith.

Love cannot thrive in an atmosphere of fear.

Thankfully, God is not a fearful tyrant, but a loving parent pursuing lost children in Jesus!

In studying how this Greek word, translated as fear, is used in the New Testament we find out that it frequently shows up in situations where people are in awe of Jesus' miracles and power.

In other words, what Paul means is that we are to work out our salvation in awe and gratitude—in reverent and holy fear—because it is God who is at work in us.

And we are invited to cooperate with Him.

Questions For Reflection

- 1** In what ways have you been trying to work out your salvation in an unhealthy fear? How might replacing that fear with holy awe and gratitude change things?
- 2** In what ways do you feel that God is currently working in your life?

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

2

VERSES

12–18

PART TWO

12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **13** for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

14 Do everything without grumbling or arguing, **15** so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky **16** as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. **17** But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering

on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. ¹⁸ So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

CHRIS PRICE

Let Gratitude Replace Grumbling

“Do all things without grumbling.”

With this statement, many scholars believe that Paul had in the back of his mind the story of the Hebrew people and their desert wanderings.

In fact, the same Greek word Paul uses here is also used in one of his other letters when he refers to the wilderness wanderings of Israel (1 Cor. 10:10).

You probably remember the story:

The Israelites were in slavery for 400 years.

They cried out for deliverance.

God sent them a deliverer in the person of Moses.

The nation ended up free from slavery, but stuck in the desert.

And, while wandering in the desert, the people started to grumble.

They started to long to go back to Egypt.

At least Egypt was familiar. At least there was a routine. At least they knew what tomorrow would be like!

The people forgot the heavy, soul-crushing yoke they used to labour under.

They forgot what God had delivered them from.

At the first hint of inconvenience, they became afraid.

The Israelites romanticized their past and feared their future, which is a recipe for grumbling in the present!

We do this too, don't we?

Listen to this quote:

"Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers."

It sounds like an up-to-date gripe from a teacher, a pundit, or a parent of Generation Z.

But guess who said that?

Socrates, over 2,400 years ago!

We tend to think the current, emerging generation is worse than the last because we forget the past, or we romanticize it, or we fear the future, which leads to grumbling in the present.

By grumbling, the Israelites were calling into question the sovereign goodness of their God!

So, in a similar manner, the apostle Paul is saying to the church, "On your way home to the real promised land, a new heavens and a new earth, don't grumble; be grateful!"

"Learn from your spiritual forerunners."

"Don't grumble; be a light to the nations."

Consider this illustration from John Newton, the man who wrote the famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*:

He told a story of a man going to New York to take possession of a huge estate that was gifted to him.

A mile before he got to the city his carriage broke down and he was forced to walk the remaining distance.

What would you think of this man if you saw him stumbling into town, ringing his hands and, through wild tears, proclaiming again and again,

"My carriage is broken! My carriage is broken!"

The man's grumbling about a dilapidated carriage while he was on the way to a large estate that had been gifted to him—the glory of which outweighs the hassle of the now useless carriage—would testify to a complete and utter loss of perspective on his part.

In a similar way, you and I only have a little time left in light of eternity.

No more than a mile to walk.

We are heading to a glorious inheritance that we don't deserve and didn't earn.

The journey may be arduous (Paul is writing from prison, not a palace), but we can undertake it with joy because we know what is ahead.

In this way, the Bible doesn't minimize suffering; it maximizes the glories of heaven and then views our sufferings through the lens of eternity.

We will suffer, but grief is temporary and joy is eternal.

Therefore, in the words of the message, "Go out into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God" (2:14, MSG).

Questions For Reflection

- 1** In what ways are you tempted to grumble?
- 2** Do you think romanticizing the past and fearing the future leads to grumbling in the present? How so?
- 3** How does the gospel help you replace grumbling with gratitude?

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

2

VERSES

19–30

19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. **20** I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. **21** For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. **22** But 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. **23** I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. **24** And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

25 But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger,

whom you sent to take care of my needs. ²⁶ For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸ Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. ²⁹ So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, ³⁰ because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

JADEN NEUFELD

Gospel Living

The gospel has become associated with many words in our minds, most of which are likely positive. After all, it is “good news.” But if I tasked all of us with writing a list of words that come to mind when we think of this good news, how many words would we write before words like *work*, *sorrow* or *risk* found their way onto the page?

As I read this passage, I am struck by the language that Paul uses to describe both what it *looks like* and what it *feels like* to partner with Jesus in His gospel—or, in Paul’s words, to “[look out for the interests] of Jesus Christ” (2:21). According to Paul, it looks a whole lot like *work* and *risk*, and feels a lot like *sorrow*.

We see this in the examples of the three men held up in this passage—Timothy, Paul and Epaphroditus.

It looks like work. Paul writes that Timothy, his son in the faith, will soon be on his way to the church in Philippi. With Paul imprisoned in Rome, Timothy is gearing up for an exhausting journey of roughly 800 miles. And from what we read later in the letter (4:1-2), upon his arrival, Timothy is expected to help sort out quarrels between two women in the church. One commentator describes this task as “unenviable” while Paul simply describes it as “*the work of the gospel*” (2:22).

It feels like sorrow. Paul goes on to say that because Epaphroditus has—mercifully—not succumbed to his illness, it has spared Paul “sorrow upon sorrow” (2:27). These words imply that Paul is already experiencing great sorrow. There should be no surprise here, seeing that this very word is used to describe the One he was following: Jesus “the man of sorrows” (Isa. 53:3). Speaking of this man of sorrows, we see echoes of Jesus’ life in the ministry of Epaphroditus as well. The word *distress* (2:26) that Paul uses to describe what Epaphroditus felt for the Philippian church, his family, is the same word used to describe Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane the night he was betrayed and later crucified.

It looks like risk. For Epaphroditus, being a co-worker with Paul and Christ led to him risking his very life (2:30). I can sometimes zoom past verses like this that speak to the kind of risk the early church took when spreading the gospel. But pause with me for a moment. Epaphroditus was so compelled by the gospel and its invitation that he left his family, traveled hundreds of miles, endured great illness and risked his life in service to Jesus.

A faith marked by work, sorrow and risk.

The examples of these faithful disciples cause me to ponder my own faith. They beg me to wonder: if my faith does not produce those three things, am I really looking out for the interests of Christ? Or am I, as Paul says, “looking out for [my]

own interests" (2:21)? Is my Christianity the sacrificial one embodied by Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus?

This passage confronts an easygoing Christianity that makes no stern demands and, instead, invites us into the self-denying, self-effacing faith modeled by these men.

Thankfully, the work, sorrow and risk is only one dimension of the Christian story. Though the path behind Jesus and disciples like these is one marked by such things, it is also disproportionately littered with the presence of Jesus Himself; the One precious enough that Paul would consider it a great privilege to suffer with and for Him. And while faith may lead us to travel uncomfortable distances—to the confinements of a prison cell or away from our families—all the sacrifices pale in comparison to the prize of beholding Him today and into eternity.

Questions For Reflection

1 In what ways has Jesus led you beyond your comfort zone, for His sake?

2 What does it mean for you personally to “look out for the interests of Jesus Christ” rather than your own interests?

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

3

VERSES

1–11

¹ Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ 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— ⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a

Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷ But whatever was gain to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

⁸ What is more, 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 ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his

sufferings, becoming like him in his death, " and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

MARIAH SMITH

Knowing Christ

"At least I have _____." How do you fill in the blank?

This is a phrase that may cross our minds when we experience loss, disappointment or grief. Some people fill in the blank with family, a job or good looks. Others may fill it with a degree, friends or money. When life misses the mark, we often turn to what the world defines as success to tell ourselves that we're still going to be okay.

I wasn't promoted at work, but at least I own property.

My friend betrayed me, but at least I have my family.

I am lost and afraid, but at least I like the way I look.

Paul's spiritual and ethnic privileges provided him with some of the best "at least I have's".

For a Jewish leader of his time, he was well connected, educated and powerful. Yet, when he had a personal experience with Jesus, he realized that his privileges were as void as empty promises. His privileges and pedigree could never fulfill his deep longing to belong, channel his passions in fruitful

directions, or satiate his desire for a clean record from past sins the way knowing Jesus could.

In this passage, to “know” Christ is to know Him through personal experience. Paul highlights that he didn’t know Jesus from following the law; he knew Jesus from having a relationship with Him. There have been many times in my walk with God where I get caught up in *performing* my “knowing” of Jesus. Do I read my Bible? Check. Do I pray for others? Check. Am I serving at church? Check. Rather than *being* a child to my Father, I act as if I am an employee trying to avoid getting fired or demoted.

But Jesus’ love isn’t based on my moral performance.

When we know Christ as a child knows their loving Father, we know that our relationship with Him is the only reliable fulfillment of that proverbial blank, not our moral performance or worldly success. In fact, in comparison with Him, our worldly successes and moral performances are of no lasting value.

When all else fades away, Christ remains.

Do you comfort yourself with things of this world when life gets tough? Or do you know Christ deeply enough to find the eternal rest that only comes from Him?

When all else fails, *at least I have Jesus.*

How about you?

Questions For Reflection

1 In what ways do we comfort ourselves with the things of this world when life gets tough?

2 Would you say that knowing Christ has brought deeper, more lasting satisfaction into your life? If so, how?

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

3

VERSES

12–16

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. **13** Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, **14** I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. **15** All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. **16** Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

ELITA FRIESEN

Press On

Have you ever run a race? I have.

Last summer I ran my first full marathon. That's 42 brutal kilometers. Well, to be fair, the first part was okay. It was around the 32 kilometer mark that my body started saying, "you'd better just go ahead and sit down somewhere." In order for me to cross that finish line I had to dig real deep.

When I read this section of Paul's letter, it brings me back to that day when I was fighting to complete my marathon. Although he doesn't make a point-blank reference to running a race, as he does in some of his other letters, Paul's exhortation to the Philippian church is dense with racing imagery. Take another look:

Press on.

Take Hold.

Strain toward.

Win the prize.

Can you visualize it? Paul wanted the Philippian church to see themselves not just as recipients *of* the gospel, but as active members *in* the gospel. He is, in essence, saying, "We have a part to play in this thing."

If you know Paul, you know he was not always a follower of Jesus. In fact, he was quite the opposite: he'd made it his life's mission to destroy Christians. He wildly pursued them in order to capture, imprison, and even kill them. Then, one day, he miraculously encountered Jesus and everything changed. Everything we read of his life shows that from that moment forward, he "pursued Christ as he had previously pursued Christians."*

Here's something that would be so easy for us to miss in the English language, but would not have been missed by the Philippians in the original Greek: when Paul tells them to "press on", he uses the Greek word *diókó*—a word that means *to pursue or aggressively chase*. He used the same word a few verses earlier (3:6) to describe the way he used to pursue Christians. Here is what Paul is getting at: "You I know I used to aggressively chase and pursue Christians, *but now* I aggressively chase and pursue Christ. You ought to do the same, church."

In the verses we are looking at today, Paul essentially uses his own transformation story to remind the Philippians that being part of the church doesn't mean we sit idly by thinking how happy we are that Jesus found us. Paul certainly didn't. Paul was exhorting them—and *now us*—to pick up our baton and run our leg of the race.

To press on with some determination.

* Todd D. Still, *Philippians and Philemon: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series*. (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011), 16.

To take hold because Jesus took hold of us.

To strain toward what is ahead, not getting stuck in what's behind.

To aim in such a way that we'd win the prize.

A.W. Tozer writes that, "to have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul's paradox of love."^{***} Paul spent his life in relentless pursuit of the One he'd already found.

Or rather, in pursuit of the One who'd found him.

This is the story of Paul's life.

Oh, that it would be the story of ours as well.

^{**} A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*. (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1948), 24.

Questions for Reflection

1 What does it look like for you to 'press on' after Christ in this season of your life?

2 What are the practical implications of being an active member in the gospel (not just a recipient of the gospel)?

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

3 / 4

VERSES

17–21 / 1

17 Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. **18** For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. **19** Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. **20** But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, **21** who, 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.

¹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

SARALISA KING

Faithful Citizens

Citizenship has always been a rather vague idea for me. This is most likely because I am a Canadian and was raised far from any sense of deep nationalism or national identity. Even so, I know that, at its most basic, citizenship speaks to both identity and duty.

As for my identity, my “Canadianness” often gets reduced to the recognition of a few character traits, or even the uniting around certain beloved Canadians. Canadian = maple syrup, Wayne Gretzky, winter or even our “niceness.” As for duty, honestly, the expectations on me feel pretty minimal.

So when I read these passages that tell me I am a “citizen of heaven,” the vagueness I feel around citizenship is doubled. If I cannot adequately explain to someone what my Canadian citizenship means to me, then being a citizen of heaven seems even more ambiguous.

And yet, here Paul gives us all the greatest “I’m from the place where so-and-so is from” statement in history. While saying, “I’m from the same place as Terry Fox or Wayne Gretzky,” gives us Canadians very little to work from—at least as far as real identity and understanding of citizenship goes—the apostle

Paul's statement gives us everything we need to know about where we are *truly* from.

We are citizens of heaven.

The place where our beloved Jesus lives.

I'm from the place where Jesus *is*.

And if Jesus is the model citizen of heaven, leading us all in the way we should go, then our sense of belonging and, indeed, the blueprint for our lives are all found in Jesus, himself.

Our citizenship in heaven and identification with Jesus as the archetypal citizen of heaven genuinely gives us the starting point for an identity and a call that brings transformation to our day-to-day lives.

In Him we are also handed an outline of the duties of a citizen of heaven—some of the very duties Paul has been urging the Philippians to walk out:

Because we are citizens of heaven, we hold on to joy.

We walk in humility.

We do not consider others better than ourselves.

We set our minds on things that are above.

We walk in the way of Jesus on this earth.

C. S. Lewis once heard the statement that one can be “so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good.”

He responded with these words:

If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one.*

Being heavenly minded does not mean Christians have a license to disengage with the world. Rather, when we view ourselves as citizens of heaven it radically changes *how* we engage with the world. And as we change, so does the world around us, for the glory of God and the good of others.

* C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 134.

Questions For Reflection

1 How can having our minds fixed on our citizenship in heaven lead us to be “good citizens” in our current cities and communities?

2 How can it lead us to a hope that transforms our present reality?

DARRELL JOHNSON

Going Deeper

Over ten years ago, on March 16th of 2012, my wife Sharon and I became citizens of Canada. It was a very moving moment for both of us. I was actually caught off guard by the depth of emotion we both experienced. As we stood with hundreds of other immigrants becoming formal citizens, the judge led us in our oath. It goes like this:

"I swear (or affirm) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Queen of Canada, her heirs and successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada and fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen."

We spoke those words keenly aware that we are also citizens of another Dominion, citizens of another Land. We agree with the apostle Paul: "For our citizenship is in heaven."

In preparing to take our oath of Canadian citizenship, I was taken by the fact that the emphasis was not on the "rights of citizenship," but on the "duties of citizenship." "That I will fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen." Can you imagine the implications for our country if all our citizens thought more of our "duties" than of our "rights"?

In the materials we studied in preparation for taking our oath, we had to memorize our “duties.” The pertinent page is entitled “Citizenship Responsibilities.” The subtitle is, “In Canada, rights come with responsibilities.” And then are listed six “responsibilities,” six “duties.”

Do you know what the six responsibilities of a Canadian citizen are? Can you name them? If you are not a Canadian, take a guess.

Here are the responsibilities to which Sharon and I said our “yes,” with a brief comment from the citizenship documents:

1. Obeying the law. “No person or group is above the law.”
2. Serving on a jury. It is what “...makes the justice system work as it depends on impartial juries made up of citizens.”
3. Voting in elections.
4. Taking responsibility for oneself and one’s family. “Work contributes to personal dignity and self-respect, and to Canada’s prosperity.”
5. Protecting and enjoying our heritage and environment. “Every citizen has a role to play in avoiding waste and pollution while protecting Canada’s natural, cultural and architectural heritage for future generations.”

6. Helping others in the community. “Millions of volunteers freely donate their time to help others without pay..”

Can you imagine the implications for life in Canada if all Canadian citizens knew and lived those responsibilities?

From a prison cell in Rome, the apostle Paul reminds the disciples of Jesus living in the first century city of Philippi that “our citizenship is in heaven.” Can you imagine the implication for life in Canada if all “citizens of heaven” living in Canada understood and exercised their heavenly “duties” and “responsibilities”?

As disciples of Jesus Christ, Paul’s cherished friends are citizens of heaven while citizens of Rome in Philippi. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are citizens of heaven while citizens of Canada in Vancouver. Primarily, citizens of heaven. That is what Paul is emphasizing. Our primary citizenship is in heaven—trumping our citizenship in any other city or empire.

“Heaven” is our true “home and native land.” And to heaven, “true patriot love in all thy sons [and daughters] command.” “For our citizenship is in heaven.”

The word Paul uses which we translate “citizenship” would have immediately gotten the attention of his friends living in Philippi. It is the word *politeuma*. This verb is the “driving-force” of the letter.

If you’ll remember from one of the earlier entries in this book,

we were introduced to this word in Philippians 1:27: “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

“Conduct yourselves” is *politeuomai*. It means “live as citizens of...”

Do you hear and see the little word “poli” in *politeuma*? “Poli,” or, “polis,” means city, or city-state. It is the root of many English words having to do with our corporate lives: polity, politics, politician, police, metropolitan, cosmopolitan.

In the first century, and in many centuries before and after, “polis” was the organizing center of people’s lives.

So much so, the meaning of one’s life was determined by the “polis” to which one belonged. The “polis” expressed itself in all kinds of ways: as agriculture, arts, technology, architecture; as institutions, laws, customs, manners; as language, philosophy, religion, spirituality, world view, desires. The “polis” to which a person belonged—be it Jerusalem, or Athens, or Philippi, or Rome, or Vancouver, or Ottawa, or Hong Kong, or New Delhi—determined how one lived one’s daily life, how one spent one’s money, how one treated other people. The “polis” to which you belonged gave you your values, your goals, your priorities. Your “polis” shaped your longings, your desires.

From Rome—in most people’s mind *the* “polis of all poli”—Paul reminds those living in the “polis” of Philippi, that the gospel of Jesus Christ creates a new “polis.” The gospel of Jesus Christ

creates a new city-state, a new Kingdom, a new Dominion, a new Empire, a new Culture, a new way of ordering human life, giving birth to new values, new goals, new priorities, new longings and desires.

Playing off the word Paul uses: in relationship with Jesus Christ, we become citizens of the "Gospel-polis." And as we go on living in whatever "metropolitan," "cosmopolitan" culture we find ourselves, Jesus calls us to also, and primarily, live in His "Gospel-politan" culture.

"Live your lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

4

VERSES

2–9

¹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

² I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present

your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

MARIAH SMITH

The Lord Is Near, Therefore

Everything is vying for our attention. The read notifications, the terrifying news of war, the new fashion trends, the thousands of advertisements we see in a day, the buzzing, the ringing, the pressure, the noise. This is the overwhelming nature of living in a world of distraction. Sometimes I think we wish everything would be quiet so that we could hear ourselves breathe again. But, other times, I think we might be dangerously fine with all the distraction.

C.S. Lewis observed that we are “like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”* I wonder if, at a surface level, we are easily pleased by our distractions and are slow to realize the deep effects they have on our souls.

What’s distracting us from remembering the Lord is near?
What’s robbing us of the joys that come with walking
alongside Him?

* <https://richardconlin.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/weight-of-glory.pdf>
(Accessed, December 15th, 2022), 1.

Maybe it's greed. We just want a little bit more—a higher salary, more time off, the latest technology or a better body; then life will be good.

Or are we infatuated with self-improvement? A new counselor, another personality test, a remedy from a naturopath or another book might finally make us into the person we want to be.

How about fear? Being entrenched in news stories, constantly reading about the latest tragedy or ensuring we're always protected might make us feel in control in this disordered world.

These are the rhythms of distraction; a life of striving after fruitless ventures. When we forget the Lord is near, it's not natural for us to rejoice. Our hearts become harder and our demeanors more gruff. Our minds run in a constant loop of anxiety. We don't talk to Him, because He feels far. We aren't satisfied with life, so it's hard to be thankful. We feel vulnerable, like our sense of identity could be snatched from us at any moment.

But oh, how wonderful is our state of mind when we know that Jesus is near! We can rejoice, no matter what comes our way. We are gentle and soft amidst this jaded world. We can reject anxious thoughts, knowing they are lies. We can talk to Him freely and openly as our Father and Friend. We are thankful, even for hardships. And we can walk with supernatural confidence, knowing that we are protected by His peace.

When we remember the Lord is near, we turn away from mud pies, wash our hands, and enter into the warm air of a holiday at the sea.

Paul makes it clear that these things do not come naturally to the human heart. The Way of Jesus takes intentional practice. In other letters, Paul equates following Jesus to running a race. He challenges us to practice, to be disciplined, to take hits.

This world will try to pull us in every direction, but the Lord is always near.

Questions For Reflection

- 1 How can you practice being an undistracted follower of Christ today?

PHILIPPIANS

CHAPTER

4

VERSES

10–23

10 I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. **11** I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. **13** I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

14 Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. **15** Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia,

not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. ¹⁸ I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

²⁰ To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

BRAD BRUNESKI

What I Have Learned Thus Far

There may be no line in Philippians more popular than one we find in today's text: "I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (4:13). We see it stitched on pillows, tattooed on arms and spoken boldly over any and every obstacle in life. While it's typically used as a means to empower and motivate us to take on big challenges and achieve all our goals, the beautiful irony of this verse is that Paul is talking about contentment—regardless of what goals we achieve, or fail to achieve. For Paul, contentment is not a dependent emotion, but a reality assured by the sufficiency of the One who gives him strength.

Paul had much need for strength and perspective in his life. He is imprisoned, alone, far from home, health failing, yet he writes of the contentment he feels because of knowing and being found in Jesus.

I recall this to mind in my own moments of trial and struggle. But to be completely honest, I feel so far from being able to say, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation" (4:12).

I so often feel rebuked by the contentment of Paul.

And what of all the desires of my heart?

I long to do and possess so many things; most of them admirable and virtuous!

But even these admirable and virtuous desires leave me feeling discontent, so-close-and-yet-so-far, as though my biography is fine but not quite impressive enough.

I don't think I'm alone.

What-if's and if-only's dominate the thought life of so many of us.

Our minds occupy the future and the past far more than the present, which leads us to worry, fear, anger and so much more.

But Paul speaks as one who knows the reality of having much and that of having little, and his experience has taught him one thing: there is only one place where all the desires and longings of our hearts will find rest and fulfillment.

I've heard it said that discontentment comes when we place infinite value in finite things. Assuming the truth of that statement, contentment will only be found when I place all value in the One and only infinite thing; that is, the One and only infinite Being.

The promise, then, of Philippians 4:13 is this: when I place all value in knowing and being known by the God of creation, in loving and being loved by the One whose love sustains the universe, I will find that He is enough.

Whatever our biography.

Whatever goals or dreams we achieve or fail to achieve. Whatever tax bracket we find ourselves in.

He is enough.

And we can find contentment in Him who gives us strength.

Questions For Reflection

- 1** What are some what-if's and if-only's that keep you striving after an elusive idea of contentment?
- 2** How does knowing and being known by Jesus impact the goals and desires of your heart?

DARRELL JOHNSON

Going Deeper

Webster's Dictionary defines "content" as "satisfied": "I have learned to be satisfied in any and every circumstance." The Dictionary defines "contentment" as "freedom from care": "I have learned the secret of living free from care in any and every circumstance."

As one commentator pictures it: Paul "was not pacing his cell, inquiring of the guard every five minutes whether the mail had come."^{*}

"I have learned to be content in whatever circumstance I am in." I am so glad Paul uses that verb, "learned."

For it says that contentment was not his natural disposition. He was not naturally inclined to be content in whatever circumstance he found himself. Neither am I! If I were to "pass through" to the other side soon, at my memorial service, my family and friends would not use the word "content" in their eulogy of me. Should I die at this point in the process of maturing in Christ, no one would say, "The thing that stood out to me about Darrell is a deep contentment no matter the circumstances." I find great comfort and encouragement in the great

* Fred Craddock, *Philippians*, 78.

apostle, one of the truest disciples of Jesus to ever live, saying, "I have learned to be content..." "I have learned the secret..."

The phrase, "I have learned the secret," Paul co-opted from the language of the mystery cults of his day. The word he uses is literally, "I have been initiated." Which I think suggests that Paul was still learning. "I have been initiated into the secret of contentment. I have learned to be content...and am still learning."

So, I say to Paul, "Teach me. Teach me what you have learned. Teach me the secret of contentment." And the Spirit of God who taught Paul says, "OK, I will. I will teach you."

The actual word Paul uses is the word the Stoic philosophers of his day used. The Stoics worked hard to achieve "a state of contentment." They used the term to mean "self-sufficiency." They sought to live so that they did not have to count on others...who would invariably let them down.

So, in order to achieve contentment they practiced "detachment." Not unlike some of our Buddhist friends. The way to live "unfettered of spirit" is to detach oneself from everything that could possibly disappoint you. Detach oneself from things. Detach oneself from other people.

Detach oneself from all desire. And, in the extreme, detach oneself from the sense of "being." In using the Stoic's word, Paul completely detaches it, so to speak, from all that detachment. For Paul found contentment not by detaching himself.

Contentment for Paul is not passion-less detachment.

- In the opening of his letter he speaks of longing... longing for his friends with the affection, the bowels, the guts of Jesus (1:8).
- He later shares his wrestling...wrestling mentally and emotionally over whether to stay on in this world or to depart and be with Christ, which he says is "very much better" (1:23, NASB1995).
- Because of his love, his passionate love for the Philippians, he decides he must stay on to keep working for his friends' progress and joy in the faith (1:25).
- In the middle of the letter he speaks of pressing on... pressing on to "take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (3:12).

No, Paul did not find contentment in detachment. Rather, he found it in attachment. He found it by attaching himself.

Yes, as we will see in a moment, he does detach himself from wrong understandings of the meaning of human life. Paul clearly has stopped hankering for all "the stuff" a world out of touch with the Living God says we need in order to live flourishing human lives.

We live in a time where we are continually bombarded by advertisements attempting to convince us that we need more “stuff” in order to be content. Paul detaches himself from such manipulation. He can do so because he attaches himself to the right understanding of human flourishing.

More than that, he attaches himself to the true Human and New Human.

He attaches himself to the One Who is Life Himself.

Paul attaches himself to Jesus Christ.

Attaching oneself to Jesus is the true secret to contentment in all circumstances.

And, at its core, this is what it means to be citizens of heaven on earth.

Our community is meant to be a colony of heaven on earth, serving and worshiping the world’s true King and the Name that is above every name; the person of Jesus.

Through Him we have joy, peace and deep contentment, through Him we get a clear picture of what it looks like to live as citizens of heaven on earth, through Him we attach ourselves to Life that is truly life.

For further in-depth study, we recommend the following:

- 1** The Bible Project, *Philippians*
(www.bibleproject.com/explore/video/philippians)
- 2** Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*
- 3** Jeannine K. Brown, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*
- 4** Michael F. Bird and Nijay K. Gupta, *Philippians*

More than any other New Testament book, the epistle to the Philippians radiates joy.

Rooted in the person and work of Jesus, in the vibrant relationship the apostle Paul shared with the church in Philippi and in the stunning invitation given to every follower of Jesus to live as citizens of heaven, this joy is the most noticeable feature of the letter.

Citizens is a short devotional that invites the reader more fully into the transformative truths unpacked in this short epistle. Our hope is that the joy which leaps from these pages would etch itself deeply into our own spirituality.

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