

Today

May/June 2018

refresh, refocus, renew

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

ALSO: PHILIPPIANS: THE MIND OF CHRIST

Friends:

What is the church? Is it a club, like a book club or a ball team that you might join for a while, as you wish? Or is it a volunteer organization like a food pantry or a social-service program dedicated to helping people? What's the difference between a local church and a neighborhood association with potlucks and clothing drives? What does it mean to be a people called out and gathered, filled, equipped, and driven by the Holy Spirit?



If the church is directed and run the Holy Spirit, then it is much more than a fan club for Jesus. If we are called and joined to Christ's body by God himself, then there is no other gathering like the church, and Christians will live intently in relationship with one another and with God.

This May, Jul Medenblik explores some of these questions about the nature of the church as designed by God, looking especially through the lenses of Ascension Day and Pentecost, which we celebrate this month.

Then in June, Scott Hoezee digs deep into the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. In many ways, Philippians examines the life of the church through one particular congregation as they are challenged to adopt the mind of Christ in their everyday living.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Steven Koster". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steven" and the last name "Koster" clearly distinguishable.

—Steven Koster

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**"Philippians:
The Mind of Christ"**
Scott Hoezee

Managing Editor: Eleanor Lamsma
Executive Editor: Steven Koster

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ReFrame
Media

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Philippians: The Mind of Christ

Scott Hoezee

Paul's letter to his sisters and brothers in the city of Philippi may be the warmest and friendliest of his thirteen New Testament letters. But this doesn't mean everything in the church at Philippi was perfect or that Paul didn't know there were threats to their unity in Christ. Threats and challenges happen in every church. So Paul offers advice on how to adopt the humility of Jesus as a way to promote unity in the church. And throughout the entire letter Paul's head-over-heels love for Christ and for the good news of salvation is on display. As we examine Philippians this month, we will be challenged to adopt the very mind of Christ so that in every way our love for God and for one another may overflow to the glory of our almighty Lord and Savior!

Scott Hoezee is an ordained minister in the Christian Reformed Church who served two congregations before joining the faculty at Calvin Theological Seminary in 2005 as the director of its Center for Excellence in Preaching. He is the author of numerous books, reviews, and articles, and he is a cohost of the radio program Groundwork. He is married to Rosemary Apol, and they have two adult children and a Boston terrier named Chester.

YOU ARE LOVED

I thank my God every time I remember you.

—Philippians 1:3

In letters or emails that we write today, we place our signature at the end. And, depending on whom we are writing, we adjust the way we sign. You don't sign an email to your boss with "Love, George." And you don't treat your spouse aloofly by signing "Regards, Jane."

Back in Paul's day, people signed their letters at the beginning, and the greeting often gave a preview of what was to come. In Philippians we can tell right away that this letter is going to be full of love and warmth. Paul calls his readers saints, "God's holy people," and showers them with grace and peace "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Then he makes clear how thankful he is for them. They are gospel partners, coworkers in whom God is doing a great thing—and this comes with a promise that God will bring

his work to completion. Paul reveals his pastor's heart here by offering great encouragement and displaying deep care and affection for the Christians living and working in Philippi.

We all need to know that we're loved, and we all need encouragement. We need someone to see God's work in our lives, call it out for us, name it, and give thanks for it.

The Philippians needed that kind of encouragement. So Paul makes sure it is the first thing they receive in this loving, pastoral letter.

Thank you, dear Lord, for loving us and for encouraging us by your Spirit. Your grace and peace are our very life. In Jesus, Amen.

LOVING THE OTHER

God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.
—Philippians 1:8

The Philippians had heard that Paul was in prison. Paul wrote several of his letters from a jail cell, chains clanking from his wrists as he composed his epistles. But that did not stop up his love. “You are in my heart,” Paul says, and he adds, in effect, “It doesn’t matter whether I am in jail or where I am; my love for you is expressed in every beating of my heart. I am not so focused on my own problems that I can no longer think of you all.” It seems that the only thing that really bothers Paul about being in prison is that he can’t travel, can’t visit these dear Philippian sisters and brothers in Christ.

Many of us have met people who seem unable to see past their own troubles and to think about the needs of others. Maybe they carry around old grudges. Talk to old so-and-so for more than five minutes,

for instance, and you will hear all about how unfairly he got fired from a job 25 years ago. But the person whose heart is aflame with the love of Christ will always be focused on others and how best to show God’s love to them. Jesus set the example for this when, even as he hung dying on the cross, he asked a disciple to take care of his mother (John 19:25-27).

This is a marker of true, unconditional love. Paul had it for the Philippians, and nothing could distract him from it.

Forgive us, dear God, when our selfishness blinds us from seeing and caring for the people around us. Open our eyes to all whom you would have us love in your name. Amen.

THOUGHTFUL LOVE

This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best. . . .
—Philippians 1:9-10

Paul knew how to pack a lot into a little. In just three verses today we find deep insight. Yes, Paul is thankful for the Philippians, but thanksgiving is not his only prayer. He also wants their love to abound. But not in some sentimental, greeting-card kind of way.

For the Christian, love is more than sentiment. It also involves depth of insight, discernment, and the ability to figure out what is best in a given situation. It prompts us to ask, "What will help me be the most transparent to Jesus when I encounter this or that situation?"

We don't typically associate love with a furrowed brow as we figure out the most fitting way to act. But Christlike love involves exactly that kind of thoughtfulness. The goal is to produce spiritual fruit that

reflects Jesus and also points others in his direction.

When we read in John 3:16 that God "so loved the world," we know that God's plan of salvation was behind that divine love. Yes, such love did involve warmth and ardor, but God's working out of our salvation required a lot of holy discernment too. Do we think it was easy to solve our sin problem? It cost the life of God's only Son!

As we are called to love, we are also called to the God-like activity of fruitful hard thinking so that in all things we will bring glory to God in Christ.

Grant us discerning hearts, dear God, that we may better understand you and how to bring your love to others around us. Amen.

WHAT DOES IT MATTER?

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.
—Philippians 1:18

If you hear that a former pastor is in prison, you get concerned. What happened? Did he do something terrible? The Philippians had heard that Paul was in prison, so Paul reassured them that he was there because of his mission to share the good news about Jesus.

And to that Paul added an encouragement: the gospel was being preached *more* as a result of his being a prisoner for Christ! That was good news, but there was a flipside: some of those preachers had some very wrong, selfish motivations. For some reason they preached against Paul even as they preached the gospel. Maybe envy drove them to try to turn the spotlight onto themselves. That wasn't honest or Christlike at all.

But how did Paul respond to that? "What does it matter?" he

wrote. Really?! Didn't it bother him that some were preaching out of selfish ambition? Apparently not. Why? Because Paul was head over heels in love with Jesus and the good news of salvation. So if Christ was being preached and the message rang true, hallelujah!

That jaw-dropping truth is a challenge for us all. Do we love Jesus so much that we can let other concerns drop? Even if we don't like a certain preacher, are we excited enough about the gospel to rejoice that it is being shared anyway? That's a tough one. But by grace Paul achieved that mindset. We can too.

Fill us with love for you and for your gospel, Lord. Help us to celebrate wherever and whenever your Word is preached. Amen.

IN THE CROSS OF CHRIST I GLORY

To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

—Philippians 1:21

In yesterday's verses we saw that Paul loved the gospel so much that he could put up with selfishly motivated preachers. Now Paul increases our awe at his Christ-saturated view of life by saying that even if he dies, it will somehow work out for God's glory. It's not that Paul wants to die, but he knows that if God grants him the courage to stay true to Christ, even his own death will bring glory to God.

Once again we are challenged. But this fits a larger New Testament pattern. After all, we proclaim that Jesus was glorified on the cross. But in the Roman world *cross* and *glory* were not words anyone would put together. A cross was an instrument of terror, a threat to scare people into paying their taxes and never say anything against Caesar, the Roman emperor. If you ended up on a cross, it

was the shameful end of you. Period.

Yet Jesus' death opened up the pathway to eternal life. He was somehow exalted on that spit of wood. Paul knew this. He wrote about it in all of his letters and preached it wherever he went. The kingdom of God is an upside-down reality and is the only way to flip a sinful world that is already upside-down.

To live is Christ, and to die is gain. It is that simple. It is that profound. The remarkable truth is that our only hope is Christ!

Whether we live or die, dear Lord, help us to remember that we are yours so that, in life as well as in death, we will bring you glory! In Jesus, Amen.

TO BE WHERE JESUS IS

I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

—Philippians 1:23-24

Paul had never been with Jesus like the other apostles, most of whom had been Jesus' disciples. He met Jesus in a vision on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). And he was eager to experience having full life with Christ in his presence forever.

Yet he loved the life he had here on earth, and he loved the Philippians and all others who needed to hear about and grow in the love of Christ. So Paul was torn, and he sensed that his going to be with Jesus would wait. He hoped to return to Philippi to enjoy the people's fellowship and deepen their faith.

Paul lays out his heart here for all to see. And what we see is love, love, love. Love for God, love for Jesus, love for the gospel, love for sisters and brothers in the church. An old song says, "They will

know we are Christians by our love." Certainly we see Paul's Christlikeness in his lavish love.

One of the saddest things I have ever heard about a pastor was that a person said, "That pastor just does not love his people." Unsurprisingly, ministry derails where there is no love. By Paul's example, we see again the importance of love for God and love for neighbor at the center of ministry. Jesus stated that these two loves summarize the whole will of God. Paul understood that, and we can too.

Help us to revel in your presence, dear God, both on this earth and in the life to come. May we love others from the overflow of our ardent love for you. In Christ, Amen.

STANDING FIRM

Stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.
—Philippians 1:27-28

Sometimes Christians appear a little shaky. Some lash out at critics. In some cases, because of fears that a “culture war” might cause trouble for the church, some Christians urge people to engage in hardball politics to try to get their way.

Make no mistake: Paul tells the Philippians to stand firm and not to compromise the gospel. We have enemies to face. But we have to face them in a way that is consistent with the gospel and with Jesus, who willingly suffered rather than lash out in anger. “Don’t be scared of those who oppose you,” Paul says, in effect; “fear is for uncertain people. But if we are certain that we have already won the victory in Jesus, then we have nothing to fear, and our confidence proves to our enemies that they have already lost!”

These verses from Philippians deliver a daunting challenge. For Paul’s first readers, this was not easy to do in the Roman Empire, where hostility toward the church became state policy. Nobody would want to suffer. Yet Paul says that suffering was “granted” to the Philippians, as though it was a gift.

That’s the way Paul saw it. To suffer for Jesus and like Jesus—well, that’s a gift. And it helps the world see Jesus more clearly than if we try to inflict suffering on others because of our fears.

Increase our confidence in you, O God, so that we can stand firm in adversity and display to the world the certainty of our faith in you. In Christ, Amen.

HUMBLE PATTERNS

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves. —Philippians 2:3

Philippians is one of the warmest and friendliest of Paul's letters in the Bible. The church in Philippi seems to have been quite healthy and a source of joy for Paul. But it was not perfect. No church is. As we read along in Philippians, we see hints and whispers that Paul knows a few unhappy and unhealthy things about this congregation. There are some cracks in their unity, some struggles with pride.

In Philippians 2, Paul begins to address this. And he lays it on pretty thick. "If you are even remotely Christian," Paul says, in effect, "then make me even more joyful by embracing humility."

Many theologians teach that humility is the core Christian virtue, the characteristic that makes us most like Jesus. Humility helps us realize that even though we all have gifts

and talents to do many things, that does not make us better than anyone else. Instead, we try to see life as a level playing field on which each person does her or his part. And at the end of the day, we pay more attention to others than to ourselves. Let someone else compliment you for your work while you focus on building up others.

We all need each other. Each of us needs to be thankful for the next person. This is, as Paul explains next (in verses 5-8), the pattern established by Jesus—so this is the pattern to follow.

Lord Jesus, grant us by your Holy Spirit a portion of your humility. Help us to serve all the people around us even as you served us. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE MIND OF CHRIST

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: . . .
—Philippians 2:5

The verses in our Bible reading today may have come from an early hymn. Back then no one had a Bible or anything in print. People had to memorize whatever was important to know. So the early Christians composed songs and brief sayings that helped them remember the core teachings of their faith in Christ. They carried these truths in their hearts.

This song gets at the essence of who Jesus was, what he did, and how he accomplished salvation: he did it through humility. He was the Son of God. He had all power, all knowledge. It was the kind of position that most of us would not want to give up.

But Jesus did give it all up. He set aside his privileged place and became a human being. And once he became human, he went even further and made himself everyone's ser-

vant. He was not some powerful political leader. He did not even have a position in the religious establishment of his day.

Jesus came to serve. He came to die. He came to die shamefully, like some criminal—though he never sinned. Paul uses these words to challenge the Philippians not to let pride ruin their community. If the Son of God could give up all that he gave up, including his own life for our sake, surely the rest of us can give up our foolish pride and offer our lives to him. It is very simply the gospel way.

Lord, help us to keep in step with your Spirit as we follow Jesus down the pathways of the gospel. Make us channels of your peace and servants to all. Amen.

THE HIGHER GLORY

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.
—Philippians 2:9

We've been talking about having the mindset of Christ and following his example of humility. When it comes to humility, no one can be humbler than Christ, who gave up his own life so that all who call on his name can be saved to have new life forever. And because Jesus did that, God also raised him from the grave and "exalted him to the highest place."

He started out as the Son of God in heaven, and then he willingly became a suffering servant who swooped down to the lowest of depths by dying on a cross for our sake. Then God reversed it all and swung Jesus upward to rule in heaven over everything.

The words Paul uses to describe this position have to do with the power of the highest name: "God . . . gave him the name that is above every name."

And what is that name? It is *Jesus* (meaning "Savior"), and it is *Christ* (meaning "Anointed One"). Jesus Christ is the Lord, the sovereign ruler, over all things.

His name is so glorious that the day will come when every knee will bow to honor him, and every tongue will sing songs to "acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Jesus Christ, who died and rose again, is Lord of the cosmos. All glory be to him forever and ever!

Dear God, help us to bow our knees and confess with our mouths the truth about Jesus' cosmic glory. Make us witnesses of this splendid gospel truth. Amen.

A FINE BALANCE

My dear friends, as you have always obeyed . . . continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

—Philippians 2:12

People are sometimes confused by these verses in Philippians, thinking that they imply we are saved by our good deeds rather than by God's grace through faith. Are we saved by grace or by good works?

We are saved by the grace of God, which shows itself when we produce good works, the evidence of God's work in us. (See also Paul's explanation in Ephesians 2:8-10.)

Here, in Philippians, Paul reminds his readers of the importance of obedience, which can sound like a "work-your-way-to-heaven" scheme. But it's not. Paul immediately goes on to say that the good works we do are enabled by God. So it's all by grace, and yet we are responsible to do something too, in response.

When Paul urges his readers to "work out" their salvation, he

means doing the logical follow-through of having received grace. He does not say we "create" our own salvation. We just keep working it out, following the lead of God's Spirit working in us because we have been made new through grace.

It is easy to slide into an either/or mistake. We might think grace gives us an excuse to live however we want, if we are forgiven anyway. Or we might ignore grace and try to work furiously to earn God's favor. But salvation is all by grace, and our response is obedience, through God's ongoing work in us. It's a fine balance, and a holy one too.

Make our minds able to understand your salvation and what it means, O Lord, to live every moment for you. In Jesus, Amen.

STARS IN THE SKY

Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.
—Philippians 2:15-16

Good preachers know the value of strong imagery. Metaphors and similes paint word pictures in our minds. In this passage Paul has two similes, one lovely and the other painful.

On the one hand, when we behave in Christlike ways as Paul has been urging throughout Philippians 2, we can shine like stars in the sky. Though the world around us may often seem like a morally dark place, in God's strength we can be like nighttime stars that pierce the darkness and twinkle in beauty.

On the other hand, Paul raises the possibility that he might not live much longer. He says he could be poured out like a drink offering to complete the sacrifice of service the Philippians were engaged in through their Christian living. If the star imagery warmed the hearts of the Christians in Philippi, this drink-offering

image probably gave them a chill. They would not want their founding pastor to die.

But Paul does not want them to feel sad. He sees the possibility of dying for Christ as a reason to rejoice! Jesus said that the servant is not greater than the master. If the world mistreated Jesus, his followers may experience the same.

So shine like stars, but don't be surprised if some people in the world do not like that. And if they don't, do not despair. Look to Jesus on his cross and rejoice.

Increase our faith, dear God, so that we too can be confident that whether we witness to you by our lives or by our deaths, we can find endless reason to rejoice in you. Amen.

HOUSEKEEPING

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you.

—Philippians 2:19

Paul has been shifting back and forth about whether he might soon die or be able to visit Philippi again. A person in prison could easily lose confidence about being released.

So, in the meantime, Paul planned to send the young pastor Timothy. Paul's confidence in Timothy was sky high. Speaking of Timothy as a spiritual son, Paul praised the younger man's devotion to Christ. Not only would Timothy do good work in building up the Philippian church, but he would also be able to warm Paul's heart by bringing back news about the congregation.

As Bible passages go, this one might look less important than many other texts. The comments here can seem like housekeeping details.

Yet even such everyday matters are vital. We all need pastors.

We all need elders who will encourage our devotion to Christ. Church council meetings, committees, producing the weekly bulletin: these are the ordinary activities of the church and may not seem terribly important.

But housekeeping details keep the church on track and help it fulfill its Great Commission. God is in the details. There are no ordinary acts of Christian service. All things are holy when we do them for the Lord!

In all that we do for your church, O God, whether we are in the spotlight or behind the scenes, help us to honor you and to discern how best to serve you. Increase your kingdom, Lord. In Christ, Amen.

THE REMEMBERING GOD

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.

—Philippians 2:25

In some parts of the letters in the New Testament we find clear reminders that we are reading someone else's mail.

If you are cleaning out your grandmother's house after her death and you find a shoebox full of letters, you might read passing references to "Uncle Harry's difficulties" or how "cousin Louisa hit it big." But you may not know much about either person, and you may never know what difficulties or successes they had.

There's a story behind Paul's references to Epaphroditus, and the Philippians knew what Paul was talking about. But we don't. In the Bible this man, Epaphroditus, is mentioned only in Philippians. It sounds like Paul had him hand-deliver this very letter to the church in Philippi. It also appears that Epaphroditus had brought Paul a gift from

Philippi and that he nearly worked himself to death for the cause of the gospel. More than that we do not know.

But in some ways we can think of Epaphroditus as a stand-in for us all. We all have stories. We may even have done devoted work for God. No, we're not famous. Few people will remember our names after we are gone. But God knows each of us by name. God remembers. God honors us for the service we have done for his kingdom. And that is more than a little encouragement for us all!

Thank you, Lord, that in your sovereign knowledge you see and notice everybody, even as you have already written our names into your book of life. In Christ, Amen.

REMINDERS

It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.
—Philippians 3:1

When pastors serve for a long time with the same congregation, sooner or later they realize they are probably repeating themselves. “As you have heard me say before . . .” can become a common refrain after some years.

As Philippians 3 opens, Paul notes that he is repeating some instructions that are very important. “I know I have mentioned this before, but it bears repeating,” he says, in effect: “Stay true to God! Watch out for those who detract from God’s grace by making you think you have to contribute to your salvation!” When the matters at hand are important, reminders are a good idea.

Paul knew that the situation required repetitions to warn about false teachers who promoted things like circumcision as a way to make sure you had salvation. Apparently teachers

like this followed Paul around and waited till he left town before sneaking in with false teachings. We see evidence of this in Paul’s letters to the Galatians and the Corinthians as well.

Some people could not accept that salvation is by grace alone. They figured they had to do something to seal the deal. But Paul’s response was always “No!” As we have seen in this letter, being saved by grace does change us into people who begin to act differently. But those actions are a fruit of salvation, not the root. Paul could not remind people of that idea often enough! And we need constant reminders of it too.

Your grace alone, Lord, is sufficient for us. Thank you for your gifts of mercy and grace! Amen.

CHRIST ALONE

I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. . . . I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ. . . .
—Philippians 3:8

In Philippians 3:8 the original Greek text includes a word that is not very nice. Often translated as “garbage,” the Greek word actually means something closer to a steaming pile of manure. It is not a word for polite company, but what makes it so striking is that Paul uses this word to describe his former religious accomplishments. Earlier in his life, his status as a Pharisee and a near-perfect keeper of God’s law were his prize achievements. He was sure it all added up to a shiny gold ticket to heaven.

Then, in a vision, he met Jesus, the ascended Son of God, who had made salvation possible by giving up his own life to pay the price for all our sin. Once Paul realized how costly it really was to take away human sin, he knew that any idea he’d ever entertained that we humans could pay for sin

on our own was false. In fact, any idea like that was beyond false: it was garbage, useless, futile, hollow, a stinking pile of manure.

We can be thankful for all that the Spirit helps us do in our lives. We need not belittle the fruit of the Spirit we produce. But, Paul urges, do not for one second think that such things reunite you with God. That required a cross and the Son of God’s sacrifice once for all. To God be all the glory!

Shine the light of your cross so brightly in our hearts, dear Savior, that we will not for a moment mistake our good deeds for your supreme sacrifice. In your name, Amen.

TO SUFFER WITH JESUS

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings. . . .

—Philippians 3:10

If we are honest, we'll admit that we do not usually, if ever, hope for suffering. We may be eager to experience the power of Christ's resurrection, but we are less passionate about wanting to experience the agony of his death. Yet in several places in the New Testament Paul expresses a desire to share in the sufferings of Christ (for example, see Romans 8:17-18; 2 Corinthians 1:5-7; 2 Timothy 1:8).

Across church history, many Christians have suffered for Jesus, whether they wanted to or not. To this day, parts of the church are persecuted, and in recent years we have seen or heard about horrifying spectacles of Christians being beheaded for their faith. If we are blessed to live free of such persecution, we tend to pray that things may stay that way for us. We also pray that perse-

cution will cease for sisters and brothers who are hurting. Yet Paul speaks positively about suffering for Jesus' sake, and he invites others to join with him.

Of course, in baptism we do die and rise with Christ (Romans 6:1-7). Spiritually we affirm this. Physical suffering may or may not come, but if it does, Paul indicates that it only draws us closer to Jesus.

This may be another way of expressing what Paul wrote in Romans 8:31-39: nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ because Jesus achieved salvation by suffering and dying for us.

Whether we suffer in spirit or in our flesh, dear Jesus, help us to see how closely you identify with us and stay with us in all things. Amen.

THE PRIZE

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. —Philippians 3:14

Many of us know what it takes to win prizes in this world. People who win medals at the Olympics, for example, do not achieve that by sheer grace or because someone decided to be nice to them. No, they practice many hours a day for years to get stronger and faster than anyone else.

Paul uses competitive athletic imagery in this passage, and the ancient world knew as well as we do what it takes to attain athletic prowess. But how do these verses align with the message of God's grace? Earlier in this chapter Paul deemed his human achievements as "garbage," so how does this prize image fit with that?

Well, for Paul, the grace-granted knowledge of Jesus' amazing work of salvation for us motivated him to give his all in grateful service to the Savior. Paul knew full well that

we cannot earn salvation. But he also knew that once we receive salvation by grace, we should have all the determination of an Olympic athlete to do our best for God's glory.

When God the Father looks at how we have lived after encountering Jesus and responding to the Spirit's work in us, won't it be a joy to hear him say, "You remind me of my Son"? That's a goal we should all pursue with the zeal of a world-class athlete!

By the beauty of the holy gospel, dear God, move and motivate us to seek to be transformed more and more every day after the image of Jesus Christ. In his name, Amen.

MATURING IN CHRIST

All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. . . . Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

—Philippians 3:15-16

As we were reminded yesterday, we are saved by God's grace alone in Christ alone. But experiencing God's amazing salvation changes us so much that we devote ourselves to Christlike living.

In today's passage Paul confirms that there is a measure of spiritual maturity required to understand all this and keep it in balance.

Someone once said that the New Testament is like a body of water: on the one hand, it is shallow enough that a baby could splash around in it safely. But, on the other hand, a skilled diver could descend to great depths in pondering the subtleties of God's salvation. In other words, the gospel is simple, and yet it is amazingly complex.

Throughout his letters, Paul urges believers not to be satis-

fied with only what is simple. Using another metaphor, the Bible teaches elsewhere that we cannot be satisfied forever with the simple milk of the gospel but need to mature and move on to its meatier teachings (Hebrews 5:13-14).

God's Spirit will help us with this, as Paul makes clear in this letter. But the idea is to keep exploring, keep growing, keep maturing. Let's keep what we have already attained, says Paul, but let's also keep moving forward into ever greater truths about God and Jesus Christ!

Let us love you, dear God, with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Show us your truths so that we can celebrate them and tell others of them every day. In Christ, Amen.

CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who . . . will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

—Philippians 3:20-21

C.S. Lewis observed that if you aim to be successful only on earth, you may never get to heaven even as the things of earth slip away. But if you aim for the things of heaven, not only will the Lord graciously bring you there; he will also make your life on earth something wonderful. So if you aim only for earth, you get nothing. But if you aim for heaven, you get everything—life to the full.

This is Paul's point too as he rounds out Philippians 3. We all are citizens of one country or another here on earth. But believers in Christ have a far more important status as citizens of heaven. All of our other identities fall in line under our heavenly citizenship.

Paul pointed this out for the Philippians because then—and now—there are all kinds of

influences that distract us from giving God's kingdom first place in our lives. We receive messages like this every day: live for the moment, go for the gusto, do whatever feels right, look out for number one. All this, Paul claims, makes people enemies of the cross. It all amounts to self-centered living and reflects none of Christ's selflessness. But if we live as Christ's people, then one day we will be made like Jesus, arrayed in all the glory of God's kingdom!

Lord, may the contours of your kingdom and the truth of our heavenly citizenship be revealed in our lives, transforming us even now on this earth into your distinct people. Amen.

ONE MIND

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.
—Philippians 4:2

Paul's letters to churches like the one at Philippi were probably first read aloud at a worship gathering. So in Philippi one day, do you suppose Euodia and Syntyche got embarrassed at this point, hearing their names read in connection with a conflict?

For some reason they had had a falling out, and everyone knew about it. Perhaps these two had not spoken to each other in a while, and they tended to avoid each other. Even if they were not talking, others likely were talking about them—so it's no surprise that Paul himself had heard about it.

Most congregations have a scenario or two in which some members nurse a grudge against one another. Sadly, in some situations people conclude that there's no fixing it, so they resolve to put up with

it. "I'm not stepping into the middle of that one!" we might say, or, "I wouldn't touch that one with a ten-foot pole!"

But Paul stepped in. We cannot be united in Christ and yet be at odds with one another. Strained relationships may not be easy to repair. But we are called to try.

As Paul puts it, it's not just about having the same mind but having the same mind "in the Lord." The Lord himself is involved with our disagreements, and we need to resolve them for his sake.

Lord, you know our conflicts with others as well as we do. Give us the courage to become of one mind with our sisters and brothers. Give us that courage for your own sake. Amen.

REJOICING AND PEACE

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

—Philippians 4:4

Paul's letters often include a section like this one: verses that burst with energy and are chock-full of meaning.

Following his need to tell two members to start getting along again (see Philippians 4:2-3), Paul gives another reason why we should not be at odds with one another: we are supposed to be rejoicing always. Then he says it again: "Rejoice!" We cannot emphasize it enough!

This is all part of our witness for Christ. We need to radiate joy, gentleness, and a sense of peace that comes from knowing who is really in charge of the universe: Jesus! Rather than be bundles of nerves and anxiety, we pray. We hand over this world's problems to this world's Savior. Things may or may not change immediately, or come out the way we like, but we do the right thing by handing it over to him.

And the peace we receive as a result? Well, it does not make sense. Ours is a troubling world. Anxiety seems warranted. But, instead, the Savior who already passed through the worst things of this world gives us a peace we cannot understand. Jesus has already suffered all things for us. The peace he gives is not cheap or fake. It's the real deal from the Savior who died and rose again for us. Thanks be to God!

Help us to cast all our anxiety on you, dear Savior. And whether our problems are resolved or not, fill us with the peace that comes from knowing we are held safe in your hands. Amen.

REVELING IN THE GOOD

If anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.
—Philippians 4:8

What do we like talking about more—good news or bad news? How much of our conversation includes hashing over bad things going on at work or in the church? If we are honest, we might have to admit that bad news not only travels fast but can also dominate our minds. True, sometimes we are eager to share good news: to announce an engagement, a wedding, or the birth of a child. But pondering the ugly is more common. Bad news and conflict sell more news, the experts say.

Paul wants the Philippians to concentrate on what is admirable, lovely, pure, excellent, and praiseworthy. Yes, there are plenty of bad things to ponder, and we have to deal with them. But let's try, Paul urges, to focus on what is good. Let's try to spend long stretches in our conversations pondering

beautiful things from all kinds of angles rather than hashing over bad stuff again and again.

Paul must have been pretty good at this himself, since he holds himself up as a role model. But the point is that it brings us peace to fill our minds with all that God has made lovely and praiseworthy. Pondering what is beautiful leads to gratitude, and we all know that grateful people also tend to be very content, peaceful people.

Be that way, Paul says. It is the best way to live before the face of our generous, loving God!

Lord, help us to see the good and the admirable in your world, to give you thanks for all such gifts, and to be filled with your peace as a result. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LEARNING CONTENTMENT

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

—Philippians 4:11

Sometimes we have the pleasure of meeting a Christian who exudes calm, peace, and contentment even though they are living with limitations or ailments that are difficult and painful. Or maybe they have faced heart-wrenching tragedy in the past—and yet there they are, almost serene in their faith and utterly joyful on every level.

When we see such people, we sometimes conclude that God must have wired them really well. We figure that such people must have been born sunny-side up with a personality and disposition that lends itself to a contented nature. But if we think that way, we are usually wrong. Talk to such folks long enough, and you will discover what Paul wrote to the Philippians: contentment is a learned behavior. You are not born with it. It does not come easily for anyone. But by grace

we grow, we learn, we mature. And as we do, contentment becomes a way of life.

But it is not inevitable. Many of us know someone who got trapped by their suffering long ago. They turned inward and curdled into an angry, resentful person.

None of us can avoid some level of pain, hardship, or deprivation in life. Our prayer is that when we face difficult times, we can learn what Paul learned over the long haul: a contentment anchored in Christ.

Some days, dear God, we confess that our needs seem to outnumber our resources. But whatever the day brings, in the end, help us to be content and joyful in you. In Christ, Amen.

THROUGH CHRIST ALONE

I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

—Philippians 4:13

Yesterday we focused on Christian contentment as something we all must learn. Paul elaborates by saying that his life—like most people's lives—has had its share of ups and downs. He has had times of plenty, dining on fine food and sleeping in a warm bed. And he has had times of great want, going to sleep hungry and without having a bed at all or even a blanket to keep him warm and dry.

"This has been my school of contentment," Paul says, in effect. One learns to be content in good times without forgetting that they are a gift from God, and one learns to be content in bad times without forgetting that the Lord is still with you.

But here's the real secret: our strength is not our own. Paul says he can do all this through the one who strengthens him.

Note that this means not only being content when times are tough, but also being grateful when times are good. Both require a kind of strength, and this comes from Christ alone. This is the message woven throughout this letter we have been exploring. For Paul, it is always Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Without Jesus, we are nothing. With Jesus, we can do all things.

That is, very simply, the good news, the gospel. Do you know this Jesus in whom we can do all things?

Strengthen our inner being, O God, by the power of the Spirit of Christ living and working in us. And may we do all things to your glory! Amen.

LIVING GENEROUS LIVES

It was good of you to share in my troubles.

—Philippians 4:14

Paul was a contented Christian. Yes, he could put up with all kinds of things (good and bad), in Christ's strength. Still, everyone needs a little help from friends now and then. And there is nothing wrong with admitting that.

The Philippians had helped Paul by supplying him with some money, and perhaps some food and clothing, on more than one occasion. That did not go unnoticed, and Paul did not pretend that he didn't need the help, or that he would have been just fine without it. Paul admitted that it was kind and helpful of the Philippians to send their gifts to him.

He even said that the Philippians did a better job than some other congregations he had worked with. Here it seems that Paul was engaging in a bit of back-handed shaming to-

ward those other churches, and this may be surprising to us.

But from earlier in this letter we know where Paul was coming from. It's not that he was begging for money or trying to manipulate anyone. For Paul, generosity was clearly a part of the whole Jesus package. Living generous lives shows that we "get it" when it comes to the gospel. In response to God's amazing grace, we give too! And Paul dearly wanted everyone to understand this—because getting Jesus right is the most important thing in the whole universe!

Lord Jesus, you gave yourself for us, emptying yourself of everything but your great love. Help us to catch this vision and to lead generous lives of self-giving always. In your name, Amen.

FRAGRANT OFFERINGS

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.
—Philippians 4:18

As a pastor, I admit that I did not often view my weekly paycheck, or the home that the church provided me, or the apple pie someone brought over now and then as a fragrant offering to God. Obviously I should have! Paul did. In the past few days we have seen Paul talking both about contentment in times of want and about gratitude in times of plenty.

Clearly the Philippians had provided nicely for their founding pastor. Paul deeply appreciated the gifts that Epaphroditus had brought from Philippi. He not only enjoyed the gifts but also saw them as proof that the Philippians were really living for Christ's glory above all. He knew God smiled on their generous sacrifices and would more than amply bless his people in Philippi.

Today the topic of sacrificial giving can be a touchy subject in the church. Ministers are sometimes accused of being greedy. And preaching on Stewardship Sunday can be a nerve-racking challenge for many pastors. There may not be easy ways to deal with this more positively, but certainly a step in the right direction would be to recognize that all generous giving is a fragrant offering to God.

It is a privilege to give! Just as we have freely received salvation and new life through the Savior, shall we not freely give?

If we are blessed to give, dear Father, help us to do so joyfully, freely, and to your honor and glory, not our own. In Christ, who gave his all for us. Amen.

DOXOLOGY

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

—Philippians 4:20

The writer Anne Lamott claims that a great deal of her prayer life can be summarized by the alternating prayers “Help me, help me, help me” and “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” Probably this is true of most of us. And, of course, we also need to say “Sorry, sorry, sorry” in confessing our sins. But we all recognize that we are forever bringing God our needs and then—in appropriate response—closing the loop with a prayer of gratitude.

Thanksgiving is wonderful and necessary. But so is doxology—and it’s not always clear that we do much of this. Doxology is praising God for who he is. It is giving God the glory that is due him for his radiant holiness. In thanksgiving we offer up gratitude for something we have received. But in doxology we honor the very being of God. We exalt and praise the Lord simply because he is God.

The word *doxology* comes from Greek and literally means “glory word.” We see God’s glory, and we speak a word of amazement as we send that glory to God.

Doxologies erupted from Paul quite often in his New Testament letters—and usually near the end, as we find here in Philippians 4. Doxologies of many kinds should regularly flow from our hearts and lips too!

Our glorious God is worthy of all the glory we can beam back to him!

All glory be to you,
Father, Son, and Holy
Spirit, for the radiance of
your holiness, the purity
of your righteousness, the
beauty that is simply and
profoundly YOU! Amen.

SURPRISE ENDING

All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.
—Philippians 4:22

Paul wrote the letter of Romans to people living in the shadow of the Roman leader, Caesar, without once mentioning his name. Caesar, of course, fancied himself as the “God and Lord” of the Roman Empire. It said so on most Roman coins. Yet throughout Romans, Paul undercut those idolatrous claims by pointing to the real Lord of lords and King of kings, Jesus Christ!

As we noted earlier this month, Paul was in prison in Rome when he wrote this letter to the Philippians. He was in prison because he had been accused falsely of wrongdoing as a missionary. And because he was a Roman citizen, he had appealed that his case be judged by Caesar, so off to Rome he went. (See Acts 21-28.)

Now, at the end of this letter, how delightful it is to hear that among the people who had

become Christians in Rome and were sending their greetings to Philippi, some were part of “Caesar’s household.”

What? Jesus had some of his own people living right under Caesar’s nose?! Yes he did.

“The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world,” the apostle John once wrote (1 John 4:4). Few verses bring that point home more vividly than this tiny detail near the end of Philippians. Though he claimed to be all-powerful, Caesar had no power over the advance of our Lord Jesus, not even in his own house! Praise God!

For the boundless power and reach of your rule, Lord Jesus, we give you thanks and praise forever! Amen.

BENEDICTION: BLESSING

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

—Philippians 4:23

When I was a student worship leader at Calvin College, I noticed that near the end of our worship services a number of students in the balcony would duck out just before the benediction. The reason for that was obvious: they wanted to get in the lunch line before most of the other students filed out of the 1,000-seat auditorium.

But this used to bother the college chaplain. He once said to me, “You know, if the benediction were the only part of the whole service they managed to catch, it would still have been worth their being here.” He could not understand why they would want to miss out on the blessing.

Paul closed many of his letters with a note of doxology—as we saw the other day (Philippians 4:20)—and then also with a lyric blessing pronounced over the people to whom he

was writing. To live under the blessing of almighty God—to have such words spoken over us—is among the finest things we will ever experience in life. “Grace to you and peace. . . .” “The Lord bless you and keep you. . . .” The benediction, or blessing, is a sign of God’s abiding love for us, a reminder of all that gives us peace. We should never want to miss it!

Let’s take time to savor these words of grace and love from God the Father, the gracious Son, and the comforting Holy Spirit. Grace to you, and peace. Amen.

Lord, thank you for your grace and peace. Thank you for the words of Paul to the Philippians, which by your Spirit are now your words to us. All praise to you! In Christ, Amen.

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